

# The Elusive REVELATION

A tale of poetic tension  
and sudden insight.

Witness

the PERCEPTION of

*Mr. Laurence Poynter*

in contrast to

the ENLIGHTENMENT of

*Miss Madeleine Quinn*

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Peter Poole

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Chapter One

*The Garden of Introversion*

IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT to trace the precise motive behind Mr. Laurence Poynter and his isolated life. He seldom ventured from his North London suburb - even to the centre of town. He made his home, his city - his garden, his countryside - and a trip to a neighbouring borough had become something of a treat.

Still...this was not a prison, if a prison can ever be chosen. It was a detached house of Victorian brick, crouching behind a natural screen of leaves. This was provided by a drooping beech tree and shaggy, untrimmed bushes. The disorder, however, was deceptive.

Beyond, the garden was a neat one. The grass had been rolled to a smooth texture, while the pathways alternated between yellow glare and cool, breezy shade. Poynter liked the place tidy, though found privacy best afforded by a veneer of carefree neglect...at least, within public view.

Quite young to own such a home, Poynter had inherited a larger house - and a smaller fortune - on his twenty-first birthday some ten years before. He had long been planning for the day. Poynter changed the larger house to this smaller one, and thus the smaller fortune to a large one. He then had such comfort as he could possibly enjoy, and the bank balance necessary for his easy contemplation.

Although the entrance to the house was - quite naturally - at the front, there was another route into the garden. A gate led to an alleyway, along the side of the house. The passage was a drab one, displaying the dustbins and detritus of a prestige residence. However, it allowed a fast route to the hidden realm, without the delays of a trip through the house. Such a trip entailed the front door, the inner doors, the antique heirlooms. All provided obstacles in case of urgency.

Poynter's need, in this case, was urgent. He had been reposing in the front garden with a sober, inquisitive eye. It had been his intent to contrive a listing of each pedestrian, who might amble past that morning. Such a list might become the basis for creative work. Settling with a pot of tea, Poynter had begun his vigil. His gaunt face was pale above a stiff white shirt, worn with pale yellow waistcoat and narrow trousers. These were dark, with indiscernible stripes. His hair was black and gelled to the scalp, his spectacles small and round. Their shine often obscured his watery eyes - as if reflecting the gaze within.

Poynter had jotted a page or two. Everything had gone to plan. Then, in a peculiar twinge of panic, the position had been reversed. Suddenly, it was Poynter - not the public - under observation. The front garden was an open stage, where he sat displayed for the critics.

Poynter felt his digestive organs quiver, as if they had somehow transformed into gelatine. He stood, unsteady and wavering, but recalled the physical obstacles of the ground floor.

So he passed the ivy-rimmed windows, to the gate at the side, and vanished down the alleyway.

A gasping reached the garden as Poynter ran the length of his house. A bolt was slid, the gate rattled into motion, and Poynter stumbled through. He slammed it, wiping his brow.

Poynter was oblivious to the springtime wonders. He ran along the redbrick path, which curved its way across the lawn. He was a madcap silhouette against the delicate background, eyes bulging wide behind the circular lenses. His gasp turned into a wail. Poynter took one curve, then another, at precarious angles. Then - with a sudden lurch - he stopped.

Poynter was frozen. He had one brogue shoe, poised inches from the ground. For, beneath, was the domed hemisphere of a common (or garden) snail. Poynter placed his foot to the side of the mollusc, gingerly mincing around. Then, in a flurry of renewed energy, he continued his crazy athletics.

There was a novel structure in the depths of the garden. It was a follyish construction in a distant corner, partially overgrown. Designed in the shape of an octagon, the gazebo featured arches and spires of baroque ornamentation, topped by a tapering roof. Poynter slowed before his final impact, and inserted a spindly key. This opened a narrow door. Poynter stepped inside, and closed the door behind him. All was calm and peaceful. The snail slithered on its way.

Soon, Poynter was slumped in a wickerwork chair, lost in mesmerized meditation. The ceiling had much to contemplate. Each

wall met the interior of the hollow, painted roof, where eight triangles receded like a tunnel. This had been painted by some eccentric visionary, although a visionary long deceased. Snaking branches held singing birds, cheeky cherubs, butterflies...while the centre became the image of an overhead sun. It was ironic how this painted fireball 'illuminated' the gazebo, built to avoid the glare of summer.

But the imagery was muted by age and dis-illumination. Flecks of paint had migrated from the artist's work, leaving cherubs with scarred complexions, butterflies with fragmented grace. Poynter studied these ruptured details, wincing at the brightness through the leaded windows. Disliking this exterior luminosity, Poynter settled into a trance-like repose. Eyes closed, the garden merged with the shady darkness that filled the old gazebo. He stayed this way for an indeterminate time.

The garden was a picture of springtime glory, lost on its sedentary owner. Birds fluttered through the scene, happy to enjoy their surroundings. However, the glory did not go unobserved...even by human eyes. Two eyes - large, brown, their lashes tinged with a subtle mascara. They were framed by the fretwork of the wooden gate, which Poynter had just passed through.

Whilst so framed, the caller's appearance might only be guessed. But as the gate was rattled, then opened, the entrance of a buckled magenta shoe, pale leg and floral frock indicated the refined - if conservative - fashion of Miss Madeleine Quinn. She

was a faithful acquaintance of Poynter, more prone to begin an initiative than he...particularly in matters of friendship, however platonic or intellectual.

Madeleine's shoes clicked upon the redbrick path, although she trusted peripheral vision to accomplish her progress. If the garden plants had possessed feelings, they would have cheered to know the glee in Madeleine soul. She breathed deep, taking in the maximum air with its natural, floral perfume. She adjusted the tilt of her broad-brimmed hat, which had been trimmed with a vignette of artificial flowers. Her clothing suggested a horticultural camouflage, equivalent to the draped leaves and khaki of a commando. It was strange how such extremes could be similar.

Madeleine let her eyes drift towards the charm of the rockery. But a discordant note marred her pleasure. It was long, low - something like a yawn - yet its sound was not one of weariness, but a sample of anguished pain. Madeleine glanced to and fro, trying to locate the source of these mournful tones. It must be the cry of a tramp or vagrant, she thought. He was lurking beyond the walls.

Madeleine Quinn was no pauper, and adored her civilized fineries. Yet there was a touch of charity within her. No predicament was the object of Madeleine's neglect, unless she could really avoid it. Madeleine felt she must investigate, and was ready to turn on her heel. But the cry came again, with a sharper acoustic. Its source was more specific now. Madeleine

realized it came from the old gazebo, looming at the end of the path.

After a second's hesitation, it was Madeleine's turn for speed. Her heels began clicking faster, while her eyes remained fixed on the folly. She took one curve, then another, at this quicker pace. Don't worry, she thought, I'm coming. Help is at hand! Yet Madeleine was quick to contradict herself. With a sudden lurch, she stopped.

Madeleine was frozen. She had one magenta shoe, poised inches from the ground. For, beneath, was the domed hemisphere of a common (or garden) snail. It had so nearly come a cropper beneath Poynter's descending sole. While the snail's position had varied minutely, it showed a continued lack of wisdom with regard to safety. Madeleine placed her foot to the side of the mollusc, gingerly mincing around. Then, in a flurry of renewed energy, she continued her urgent sprint.

The garden was visible from the gazebo, although Poynter was dwelling on his mind's eye. Many a grotesque visage might have peered through the dusty glass, without creating a distraction. Madeleine recognized the fact, and brought her heels up sharp to stand patient by the door. Her face was framed in a criss-cross of struts, peering through the glass.

Poynter's yells had been reduced to a low moan, which became a flow of frustrated murmurings. Then these ceased, as if the source had run dry. A calmness fell upon his face. It was an outbreak of rationality. Having released its grip on his

attention, Poynter's mournful state was in abeyance. He was able to blink, shake his head and see the world around him. In this case, the world was the small octagonal interior of the gazebo, the pretty garden beyond, and the equally pretty Madeleine framed between the two.

Madeleine felt a cheeky thrill at this domestic intrusion. She had disturbed the brooding scholar, yet he had been brooding far too hard. Madeleine was overcome by a sense of glee. She couldn't help a smile.

Poynter's mouth twitched upwards in a return undertaking, although it was a somewhat dour attempt. He rose from the wickerwork chair, and opened the gazebo door. Madeleine did not enter. That would have been far too intrusive. Neither did Poynter shift his position to allow it.

"Madeleine," said Poynter.

"Laurence," she replied. "I hope...I do not disturb you."

"I was hardly aware of your presence," said Poynter. His voice was a monotone. "I come here to think. To meditate. It tends to block all else."

"Just turn me on my heel," chirped Madeleine. "I know the pain of creation. Pain isn't my goal, Laurence. But it can mar the journey we make."

Poynter offered no comment. He merely nodded. Madeleine continued her exposition.

"It was to ponder such things that I chose to call. I hoped we could share our tensions. Ease them, together." Madeleine

batted her eyelids. "I couldn't resist your garden, Laurence. Springtime shames Christmas with its natural decoration."

"Indeed," mused Poynter. "The winter is over."

It was not just the flowers that impressed Madeleine. The leaves were a curtain of shimmering green. "You show a vast dedication to your labours," she added. "How can you sit in the shade, Laurence, while glory blooms all around?"

"The interior world, Madeleine. The gazebo sharpens my mind."

Poynter's drollness of manner, and his lack of sympathy, led Madeleine to an obvious conclusion. Poynter must resent her surprise appearance, and she ought to curtail the visit.

"I'm...sorry," she stuttered. "Maybe I should go."

But Poynter's mood had been broken, wilfully or not. The broad, if falsified, smile he displayed quelled Madeleine's consternation. "No. The current session is over," he said. "Indeed, while I gained some vivid insights, I lack a tangible result. Come! We'll walk to the house, ring for Polly. Time for some tea and cakes."

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Moving silently with rapid, bird-like gestures, Polly placed the tea tray on the study table. After spreading a colourful display of cakes, she departed with no further word. Madeleine took the initiative in filling the cups, adding milk and sugar as required.

Poynter seemed to be recovering from his bout of tension. He sat in an armchair against the French windows, his features veiled within an outline of semi-silhouette. As Madeleine spoke, she looked in Poynter's direction. But her eyes preferred the brightness of the garden, where they more easily found repose.

"Subjects are everywhere," bubbled Madeleine, "though most, we choose to ignore. Or we become overwhelmed by the duty which beauty demands, to preserve its fleeting grace."

Poynter nodded patiently, while Madeleine continued. "True, I have written little but couplets and feeble *verslings*," she said. "Yet if I lack a notebook bursting with lyrical rhymes, it is the very cause of my earnestness that distracts me so. Nature inspires my literary quest, but also keeps me from the page. I cannot help but fix my gaze upon the things I love, or I lose the feelings I chase. The pen, at such moments, stays on the desk...and the words remain elusive."

"You are...confused?" asked Poynter, dryly.

Madeleine's eyes betrayed a measure of inner bewilderment. This bewilderment extended to her external faculties, as her fingers moved to and fro near a lemon cup cake. She left it for the moment.

"One who knows the way through a labyrinth is lost to an ignoramus, twisting hither and thither in delirium. Reasoned actions can seem merest chance, depending on one's point of view."

Poynter nodded.

"Strange, obscure...madness, even!" gasped Madeleine. "Yet one escapes from the labyrinth by seeing a clear path."

Poynter studied Madeleine's pink figure against the frowning drapery of the curtains. He could only venture an opinion, though had little faith in his analysis. "So...you are lost," he mused. "You took the wrong turning?"

Madeleine sighed. "I still have my curiosity," she replied. "It is surely the gift of the poet. If I lose myself, I lose to the pleasures around me. The...delirious delight of deliberate distraction! The whirl of a passing moment!"

At which, Madeleine whirled the lemon cup cake from its paper tutu. She took a bite, and continued.

"I am eager for that minute - that second of vivid experience - which strikes the heart as poetry. The flow of ink from the nib of my pen is like...a babbling brook! A flow, released - as it were, from the winter ice. Each ripple, each wave, is a lucid line. Emotion rendered into literary art, the fleeting moment immortal! Thus, the labours of compilation become nothing but a signature. The mark of one's own enlightenment. A physical manifestation of inner light to share, and share forever. A gift to the future, Laurence!" Madeleine stuffed the cake in her mouth.

Poynter leant back. He snapped his shortbread, and nibbled the end. It had seemed churlish to do so during Madeleine's speech. Poynter began to outline, with far less candour, the nature of his own inspiration.

"I, too, possess the novelty of personal technique. I spurn the dullard ways of those 'craftsman' writers who say all can do it, there's a special knack, and run desperate competitions. Bread and circuses, Miss Quinn! We require neither one nor the other. Poetry should - no, must - come with the momentous glory of a thunderstorm. Who commands the weather? No mortal, Miss Quinn. It is hardly an earthbound job."

Madeleine was receptive to the logic of Poynter's argument, although she frowned at his sombre conclusion. "An intellectual climate?" she mused. "Its variations equal to those of the atmosphere with its rain, fog and snow? You paint a powerful picture, Laurence - and yet, a foreboding one. Remember, a climate has many variations. We can shiver in the pouring torrents, or relish the glory of the sun. One naturally takes shelter in the bleakest times, yet we watch and wait - ever hopeful - till a glimpse of blue appears. The clouds vanish, the mist rises, the sunbeams dance before us."

Now it was Poynter's turn to express himself. He was happy to startle Madeleine. "Your status as a poet is biased," he said. "Oh, I can hardly claim objectivity. It is a vastly overrated asset. But since all weather exists upon the earth, all exists within the mind. Whilst some are adapted better for heat, might others prefer...cooler days?"

A frown settled on Madeleine's brow like a tentative moth. "Those who choose will love the springtime," she said, "and tolerate the cooler days. But they are not the stuff of romance."

To see...light raking the green velvet hillsides. A breeze rippling the meadow. Yes - how I love it, Laurence!"

Poynter could feel a slight sickness inside him. He knew the cakes were of perfect quality. It must have been Madeleine's glee.

"One can be fazed by an epic sensibility," said Madeleine. "I'll never lose my sense of intimate splendour. A child-like innocence, to be so entranced...by a sudden silence, a stillness, the gleam of a flower."

Poynter felt himself cringing in his armchair, but made the cringe mostly invisible.

"My soul sings in joy," added Madeleine. "It filters through the intellect, and tries to put joy on the page. It is the light and cheer I wish to grasp in my work. The sheer joy on one's face within the glow of a cottage window...among friends, but aware of the chilliness outside. The freshness of the churchyard on a springtime morning - the day one finds inner bliss."

"Poems," murmured Poynter. "Your poetry flows?"

"From my heart to my head," said Madeleine, "making me dizzy for words. Yet I am often at a loss to transfigure its spirit from cranium to...written page."

"Hmm. The printed page, Madeleine. That would be achievement, indeed. One can hardly expect the printer to move blocks of type and transfigure them into verse. Butt behind his ear, inky fingers, mind on the greyhounds..."

"We each have our separate tasks," said Madeleine. "I'm sure the printer is a skilful man, who ponders more than the betting shop. One has to write poetry first."

Poynter nodded.

"Emotions are so tricky," smiled Madeleine, "like...elusive butterflies. We seldom bother in the modern world to consider them as we should. Yet the poet acts like the butterfly collector, swooping treasures from the air..."

"Pinning them for pleasure." added Poynter.

Madeleine winced. "You put it harshly, Laurence."

"I merely complete your analogy, Madeleine."

Madeleine lowered her tone. "My image seemed a carefree one, but you ground it with sinister terms. We do not kill our emotional quarry, but channel it into verse."

"One must not sugar nature like a bon-bon," said Poynter.

"There is sun, there is rain. Animals are cuddly, but they eat other animals. Those are cuddly too."

"You've...put me off my tea," said Madeleine. She replaced a semi-masticated apricot confection (a Madeleine with a small 'm').

Poynter was hardly the jolliest of hosts, but he disliked throwing Madeleine into gloom. "You've pinned a butterfly yourself," he offered. Madeleine followed his gaze to the obvious place. The beautiful blue butterfly brooch, fixed to the front of her frock.

"This is a rarity," she said, touching it.

"The brooch...?" murmured Poynter. He was more at home in the purchase of antiquities than the study of uncommon species.

"No. The brooch is unique," said Madeleine. "One of a kind. I had it made by Burley's, a remarkable jeweller. It is the species that is a rarity. The brooch depicts a diminishing butterfly, the adorable Adonis Blue."

"The symbol of what you seek," nodded Poynter. "I have yet to find my own symbol."

"You have a poetic vision," observed Madeleine. "At odds with my own..."

"We share much between us," said Poynter. "But all emotion is valid. The summer is...a brilliant backdrop, in contrast to the darkness. A gilded frame for the frosty winter."

"But, Laurence! You cast a chill in my heart!" gasped Madeleine. "The daffodils and tulips have greeted us, and the summer months are approaching."

"All weathers exist," said Poynter. "So each exists forever, if only in our heart. I may commune with the rain and storms in springtime, as you dream of the sunlight in autumn."

Yet one phrase had been better than chat, to discard in idle conversation. "Yes...I dream of the summer in winter," said Madeleine. "An Adonis Blue flutters within. It flies across the...green velvet hillsides. Ah - Laurence! Inspiration! A pen, a pen!" With which, Madeleine twisted wildly in her seat, desperate for the tools of her trade.

While Poynter hated to see Madeleine in such distress, he was taken aback by her urgency. She jumped up all of a sudden, and wrenched the fountain pen from his shirt. "Paper..." she seethed, struggling to remove the lid without starting a squirt of ink.

Madeleine was poised to begin her opening line, so Poynter offered minimal assistance. He thrust a paper doily onto her lap. Madeleine stabbed the gold-plated nib through this inadequate medium, almost into her thigh. "The words! The words are coming!" she squealed. "Quickly - something to lean on!"

Poynter looked for a not too precious book, but Madeleine had beaten him to it. She was up, running to the bureau, where she spread the doily and started to scribe.

"The light. The remedy of sunlight...chequers the carpet with luminous and...urgh, Laurence! The ink! The ink's running dry!"

Poynter denied any physical aid. "On the bureau," he murmured, dryly. Poynter watched in bemused detachment as Madeleine grabbed a large blue bottle. She struggled to twist the lid.

"I'm losing the words," gasped Madeleine. "Quickly! Help me, Laurence!"

Poynter snorted. "We need an emergency box, Madeleine, complete with quill, parchment and inkwell..."

"Laurence! No time for teasing," said Madeleine. She gave a ferocious twist, so the bottle slipped from her grip. This created a short-lived Niagara over the edge of the bureau. Poynter had

once performed a similar antic, and had a square of linoleum fitted to the floor.

Madeleine desperately scraped the nib through the shiny pool, scrawling pen over paper...but this only made a ragged skid of splattery blue. The last drips fell on the lino. Madeleine's inspiration dried up.

Poynter knew the embarrassment that would be flooding through Madeleine. She was shaking very slightly, while staring at some old school photographs framed on the wall. Madeleine held her emotions in check, but a deep frustration had engulfed her. Grief for the lost insights, restrained by the dignity of her role. Both she and Poynter were visionaries, in their different ways.

"I saw them," whispered Madeleine. "The...green velvet hillsides. The only phrase I have captured." She held up the ravaged paper doily, to reveal the phrase in a spidery scrawl. "It is hardly done justice through this wretched calligraphy." The ink had very nearly dried.

"You confirm my concept of the poet," said Poynter. "Take the rough working fellow...the tradesman. He huffs and puffs up and down all day, and claims that he labours hard. So he does. But the toil of a poet has a different nature. It might seem lazy to the ignorant mind, but has no less a drain on one's power. The labour of a poet, Madeleine, is not the scratching and scrawling on a crisp white surface. It is the stress one endures as a silent martyr, in what seem to be tranquil times."

"Today seemed tranquil enough," said Madeleine, moving back to her seat. But Poynter beckoned her to the French windows, and unfastened the catch. They could step forth onto the pathway, when the moment was poetically apt.

"To you...the garden is the poem," said Poynter. "To me, it is the setting from which I retreat. We each have differing visions, yet the role - of a poet - is precise. We wait in patience and in faith, Madeleine, for that vital link between language and emotion. This bonds them to a third and greater whole. The creation of radical verse!"

Madeleine took a refreshing atmospheric draft into her somewhat deprived lungs, for the air in Poynter's chamber was musty and still. The aromas of the garden were a balm to her spirit, and the sunlight an astral massage. It bathed her skin with a golden radiance, glistening the gems of her butterfly brooch.

"Your sympathy is a comfort, Laurence," she said. "I believe what you say has truth. I mourn the shreds of lost inspiration, never to be caught again. Every mood - every moment - has a unique signature, if only in the subtle minutiae."

"Only our intentions differ, Madeleine. Our ambitions seek varied accomplishments, yet we suffer the same vexations."

But the words suffer and vexations were at odds with the moment, at least in Madeleine's eyes. She stopped brooding on her poetic failings, and witnessed the magic of the garden.

"The day is a gorgeous one," said Madeleine. "We are free to do as we will. I refuse to lapse into sadness. If you've troubles of your own, Laurence, then share them. I can offer a glimmer of hope."

Poynter looked away from the garden. His profile was sharp and black against the sun-dappled leaves. "I have...no external troubles," he stated. "I have this house, the garden, money in the bank...a fine friend like yourself. Perhaps I share the way of the wealthy sportsman who, lacking labours to wrest him from domestic ease, sets forth on some harsh expedition. I have nothing to vex me, Madeleine, so I choose to dabble in vexation."

Madeleine blinked. "An emotional tourist?"

"Traveller, perhaps. Explorer or seeker preferred. Your green velvet hillsides exist only in the mind, in the form of a fading recollection."

"Though I should wish to visit them, Laurence. Unlike the swamps and mires..."

"The barren country, Madeleine. An acquired emotional taste."

"Huh! We should enjoy happiness while we can, Laurence. It may not last forever. Where you look to the drizzle, I prefer a more...sunny day."

Madeleine stepped out onto the pathway, and began its snaking route. She had the flowers, the pond, the rockery. She would leave the shadows to Poynter.

Chapter Two

*Creative Pains*

POYNTER HAD BEEN LOATH to embark on a similar path to Madeleine, within the art of poetry and the art of life. But he found difficulty in shedding the glorious imagery, which she had imparted in such delicate terms.

The garden greens became sepia with the dusk of early spring. Poynter found comfort in the pools of murkiness that obscured the foliage, and ventured into his home. He sat reposing at the bureau, with fountain pen in hand. A dim bulb was the only concession to nocturnal abatement.

Polly had laid supper in the dining-room, which Poynter ate alone. The room was illuminated by four small lamps. There was one in each corner, each with an orange shade. Their reflections floated in the windows like a quartet of visiting spaceships against the night sky. Poynter sat in a region untouched by their luminescent endeavours, finishing his cold ham and salad. Then he rang a bell for rice pudding.

"You'd not be better with the chandelier, sir?" asked Polly.

"I have all the brightness I need," said Poynter. His maid delivered a hefty bowl of the steaming desert. It had been a favourite of Poynter's since childhood, especially with a whirl of blackcurrant jam - which Polly had provided, of course. He spooned two dollops into the white, viscous dish, taking pleasure in

stirring the dark and light through a momentary yin-yang symbol. This created a purple mixture.

"I'll be retiring early tonight," said Poynter. "Touch of migraine, I fancy. Prepare a hot water bottle and nightcap for nine."

"I will, sir." Polly curtseyed in her smart black and white outfit, and turned to click across the parquet floor. Her heels were silent on the intermittent rugs. She closed the door behind her.

It was at such times - and wilfully - that Poynter relished the heaviness of his antique entrapments. The artefacts had not been chosen to elicit a gasp at the apogee of craftsmanship. Rather, they lurked in a combined aura of solemnity, as if the fittings of a devout faith. Landscapes were burnished with varnish to a distant amber, obscuring any evocation of fresh air, carefree days and sunshine. The portraits - both photographic and painted - had an attitude of scorn. Even those occasional touches of wit - such as the quaint animal carvings on the mantelpiece, or school portraits of an earlier Poynter unable to hide a grin - seemed tinged with an aura of sadness. The house might have been filled with an invisible gas, which made brooding emotions an elemental substance.

The hands of the carriage clock approached nine so closely, any quibble over minutes would have been petty. There was no point waiting for the chimes. Poynter mounted the richly carpeted staircase to his small, but ornate, bedchamber. As with so much of

the house, few traces of the twentieth-century could be found within. The bulbs burned in lamps adapted from oil, and there were no modern gadgets or gizmos.

Ignoring his reflection in a long, oval mirror, Poynter removed his tight layers of formal attire. He donned a full-length nightshirt of embroidered flounces, which bordered on the effeminate. Slipping into bed, Poynter slid the hot water bottle to the farther end, and sipped the nightcap - an Ovaltine - which Polly had left on the bedside table.

Madeleine had related many concerns about nature, and the endangered Adonis Blue butterfly. She had offered Poynter a specimen, immortalized in gemstone form, but had failed to strike much sympathy within his insular concentration. However, the thoughts had become fixed in his mind like the brooch by its pin.

As he lay back in bed, Poynter stared at the filigree plasterwork, which crawled the ceiling into sectors of fussy division. It was a trap for much airborne dust. Yet the image of that cheery blue butterfly came fluttering back to mind. Bemused by this irritant stranger, Poynter switched off his hefty brass lamp. If the bulb's rosy orange had resembled that of a candle, the snuff was instant - electrical - with neither smoke nor smell, leaving a void of blackness. Poynter's vision soon adjusted to the blue wash of starlight, which penetrated the gauze curtains.

Poynter seldom moved position once in bed. He tended to lie like an embalmed corpse, the frilled nightshirt suggestive of a funeral gown. Perhaps each night was a prelude to his own demise,

a rehearsal for his premiere at the mortician's parlour. Poynter had placed his spectacles by the brass lamp, free of the entrapping mantles of ear and nose. Perhaps they could shuffle off on some nocturnal adventure.

Poynter closed his eyes, having glimpsed the starlight. He did not yet fall to slumber. Time was suspended for a while. Down in the dining-room, Polly enjoyed her own supper to the chimes of ten, then eleven.

Poynter's mind was keeping him alert, though with no strain upon the intellect. His subconscious flicked images onto a mental screen. Memories of family, acquaintances, colleagues of the past...houses, castles, gardens...or images of random surrealism, prompted by this drifting, half-awake state. Poynter's body would not obey his desire for early sleep, although it was not too late when it did so. Eleven chimes had sounded a minute before, while many a late drinker would relish a final glass. Polly was on domestic premises, and immune to the licensing laws. She enjoyed a glass of Poynter's brandy by long-standing mutual agreement.

To Poynter, it had been an intense day of moods and counter-moods. These might run for a month in some other, less tormented life. To Poynter, the angst of poetry and expression seemed no less strenuous than a job breaking boulders or lugging loads. In truth, he had experienced neither. Yet his mental machinery had been grinding metal on metal. The smoke had set Poynter sputtering - figuratively, at least. His state of stressful agitation had barely settled, even as Polly had served dinner.

Now, as Poynter finally drifted into silent sleep, there came with stalking, relentless inevitability the state of the deep dream. His rapid eye movement denoted the brain's busy functions, not the seizure of some dreadful fit. There were flashes of Madeleine's green velvet hillsides, as she had primly distilled those wonders - then a figure in dark suit and waistcoat, glancing around with fervour. Poynter could recognize himself, but not the cause of his disquiet. That was something else entirely. He could see a small shape, bobbing in the breeze. An Adonis Blue butterfly, fluttering closer.

Poynter tried to swoop the butterfly into a diaphanous net, which had somehow appeared in his hands. He hoped to examine its delicate airframe, and see what made beauty tick. As Poynter swooped and failed to capture, it seemed it was not a butterfly that eluded him. This was an embodiment of the poetry, which Madeleine had described: the purity of nature's delight, wrapped in subjective emotions. It was as bright and lively as the fluttering insect.

There was a sorrowful frown on Poynter's face. He knew he must leave the butterfly, and let it flutter free, for the net of his own sentiment was meant for a less flirtatious species.

Poynter turned, and walked an expanse of wild, open downland. He descended a chalky hollow, entering a murky, tight-knit grove. His jacket brushed the clinging mass of ivy, which entwined the trees with a botanical lattice. Disturbed by Poynter's intrusion a Ghost Moth - the white male of the species - released its grip on

the plants. It glided past the edge of his Poynter's vision, disliking his intrusion into the obscurity of its home. Startled, Poynter swept his net wildly - but the moth was forever a receding shape. It was bright against the earthy colours of the grove, like a negative silhouette.

Always at the edge of my vision, thought Poynter. The moth was the sense of refined insight he sought in a bleak modernity. It fluttered through the cracks of mortal existence, a spectre in search of a banquet.

Poynter woke suddenly, thrashing in his sheets as if the ashen moth were fluttering beneath. He opened his eyes, sweating and gasping. Each corner of the room was a murky alcove that might hide the spectral insect, or offered some vague, ornate shape to conceal it.

Poynter's hand stretched by instinct to the bell-pull, to Polly, but his fingers froze before the dangling tassel. A shiver of fright ran through him, yet also of paradoxical delight. He had experienced a frisson of terror, which might serve his poetry well.

\* \* \* \* \*

Despite the sinister quality of the haunting nightmare, it was a surprisingly ungrateful Poynter who received news of Madeleine's concern. There was no place in the Poynter household for the chirrups of electronic contrivance. The refurbished Bakelite

telephone, of nineteen-thirties' manufacture, signalled its potential for chatter with a gentle but persistent ring. It was as bright and musical as trickling water.

Polly - who had cleared a clutter of ornaments from the piano to facilitate her housework - turned on her heel with a delicate grace, her gesture arcing the feather duster through the air as a showgirl might toss a boa - a lingering wraith floating behind. She stepped into the hallway where the telephone was installed...equally available from each ground floor room, yet unable to dominate any. Poised, she lifted the receiver, greeting the caller with a formal address. "Good morning. Mr. Laurence Poynter's residence."

Poynter, who had heard the phone but remained recumbent, felt something of a sudden hunch. Rising from the wickerwork chair in his bedroom, he tossed a silk dressing gown over his nightshirt and made his way to the grand wooden staircase.

"I'm sure that he will, Miss," said Polly, turning to the stairs - but meeting Poynter's gaze as she did so, for he peered from the banisters like a queasy shipboard passenger. "Sir! Miss Quinn on the telephone. She seems a little anxious." Polly waited for Poynter's reaction, duster in one hand, receiver in the other.

"Madeleine?" mused Poynter from his lofty position. "She's given me nightmares already. Now it's pestering and bother."

"Nightmares, sir?" Polly dipped her duster.

"Such nightmares, Polly. Sublime."

Polly barely understood the thrust of Poynter's speech, and - knowing how Madeleine waited on the end of the line - felt she should clarify matters with her master. "Miss Quinn hardly wishes to cause trouble, sir. She...feels she has made a scene, sir, and wishes to make amends. She came to see you as a friend, sir, not play the part of a critic."

Poynter scratched his short morning stubble. "Nothing I said seemed to satisfy, Polly. She was the very spirit of pomposity. Indeed, her facile visions have lingered in my dreams...then turned me to 'mares and migraine. Pah!" Poynter slapped the banister rail. "She wishes to chain the great edifice of poetry to the flimsiest, wispiest things. Yet they will not support the weight, Polly. The chain shall rip them asunder!"

Having stood as doubtful go-between to this stilted conversation, Polly felt she should report some of its substance to its remote, excluded instigator. "Mr. Poynter...says something about a chain, Miss Quinn," she murmured. "Be careful. Um...your wispy things. Try not to break them, Miss Quinn."

Poynter grinned to himself on the banister, knowing this garbled précis of his metaphor could only confuse Madeleine the more. He treasured the suspense as Polly nodded, listening to Madeleine's reply: however, the content of Polly's résumé was more adequate than Poynter's anticipation.

"Sir...Miss Quinn says you have a great duty, and neither wishes to disturb you, nor criticize the work you choose. Just a moment..."

Polly cocked her head to listen, her tone brightening a touch. "She plans to hold an evening, sir, of artistic meditation. A group of friends to share talent alike. You're very much invited, sir."

Poynter withheld a frown, and then - realizing Madeleine could hardly see him - allowed it to betray a trace of inner conflict. For such an evening, if it might bring converts to his cause, would be a worthy occasion to attend. "We can share...what we wish to share?" he asked. The question had such a degree of obscurity that it passed Polly by, so - with the lack of repetition - Madeleine was obliged to divine the gist from an awkward silence. So she provided a greater illumination, transmitted to Poynter through his faithful maid.

"Miss Quinn says she will read her poems, sir, and asks you to do the same. There will be allsorts - an artist, a musician - each with a different talent."

Poynter seemed to drift into poetic mode for a moment. His eyes focused on the wood panelling, which lined the lower half of the hall below. "'I don't wish to be a spectre at the banquet, so I've thrown my invitation away. Shall I stand still, morbid, with a poker face while you say that everything's...okay?'"

"Okay, sir?" queried Polly, who felt unable to accept the invitation on Poynter's behalf.

"Hmm. Not sure, Polly," murmured Poynter. "'Okay?' A touch colloquial. A touch trite, I believe. The poem is a trying one. The rhymes..."

"But shall I accept, sir?"

"We must all accept our fate, Polly," intoned Poynter. At last, he put his woeful sensibilities to practical use. "If it is fate I attend Miss Quinn's artistic *soiree*, then attend the evening I must. But I would like more information, Polly, before embracing such resolution."

"That's easily provided, sir," replied Polly, keen to conclude the call. "Miss Quinn's to send a formal invitation, everything clearly explained."

"Once I know where, when and what...I shall say whether," concluded Poynter, offering a sardonic smile which remained un conveyed by telephonic means.

\* \* \* \* \*

Madeleine contemplated the silent candlestick phone a moment, replacing the receiver as her mother entered the room. Mrs. Quinn was tall, thin, dressed in a sombre gown enlivened by a silver chain at her neck. Her hair was equally silver, clipped back in a bouffant formation.

"Is the telephone free?" asked Mrs. Quinn. Her dress brushed the floor as she manoeuvred between the scattered clumps of antique furniture - as well as new, modernistic pieces made by exceptional, admired craftsmen. Mrs. Quinn had indulged Madeleine in their commission, though the products - to her - were anathema.

"Free of myself!" chirped Madeleine. She leant back on the stool with the glee of an infant keen to please teacher.

"I hardly meant free of charge," frowned Mrs. Quinn, whose frown was directed towards the legs of the stool. Madeleine adjusted her position so it stood on four, not two.

"Come. I have matters to attend to," said Mrs. Quinn. "You're causing an obstruction, girl. The telephone is a means of communication, not the instrument of some...rarefied social club."

"I'm sorry if I took my time, Mother," said Madeleine, adjusting both skirt and voice to a primmer mode. "It was hardly a direct line."

"Another of your 'dandy' friends?" scowled Mrs. Quinn.

"Ha! I'd not think Laurence would care for the title," smiled Madeleine.

"Laurence..." mused the mother, settling on a sofa. "I do believe you've mentioned him before? Have we met? Have I seen his face? I do not muddle with unimportant names..."

"You would not forget Laurence," said Madeleine Quinn, "and Laurence will not forget me!"

Mrs. Quinn sat rigid, pinning her daughter in place with a look of hardened steel. "You track him, young Madeleine...like one of your precious insects?"

The last word brimmed with a quantity of restrained disgust. The insect - or butterfly - regarded by Mrs. Quinn was no impaled specimen, but a sparkling, stylized brooch. Madeleine's fingers

touched it by instinct, both seeking security in its familiar contours and protecting it from this piercing attack.

"I am curious," said Madeleine, "about Laurence...and his endeavours. For we both share a similar path."

"And he's curious about you?" asked Mrs. Quinn, most skeptical anyone should be.

"Perhaps."

Mrs. Quinn sighed deep, hoarse, as if trying to fill the room with her own airs and graces and envelop those of her tiresome offspring. "Your charade. This Laurence. Is he coming?"

"Soiree. Though I've yet to make the invitations."

"But is he?"

"I couldn't say, Mother. But he - or his maid - shows interest."

This statement was too much for Mrs. Quinn. A look of lemon-sharp bitterness exaggerated the wrinkles on an already sour face. "His maid, Madeleine? His maid has an opinion? He's bringing his maid along?"

"No, Mother..."

"It seems a very queer kind of household. A miserable kind of household!" Mrs. Quinn rose like a black phantom, stretching to take the phone.

Misery, thought Madeleine. It seemed a common currency, and one in which her mother liked dealing. "You've shown nothing but misery at my big occasion," she said. "It is only for the love of nature, of poetry, that I tolerate these turgid surroundings."

"You tolerate luxury," sneered Mrs. Quinn. "Would you find peace to versify in some pauper's garret?"

"Laurence isn't poor," gasped Madeleine. "He's quite as rich as us. *Richer!* But he sees beyond the grandeur around him. We're each searching for...the enlightenment."

"Which I shall appreciate by my absence," concluded Mrs. Quinn. Rejecting any subtle manoeuvre, she whisked her daughter from the stool with an emphatic gesture, settling to dial a number. "Now - if I might ring my broker, I've shares to sell. Finance is a great machine."

Madeleine snorted.

"The navvies stoke the boilers, Madeleine. Yet I am no navy. It takes a keen eye and confident touch to tinker with the grand design."

"Which put Father in his grave, Mother. The tension. The woe..."

"Which pays for this house and our gracious ways. Butterflies don't pay the rent."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Ker-chunk! Ker-chunk! Ker-chunk!* went the printing press, watched by an eager Madeleine. She couldn't bear to miss part of the process, and had watched - fascinated - as the type was set. It was a mechanical composition of her polished phrases, with each

letter a solid block. There was even ink on Madeleine's hands, and the apron tied to her frock.

The printer took the first proof from the rising stack, offering it to his customer. A look of awe illuminated Madeleine's face, brighter than the workshop bulbs, as she beheld the printed sheet. Its words seemed new to her, as if written by another, and she felt the rush of honoured satisfaction they must surely prompt in others.

My Dear...[whoever]...

Imagine an EVENING blessed with LIKE-MINDED souls, each devoted to the ARTS and LITERATURE...each with something to SHARE. Imagine being blessed by such TALENTS, or sharing blessings of your own! It is my PLEASURE to invite you (and your partner) to:

-- The Enlightenment --

Where unique feelings SEEK the art of expression.

Orchard House, Downshire Hill, Hampstead.

From 7.30, April the 24th.

R.S.V.P. Miss Madeleine Quinn.

Later - in her bedroom, away from needling tongues - Madeleine wet nib with ink and inscribed the favoured names, one each per card. It was no reflection on Poynter that his name was late to arise,

for Madeleine took especial delight in certain friends - and hoped her calligraphic flourish was, by then, running at its fluent best.

Sealing each in a stout envelope, Madeleine considered her evening's labours adequate and slept a happier girl. Next day - cautious of curious eyes - she popped the invitations into a bright red post-box. It had just been re-painted, as if for the occasion.

Madeleine knew - care of first class delivery - how they would soon be winging their way through the London Boroughs, even back to Hampstead, Laurence Poynter and - in a show of irony - her mother.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the established manner of the Poynter residence, Polly collected the morning letters and placed them on a silver tray, along with Poynter's Daily Telegraph and a glass of apple juice; these items formed the prelude to breakfast, itself a complex grilled affair. Dressed in his accustomed clerkish manner, Poynter noted the contents of some tedious invoice - then turned his attentions to the second communication of the day, sealed with a rubber stamp of floral design and addressed in a decorative hand:

'Mr. Laurence Poynter, Orchard House, Keats Grove,  
Hampstead.'

Sensing a particular importance, Poynter took care not to ruin the envelope as he slit the top carefully with his paper-knife...knowing, should it prove of value, how it might be treasured for decades in some precious album. The card, therein, was as Madeleine had printed, and inscribed with Poynter's name - although no further personalization.

Poynter scrutinized it with a detective's application. He took in the pinkish hue of the paper, the formalized glee of the wording and the minutest elements of typographical style. Indeed, so prolonged was his examination of the document that the customary glass of apple juice stood losing its chill. It even collected the minutest touches of dust upon its meniscus.

Polly's entrance with the grilled portion lacked its synchronous routine. "Is...everything all right, sir?" asked Polly.

"Thank you, Polly," murmured Poynter. "Everything's wonderful. Serve tea at the gazebo, please."

Where, till the late afternoon, Poynter might have been found in the thrall of poetic creation, the teapot warm beneath its cosy as he took an occasional sip from a bone china cup - then took wing upon a sudden rapture through a labyrinth of mental anguish.

Poynter had a notebook filled with abortive poems, which lacked the drive or inspiration to continue. The Enlightenment had provided a platform, so Poynter could meet the challenge of completion. He smiled at times, wondering how the grimness of his gothic tones might compare to the endeavours of Madeleine's other

guests. Each had been invited, so he imagined, to buttress her trivial pursuits.

Chapter Three

*The Enlightenment*

DESPITE THE TIRESOME objections of her mother, Madeleine had achieved an appearance of lavish magnificence in their surly, if classical, home. The number of lamps visible in the windows, the soft tinkle of music from within, caused even Poynter to pause on the pavement. The poet was impressed by the efforts so displayed, and opened the wrought iron gate.

Yet as he did so, Poynter froze. The darker instincts he had nurtured through affectation conflicted with desire to seek enjoyment within. For he could identify with the forlorn state of an outsider. One who might sense the signals of a graceful occasion, but lack friends or invitation to enter. If it were so, thought Poynter...how bleak might happiness cast shadows beyond the indulgent glow of its bliss? How sublime those shadows would seem enclosing a social and aesthetic void, trapping their hapless victims in a limbo of petty diversion.

Feminine laughter from within Orchard House broke the chain of Poynter's philosophy. He gripped the solid shape of his brandy bottle, knowing its vintage pleasures had been bought to whet thirsts within, not evoke the desperate comfort of a wino. Moreover, he remembered how he had polished fine examples of his mournful verse to sober this very audience, should fancy or alcohol lighten their heads to excess.

Resolved in the solemnity of his presentation, Poynter paused no more. He stepped onto the path, closing the gate, and strode to the great oak door beneath the porch. A burst of applause hinted some talent had found favour, and Poynter waited a moment till its scattered remnants left sufficient peace for the bell. Judging his moment with an almost musical timing, Poynter pressed the button.

\* \* \* \* \*

The poet did not have long to wait for a response, although its manner was quite unexpected. Poynter heard a knocking to his left, and turned to see Madeleine's face beaming through the side of a bay window. She vanished for a moment or so, before appearing around the crack of the door to admit this lone, late guest.

"Laurence!" gushed Madeleine. "I was worried."

"I wouldn't make it?" Poynter affected a wry expression, which was the nearest he had to a smile. "I enjoy the night air, Madeleine. The way the world is punctured with light. Stars in the heavens, lanterns upon the earth."

"Gosh, Laurence!" gasped Madeleine. "So you do see beauty after all?"

"It lies within the eye of the beholder," replied Poynter. "My eyes lack the common ideal."

"But - come in, Laurence!" gushed Madeleine. "Don't dally at the door. Take my arm. Be the proper gentleman."

"Of course." Poynter curled his jacketed sleeve round Madeleine's wispy silk. He imagined how the two might be the roots of different plants, with the wise tree grafting to the flower. This was no romantic evocation, for Poynter's vision of nature spurned any whimsical interpretation. But he sensed a quiver of stimulus, knowing how his first impression - to the guests within - would be a portrait of respectful influence.

"Mother isn't here," whispered Madeleine as they crossed the polished floor. "She refused my invitation over breakfast. Booked a night at the theatre, although her company saw to the arrangements."

As Poynter tried to phrase an apt remark, he became distracted by a discordant note that had underplayed Madeleine's words. Rather, notes - many of them - for the source of concern was a flow of sound from the piano. "Music?" he frowned. "It's somewhat irregular..."

"Richard Keel," said Madeleine, as they entered the lounge. The soiree was a tableau of static appreciation, framed by the richness of an embellished doorway. Hale - a mercenary butler hired for the occasion - bid Poynter welcome with a stately nod. Poynter offered barely a glance of acknowledgement as they stepped inside, where the full scope of Madeleine's meticulous preparations were dazzling to behold.

There were constellations of glowing lampshades, a table-groaning buffet, and drinks gleaming in their coloured bottles. Around twenty guests sat fixated by the flow of sound, which

ascended like an intermittent brook over a variety of jagged rocks.

"Discordant," murmured Poynter. "Most definitely discordant."

"Steps to Serendipity!" whispered Madeleine. "A construction in sound. The notes create...an audible geometry, shaped by the harmonic space of the room. It differs with every performance."

"You tempt me to an understanding," replied Poynter, as they moved towards an empty sofa. "One can often resist temptation. Such is the nature of discipline."

"Oh - come on!" said Madeleine. Her voice rose louder than she might have pleased, prompting one or two heads to turn. "This is The Enlightenment, remember?" she added, in a more subdued tone. "Richard Keel's a genius. You can hear shapes in the air. Close your eyes, Laurence."

Poynter did so, as Madeleine waited for his response. "Ah," intoned Poynter. "Nothing more than an ill-defined grey."

However, Madeleine's own attempt produced better results. "Yes...lines and corners," she gasped. "Chunky bits!"

So the composer embellished, or demolished, his basic rhythm - according to the listener's taste - then created a thicket of notes so dense, so obscure, it seemed no melody could ever emerge. But Keel twisted a theme from this musical wreckage, thrashing it into submission like a vicious serpent. Then he stopped, quite suddenly, with his hand held high in the air. A silence fell upon the room.

The vibrations of the piano died down, down, down till its resonance teetered on the threshold of subliminal tinitus. Only then, through that vacuum of breathless suspense, did the composer plunge his hand, wiggling, to the waiting keys - where he extended one single, gold-ringed finger to add a single, plaintiff note. There was a momentary silence. The room exploded with applause.

"Assure me," hoped Madeleine, "that you can no longer retain your skepticism towards the work of Mr. Richard Keel."

Poynter, indeed, had been impressed by the slow emergence of formal structure - even if he sat, startled and bemused, by the meretricious impact of that final note. While he admired the intensity of emotion displayed in the composition, Keel's failure to transmute such emotion through any recognized form grated on Poynter's classical mind. "The work has...some winning features," he said wistfully. Poynter had allowed a fog of ambivalence to shroud either his lack, or suppression, of zeal.

However, Madeleine had to play hostess to more than the mordant Poynter. She stood, jingling in her jewellery, with all eyes instantly upon her. "Dear friends! Tonight, we have found Enlightenment! My desire has been fulfilled."

A murmur of approval ran around the grandiose chamber.

"Indeed, we have had a truly profound experience," said Madeleine. "Richard Keel does not create *music*."

This was a sentiment with which Poynter agreed, but for very different reasons.

"No," added Madeleine, as she fuelled herself with an invigorating breath. "He creates an entrance into an audible dimension. A parallel leit-motif on our own worldly symphony, which we might experience only through the medium of his talent, with no fear of chaos or...discordance."

Poynter almost choked on this final word. Madeleine was plagiarizing his skepticism, with irony. That was a kind of insult.

"Spiritual awareness aplenty!" concluded Madeleine. "But I hope it fails to blunt our more earthly appetites. The tables are spread, the refreshment is ready, and so...let us all make merry. How better to do so, indeed, than amongst such pleasant company."

Keel was a lanky man in a green bow-tie. He stood stiffly by his piano stool, as if it was an item from which he seldom detached himself. Keel whisked back his mop of prematurely grey hair, and made his own verbal contribution. "And you too, Miss Quinn, are an Enlighten-ess," he proclaimed. "For, more than any of us - with our humble talents - you have had the vision to bring us together. This is the greatest gift of all!"

A further wave of applause filled the appreciative chamber, started by some sycophantic acolyte in the corner. Poynter contributed a burst of rapid handclaps, although their frequency bordering on the ironic. He was only returning the treatment he had received from his host.

"And all is not over," announced Madeleine. "We have my own humble efforts to look forward to...if look forward to, we do,"

she smirked, "and those of our new arrival, Mr. Laurence Poynter, another of the Hampstead poets. We met by chance, upon the rolling Heath...searching for inspiration."

Madeleine inclined her head towards Poynter, who did not meet her eyes. He had found the programme for the evening, and sat scrutinizing the terms of his own description. This was to avoid prompting any applause, to which he would have to present a confident figure. Poynter disliked any wild show of approbation, and the prospect was cringe-inducing. As it was, the rumble of chairs and trampling of feet indicated the buffet was the more immediate attraction. Poynter had still to earn his recognition.

Poynter had never liked the free-for-all scramble of buffet catering, even when the spread - as tonight - was not only magnificent in scope, but in each attention to detail. The chutneys sparkled in the lamplight like precious gems poured into silver bowls, while avocados, baguettes, confections and delights extraordinaire formed just part of an alphabet of excess.

"A *buffette* from the buffet," smiled someone, referring to their plate of food.

Poynter manoeuvred himself between posh frocks and jackets. He seized tongs for an extension of manual dexterity, rather than a concern for hygiene. Their mechanical grip deposited a variety of sweets and savouries onto a large, porcelain dish, where they mixed and merged in an appealing manner. Each was a nibble to alternate with the last, in a series of miniature courses.

Poynter made a sly, slinking retreat to a corner, where he might consume his selection undisturbed. He wished to retain a solitary space, for he was by no means confident at performing his poetry. Jammed beside the bookcase, Poynter tried to ignore any trace of nerves and concentrate on his food.

There was another who shared the laconic nature of Laurence Poynter - and if anything, had more cause to do so. The figure sipped on his brandy and munched a spicy sausage with an air of distant contemplation. Poynter noticed him, and found the figure one of enjoyable private study.

The fellow was mostly bald, with a black goatee beard that had sent exploratory wisps to his ears. His tiny eyes would gaze at one area of the room for a moment, then move with the smooth precision of a security camera to examine another area. He wore a brown suit buttoned high to the neck, in the manner of communist utility garb - although the tailoring was rather better. The breast pocket held a couple of fountain pens, a propelling pencil and one of the stubby, soft variety.

Madeleine was beyond Poynter's range of observation. But she would soon be speaking to an invited guest, whom she had barely hoped to see. But he was here, struck by the sincerity of her crafted invitation, and had nothing but admiring words.

"Roland Twine," he greeted her, extending a hand.

Madeleine displayed a sample of her inner joy. She had known the name - not the face - by reputation, and butler Hale had failed to introduce them. Desiring a little fun, however,

Madeleine ignored Roland's introductory remark and offered him a perfumed wrist. With no sign of hesitation, Roland brought his lips down to touch the skin above the bracelet. His eyes noticed the glimmer of her Adonis Blue butterfly brooch.

"I'm flattered you could make it," replied Madeleine. "I'm nothing but a humble scribbler. My friends spin their magic around me."

"No," said Roland. The voice came resonant from within a stocky, forty year-old body. "If they rely on you to maintain their orbits, then you must be the sun. They are the merest planets. There is no need to feel flattered. I am flattered to be asked."

Madeleine blushed, and fiddled with her bracelet.

"Mr. Keel made a strong impression," added Roland, sensing he should advance the conversation from its meek cul-de-sac. "I'm no musician, of course. But I know talent. Mr. Keel is a talented man."

"He will go far," nodded Madeleine.

"He will," agreed Roland. "If his vocation had reference to my own profession, I would be honoured to help on that journey. As it is, I can only write on which I know: writing. So I anticipate the second half."

The very simplicity of these words threatened to overcome Madeleine. She was used to cynical views from both Poynter and her mother, and knew her poetical musings would soon be offered to

all. But her admiration for Roland's work - and now, the dignity of the man himself - nullified any lapse of confidence.

Madeleine nodded slowly, hoping to give of her best. "Both myself...and Laurence," she added, looking to and fro for the invisible poet, "hope we shall enlighten the evening more."

Roland furrowed his brow in concentration, as he analysed the implications. "And if so...I will do my duty." Then, without explaining to Madeleine what this duty might be, Roland merged with the shifting crowd.

\* \* \* \* \*

The throng became hushed to the tonality of a religious congregation. Drinks were still sipped, and *buffettes* nibbled, but in a manner both furtive and fastidious. Before all, Madeleine Quinn stood proudly on display. The slightest current of air sent her antique dress shimmering, as she began to recite her verse.

Poynter sat to one side of the performance area, watching from relative seclusion. His profile added a jagged promontory to the luxuriant drapery, which framed the dormant piano. Madeleine closed her eyes, hands clasped behind her back as if she stood before a headmistress. Her face, painted and powdered, seemed warm and alive. It enraptured those present as she began the recital.

Madeleine's words were simple, but carefully chosen, and created instant mental imagery of those places and passions she loved. How Poynter winced at each and every stanza, for

Madeleine's gleeful aesthetics were so opposed to his own. It was fortunate, perhaps, that the tricks of lighting concealed much of his own expression. Yet few would have glanced in his direction, so mesmerized were they by the woman's diction.

The observant Poynter noted one discrepancy. The head of the balding, brown-suited goatee man was bobbing up and down. A curious factor, considered Poynter.

To those with a cynical outlook, the poems of Madeleine Quinn might seem trivial and decorative affectations. Even so, they had only been affected after many hours labour. Sometimes, there had been a painful frustration equal to that of Laurence Poynter, in pursuit of his bleaker truth. Madeleine had no wish for such frustration, unlike her laconic but studious friend. However, any faint shadow it cast upon her work added a sense of poignant difficulty - to which a critic might favourably allude as deep sincerity.

While Poynter would always be polite to Madeleine, he failed to see any of the subtlety her poetry might possess. So he smiled silently through Madeleine's Oak Tree Opus, even the more wistful passages, and fixed his face in a grimace through the torturous Childhood Snowflakes.

Others saw the glee in Madeleine's Forest of Plenty, but Poynter could only wish for less. Even so, this did not stop his loud handclaps adding to the huge applause. Poynter even kissed her hand as Madeleine introduced him as "Mr. Laurence Poynter. A soul of the gothic heart!"

Poynter made no concession to entertainment. He adopted a statuesque pose before the listeners, taking time to adjust his spectacles and slide a small black notebook from his pocket. It was here that Poynter had transcribed the best versions of his better poems, currently in the region of thirty. He regarded the volume as a valuable artefact, in the manner of a saintly relic. The hush that had preceded Madeleine's performance held reign in the chamber once more - although the gasps of delight at her versification remained unique to those contributions.

Poynter read his poetry in a sombre, portentous manner. This elicited no discernible reaction, but created a pall of *gloomish* intensity that encroached every nook and cranny. The audience shivered, either through an illusion of cold or a genuine inner dread. This was present during the measured tones of *A Summer of Dusk*, the more narrative but elliptical *Woven Minds* and - most especially - the ambivalent but uneasy *Game of Childhood Fears*.

Even so, Poynter held his audience gripped throughout. When he stepped aside with a nod of farewell, there seemed no muting of the applause. It might have expressed a great relief from the growing tension, or been a show of pity for Madeleine - whose Enchantment Poynter had sobered. Whatever the reason, these two very different performances were brought to a satisfactory end. Now it was left to mingle and chatter.

\* \* \* \* \*

There were many individuals who Poynter could meet at The Enlightenment. The one person he never expected to meet was himself. So Poynter was astonished to meet himself by the gateaux, where his doppelganger drooled over an indulgent slice. Meeting himself was a peculiar sensation. It was even more peculiar to see himself wearing an elegant 1930s gown, with court shoes and a feather boa. Poynter almost choked on his nibbled *buffette*, until he saw himself remove the visage to reveal Madeleine's grinning features beneath.

"Where did that come from?" scowled Poynter, as Madeleine offered the painted mask. Its features were stylized and angular in their interpretation. The paint that rendered them was still wet.

"Look over *there*," said Madeleine. She pointed across the thicket of conversing, consuming heads to that of the goatee man. He was holding a similar mask, upon which he was daubing the face of another. "Simon is a portraitist," explained Madeleine. "Not the 'sit in a stiff chair' kind of stuff, but spiritual projections of the subject's persona."

"And he sees me as a tight-lipped tin soldier?" frowned Poynter.

"Look how he sees me," smiled Madeleine, tugging Poynter over to the artist. There were a number of masks before him, mostly blank pink ovals awaiting his strange impressions. One was Madeleine, with her face framed by complex yellow curls. The flower on her forehead looked like a caste mark.

"It resembles...a hippy," murmured Poynter, delving deep into his knowledge of popular culture.

"Simon sees me as a free spirit - of nature - trapped in these formal walls. Here, be me! Try it on!" said Madeleine, and Poynter allowed her to place the mystical, feminine face over his own gaunt and troubled features.

But as he looked out through Madeleine's eyes, Poynter could see her turn to greet another, more admiring man. Roland Twine had been so measured in his earlier tones, but now patted her firmly on the shoulder. "Madeleine. You have knocked me sideways," he announced. "I will have to do my duty."

At which Poynter, concealed by the Madeleine mask, felt a wave of cold bemusement. Roland's duty was that of a critic, so who would he criticize? Or did he have *another* plan in mind?

Chapter Four

*Drawing the Circle*

THE TWO POETS had traversed the northern part of Richmond Park, along the long, sloping path known as the Queen's Ride. Woodland bristled on either side, rich with the new leaves of early summer. The White Lodge was visible to the east, shielded by a gathering of trees. Inside, the ballet stars of the future were being groomed.

Madeleine fancied cutting through the woods, to speed the journey through the park. Poynter assented, for the experience might offer a worthwhile sensation. The two poets stepped onto the grass, and moved together through the wood. The trees were solid, and spaced to allow light and movement between them. There was a floor of older, crumbling leaves, while fresh bracken sprouted in bright green tufts.

It was here that Poynter seemed to become truly alive. He wished it was later in the evening, when the details would fall into obscurity as the light withdrew...blending bark, leaf and undergrowth into a tapestry of chromatic restraint. Madeleine's dress might retain a degree of luminescence, and she might cling to Poynter like a floating wraith. His brooding influence would flow into her psychology, robbing the natural forms of joy. She would tingle at every crack of a branch, every scuttle, every cry of a bird. Madeleine would cling to him tightly, unable to comprehend her terror. Such was the fancy of a gothic poet.

But as Poynter glanced at Madeleine, the moment passed. She was happy, carefree, enjoying the wood. She gasped audibly as they emerged - but not with terror, with delight. For there, in the distance, was a wonderful sight. A herd of reindeer spread across the grassland in a scattering of rich, tawny brown.

The two poets made their gradual approach, while the animals sensed them and turned to look. Madeleine slowed, and mirrored their gaze. One particular deer, more curious than the rest, scrutinized the newcomers.

Madeleine was unable to quantify the emotions behind those eyes. She was at one with the animal, which - in her imagination - had become an antelope of the African veldt. They poets seemed like colonials, enjoying the rays of a tangerine sunset. Madeleine stood bright in her white, billowing dress, while Poynter was a darker outline.

Madeleine squatted, beckoning to the creature. "Come on, darling. Come on, sugar." For one breathless moment of excitement, it seemed they would be blessed with a close encounter. Although its ears perked up in curiosity, the animal failed to make the approach. Then it sensed some greater urgency, and turned with a sudden gallop.

Poynter smirked. Madeleine offered a rueful smile. "Nearly made a friend," she said.

Poynter strolled over. "These are wild animals, Madeleine. We should never cling to sentiment."

"Name the poet who is ruled by logic," retorted Madeleine.

"Even your poems are wrought from a morbid emotion."

"An emotion which lacks in folly," murmured Poynter.

Nevertheless, he was amused by Madeleine's child-like wonder.

Poynter would soon dampen her mood. "It would be folly to remain abroad in such weather," he added.

Madeleine frowned. "It is a gorgeous evening."

Poynter pointed his rolled umbrella at the rosy clouds, as if inviting lightning to strike. "Potential...inclemency," he murmured.

Madeleine looked up at the sky, so it tinged the curves of her beaming face. She flipped the brim of her sun-hat away from her eyes, fixing Poynter with an inquisitive glare. "Proof you lack any logic," she said, "for Richmond gives us a splendid sky, below which the deer roam free - as should we, Laurence - if we're to see Roland in time."

Madeleine took Poynter's arm as she said this, tugging him into a compliant march across the grass. They became smaller and smaller within moments. The green strands rippled above their diminishing heads, as the breeze indulged in its own mobility.

The two poets walked on towards the East Sheen Gate, by the side of a road that entered the park. The sun was low and diffused above the ragged crest of Sheen Wood. They soon reached the Sheen Gate Lodge, with its redbrick and pebble-dashed walls, window shutters and picket fence. There was no sign of any gatekeeper, although the park would not be open much longer. The poets passed

through the wrought iron gate, into the residential streets beyond.

Poynter cracked his umbrella sharp on the pavement like a military cane. He pointed the way ahead in a manner that belied his lack of local knowledge. "I *think* so," murmured Madeleine. "I'll check the map..."

"Never mind *that*," said Poynter. "We'll check reality first. If it fails to correspond, then we worry."

It was with such confidence that Poynter led his companion along the short distance, which stood between them and the evening's appointment.

\* \* \* \* \*

The home of Mr. Roland Twine was at once familiar, having been depicted - in miniature form - upon his personal letterhead. The finely honed phrases of invitation remained with Madeleine, and the proximity of the occasion summoned them to mind as the pair negotiated the darkening pavement:

*My Dear Miss Quinn,*

*May I supplement my appreciation of *The Enlightenment* with an additional, benevolent note? It is so often the role of the critic to plough the furrows of mediocrity, churning the desolate meagreness inherent in its lamentable execution - averting the*

*gaze of the public from the desolate, ill-conceived object. At times, one can fester a bitterness at the sheer grime of the job - becoming the equivalent of a literary 'scrubber', ensuring the temple of the art we each hold dear shall be manifested in the utmost glory. Such is the bitterness that threatens my career - yet this can be thrown into abeyance by the unforeseen flash, the delight of sudden revelation.*

*By my own admission, I ventured to your glowing enterprise with critical faculties poised: programmed, as it were, by a mechanical instinct to find fault wherever they might probe. Yet these faculties remained dormant throughout an evening of the most eloquent and dignified bliss. I am qualified only to analyse the literary components offered by yourself and the good Mr. Poynter: your own charming renditions were, indeed, an Enlightenment - while Mr. Poynter's elegant parody of the gothic-grotesque was a triumph of mordant satire.*

*I would not presume to supersede your future plans, for I anticipate other such Enlightenments. Yet it would counter my calling to ignore the joy within me, and be satisfied with a passive role.*

*I survey the field of poetry with an increasing distaste, and see the need for new directions. You have cast a spell, Miss Madeleine Quinn, and I have become enchanted. So much so, I am compelled to seek involvement. I know of several other poets, like yourselves, who bear witness to a better world. Though I lack the talent of poetic composition, I would be honoured by a different*

*task: I invite both yourself and Mr. Laurence Poynter to discuss these matters with others of my acquaintance, with a view - perhaps - to a regular gathering. Such a focus might burn through the tawdry filaments of established verse, as a lens makes the sun a pin-sharp ray.*

*Yours, most sincerely,*

*Roland Twine.*

Roland had left the gambit open to Madeleine, knowing how any lack of motivation would embody a lack of mutual trust. It was not for him to peer, to probe, at the young lady's manoeuvres: only to sit back, as a critic, and let the treasure come his way.

Madeleine had seen the sense of Roland's words, way beyond the gloss of flattery, and knew here was someone to share her vision and further its spiritual ends. The summation of Poynter's brand of 'gothic-grotesque' amused her, though she knew better than to share it with the poet. Roland had misinterpreted the motive behind Poynter's words - yet having done so, his opinion was hardly incompatible with appearance. The sheer degree of Poynter's solemnity - of cold, superior detachment - had suggested the actor's skill more than the poet's.

Madeleine was well versed in Poynter's psychology, and knew he recited with no trace of irony. There was no satire or burlesque intended. As long as Roland steered clear of such reference, the evening promised to be productive.

Such was the distraction of Madeleine's musing that she failed to recognize the likeness to the letterhead born by one particular, large old house. Luckily, Poynter had a sharp eye for atmosphere and detail, so the two lamps framing the gateway shone with the familiarity of a frequent haunt. Of course, Poynter had not seen Roland's original letter - but the meticulous critic had sent confirmatory notes to both, on Madeleine's approval.

Poynter's note had been simple enough. It had merely stated how pleased the critic would be to see him, and that his poetry had been much admired. Initially, Poynter had not deigned to look at the note. It had been Polly who had read it aloud, until her comments about the letterhead's "quaint little house" had prompted Poynter's more personal scrutiny.

Tugging Madeleine back from an absent-minded diversion, Poynter slid the latch of the wooden gate to reveal the path beyond. It sloped up, interrupted by a couple of steps, on which the pair took care in the gloom. These brought them to the carved front door, shrouded beneath a heavy porch. Madeleine located the doorbell and pressed, eliciting a rasp within.

Roland's study might have been designed as a depiction of his own inner workings. Not the physical faculties, but those of the brain, which - in his case - had been devoted almost entirely to literature. The room was lined with bookcases to the exclusion of virtually all, except one narrow slit-like window, and constructed in such a way that the room appeared to be an oval. This shape was echoed by an oval table that dominated the centre, surrounded by

matching chairs of a rich, red-stained wood. An open fire crackled opposite the window, their alignment bisecting the oval, while an oval clock sat ticking patiently above the dancing flames. In addition, the place was illuminated by two chandeliers of a simple yet elegant design.

A stocky man in late middle-age sat by the fireplace. He had grey hair, a large bushy moustache and a suit of grey herringbone tweed. Roland sipped a brandy, studying this senior companion - whose mood had remained morose for the last hour, if relaxed by alcohol and warmth.

Finally, Roland felt it his duty to break the prolonged silence. "So you really feel the state of modern poetry is unsalvageable?" he asked. "A somewhat nihilistic view, Douglas."

Douglas showed an initial, discouraging tendency to continue the silence yet further. But his wheels of cogitation had reached their ends, and he offered a theory to Roland. "We haven't questioned - fundamentally questioned - the slow erosion of poetic imagination," he began, pointing a stern finger at his host as if holding him personally liable. "One sees cracks in the new anthologies that would have *abhorred* the craftsmen of a bygone era. Yet we deify their creators like some acolyte's guild, blessing ourselves - perhaps - that our tenacity in grasping the challenge of critical disapprobation excuses any inertia to raise the prevailing standards."

As he continued, Douglas's voice became louder and faster, his breath sliding wheezes between the words. "I hate to see

passion reduced to some post-modern game of formulaic and structural disintegration, as if the words were tarnishing the message. It sickens me. It's rare for me to side with McLuhan, but this is one medium where the message is inherent in the structural form. One where the respect between creator and reader must never be broken." Douglas explained these last points by taking his pipe from his pocket and rapping it on the table like an auctioneer's gavel.

"I stand at the edge of this barren literary landscape, and I'm given the invitations - yes! - they ask me to play the game. But the game is a shambolic, self-deceiving mockery of what our culture of verse should be - and I say I'll have no part in it, sir, no part!" With which Douglas banged the table three times very loudly, paused, then calmly lit his pipe.

Roland was left speechless for a moment. He had been astounded by the roller-coaster ride of annoyance upon which Douglas had dragged him, yet confounded by its final destination. Indeed, Roland suspected Douglas could set forth on these meandering expostulations quite as easily as a funfair threw its public through a wild, curving ride. Just like the rapid, complex but closed passage of a roller-coaster, his language provided little but a rush of exhilaration, trundling back to the initial stance. According to Douglas, modern poetry was bunk.

"We need straight talk like that," smiled Roland, taking a sip of his vintage port. "Which is just why I have called this meeting."

"Yes. Of course, Roland," murmured Douglas, sinking back into his seat. "You're the best at spotting these dismal tendencies. Right near the front line! Sniff the credentials of the avant-garde, but never kiss their cocks! Am I right?"

"I think you are," shrugged Roland - whereupon he turned to acknowledge a knock at the door and the entrance of his butler, Horace.

"Sir...Mr. Laurence Poynter and Miss Madeleine Quinn," announced Horace, who had the charisma of an embalmed corpse on castors. He slid aside to admit the guests.

"Miss Quinn," said Roland, rising from his seat. His manner teetered between the debonair and bashful. "I am so glad to see you. I was becoming a little concerned."

"Delighted by the delights of the park," grinned Madeleine. She shook the proffered hand, then removed her hat with a flourish. "And Laurence, of course..."

"Yes, Laurence!" said Roland, turning to the observant Douglas. "This is the young man with all the fiery brimstone stuff. Quite startling."

"Glad to hear it, sir," said Douglas, scraping the chair back and lurching over to crush Poynter's timid hand. Poynter smiled weakly.

Roland took a look at the oval clock, which now read a little after eight. "Roger said he'd be round," he murmured. "Roger Hart."

"Oh, the northern chap? He might be looking for the right house," grunted Douglas. "Had some trouble myself, Roland. Quite a performance." At which Douglas resumed his seat by the fire and, it seemed, a private decanter.

"Oh...perhaps," shrugged Roland, bemused by Douglas and his urban confusion. "Anyhow - Wendy said she'd be late, so we may as well start. Please...take a glass, the decanters are full, unless anyone wants a coffee?"

"Not just yet," said Madeleine, to a general consensus.

"Coffee and cakes for nine," Roland informed Horace, who vanished in a silent, undetectable manner.

Both Madeleine and Poynter took to the chairs, leaving several others vacant, while Roland stood at the head of the table in a mode of formal address.

"Poets," Roland began, spreading his arms to inspire the tiny gathering. "I wish I could say 'fellow poets', but I - as a critic - could barely scribe a limerick." Douglas snorted, dutifully refilling his glass.

"I have long thought to call a gathering such as this - and the wonderful evening hosted by Miss Madeleine Quinn," who Roland indicated with a glimmer in his eye, "has confirmed the value of the concept. Because, poets - we meet at a crisis."

Douglas contributed a slurred "*Hear, hear...*" which barely aspired to the second syllable.

"I believe poetry - as an art form, for surely it is - has become little but a decadent bauble. It is something the

chattering classes can drag along and banter about like a trimmed and perfumed poodle. I believe poetry should be much more than this. It should be the scalpel of literature. The cutting edge!" Roland karate-chopped his palm. "It should slice through the mire of description and dialogue and waffle that makes journalism and fiction such a pain. It should be like the best classical painting. It should cast a light upon the world, showing us the hidden depths and emotions. It was to appreciate such work that I became a literary critic. I hoped to find and encourage its creators. But I have become ensnared in a modern literature of irony and self-referential pastiche."

Roland gripped the back of the chair before him, riveting his listeners as if a preacher at the pulpit. Even Douglas had frozen to attention.

"We have a responsibility, not only to identify these problems, but combat them. How best to do so? Oh, I can offer a barrage of criticism designed to prise the poser from his meretricious shell. The best method is to show by example the greatness to which poetry may aspire. In this, it is only the poet who may fight the cause, for only he - or *she* - has the insight or genius to compose the works that shine on the page, delight in recital, and conclude in revelation. My friends - to bring *enlightenment!*"

At which, Roland spread his arms once more - prompting a burst of applause from the eager Douglas, and a more restrained contribution from the incredulous Hampstead poets.

"Utter agreement," gasped Madeleine.

"I appreciate your passion," nodded Poynter, dryly.

Roland had hooked his audience. He had made what the commercial world might term the 'sales pitch', and now it was time to close the deal. "Friends," he resumed in a more intimate tone, "I have explained my deep regret at lacking the skills of versification. But I would feel honoured if the insight we seem to share unfurled from my own approval. This, at least, would lend me an affinity with the poet...and as such, I might bathe in the reflected glory."

Madeleine's eyes were wide as she beheld the speaker, and the rosy bloom of her curvaceous cheeks was an indicator of much admiration. Her dewy gaze remained on this subdued yet passionate man...his manner sensitive but determined, intelligent yet lucid. She crossed her legs beneath the golden wood of the table, the white dress rustling like a veil, while Poynter's grey-trousered knees inclined themselves together in a tight clenching of emotion.

"I would wish to become the hub...of a spinning wheel," said Roland. "Spinning faster and faster with poetic enlightenment, riding roughshod over the meagre literary morsels of which the Modernists craze. Let us form a movement, my friends. A circle. The Circle Of Radical Verse."

Roland knew better than to force excess drama into an already powerful statement. He neither screamed the final sentence at the top of his voice, nor raised his hands to the heavens. He merely

shot a straight, piercing glance at each of his guests, then quietly resumed his seat. Madeleine sat motionless, her breath stilled like water frozen in a pipe, while Poynter rocked solemnly to and fro.

Suddenly, the silence was broken by Douglas, who yelled "Bravo, my son!" at the top of his voice, and banged the table like a businessman glad to be his own boss. Despite the crudity of this loud display, Roland was filled with a warm gratitude that his message had been conveyed, and allowed a ripple of satisfaction to quiver his upper lip.

"I think it's a marvellous idea," gushed Madeleine. "It's sad we should all beaver at our own endeavours, ignorant of like-minded souls. Why, it was only the chance meeting of Laurence and myself that opened the channels between us. Yet we had both written poetry since youthful days, and lived for some years in the district."

Roland gave a nod of acknowledgement, although an astute observer might have seen the glimmer in his eyes and found a more intimate reason. But the subtle looks did not linger. Roland flashed his eyes at Poynter, seeking the viewpoint of this shallow listener.

Realizing he was now the focus of attention, Poynter avoided the option of squirming embarrassment by contriving several restrained manoeuvres. He took out a pencil, using it to trace an imaginary circle in the air, then mused on its invisible geometry. "A circle..." he murmured.

Roland nodded. "The Circle Of Radical Verse."

Madeleine's honey-sweet smile lent support to the scheme, though Poynter was more skeptical. "And what would that entail?" he asked. "You would be the hub, yes...but would we merely whirl in your orbit?"

Roland liked the wary analysis of this grave young man, who might become a most astute member once converted to the Circle's cause. "There could be a number of activities," explained Roland. "Regular meetings, perhaps here...or the local hostelry. Maybe outings to scenic locations, away from the bustle of everyday life. Somewhere to spark a poet's inspiration. Rich in atmosphere and detail!"

Poynter enmeshed his fingers, allowing one to wiggle like the hand of an oscillating metronome. This was sounding much more promising. "And your own role?" he queried.

"I would see myself...very much as a facilitator," said Roland. "I do not seek dominance or power in such a group. I merely wish to keep the enterprise spinning." At which he paused, for Horace had appeared in the doorway.

"Sir...Miss Weaver has arrived in the house," he said, with the lively chattiness of a museum caption. "The coffee and cakes are in progress." Horace slid aside to reveal a lanky redhead in tight velvet trousers and a green satin blouse.

"Wendy...!" exclaimed Roland, rising to kiss her cheek while Douglas consumed another fathom of port. Poynter continued to

scrutinize his imaginary circle, while Madeleine acknowledged the newcomer with a beaming smile.

"So the Circle has been agreed," said Wendy Weaver, as if possessing a secret insight into the previous hour.

"Not quite. I have made the proposition," murmured Roland. "Wendy, I should add, helped with the original idea. We had a chat in the theatre bar during this laugh-an-hour comedy. Dreadful playwright...what was his name? Brickford? Bumbleford? Forgettable, either way."

"I think it's a marvellous idea," smiled Madeleine. "We must keep the bandwagon going."

"I'll agree to that!" snorted Douglas, keen to conserve his supply of refreshment. "Been nibbling for years, barely published a thing. Actually, I bought a few poems along..."

Roland could see Douglas slide his hand to a sheaf of papers shoved in his jacket pocket. He blocked the move like a wary policeman suspecting an armed villain. "Not just yet," said Roland, quickly, "for the Circle is not unanimous. We still have a doubter in our midst."

Poynter could imagine he had fallen upon some esoteric cult, with this oval room its secular chapel. Given such a striking metaphor, he fancied how the group might become a source of peculiar vibes, even if this was not its proffered intent. Poynter might be happy to play a part. He had also be happy to distance himself, and criticize the Circle from the perimeter. Perhaps the

poet was not a doubter. But his idea of dedication was an ambivalent one, and lacked the blinkered zeal of the others.

"It would be...an experience," said Poynter, quietly. "What else does the poet need?"

"Good man," nodded Roland in approval. "And there's another thing, touched on by Douglas..."

"Ah, yes!" Douglas began sliding out his sheaf of papers, eliciting further distraction from Roland.

"The question of publication," said Roland.

Douglas sighed.

Wendy took a seat next to Douglas as Roland resumed his oratory. "I have been a critic, oh...must be twenty years," said Roland. "As such, I've shouted from the sidelines at anything I thought crass, praised anything I thought worthy. But my energies yearn for more direct involvement in the production of literature. Not the writing, but the distribution. To this end, I propose the Circle has a twofold function. It must allow poets to meet and mingle, share their works...and choose the best for a prestige anthology."

"Bravo, sir!" boomed Douglas, his thunderous handclapping prompting the others to follow. They did so with total sympathy, albeit a variety of styles. Wendy's came sharp and regular like dripping water, Madeleine's gleeful and lively, while Poynter's had the pace of a dutiful drumbeat. Roland adopted several gratified postures, as if posing for photographs.

"We agree...?" asked Roland, with a twinkle in his eye.

"You bet!" shrieked Wendy, at a manic pitch.

"I'll drink to that," said Douglas, though he had done little else all evening.

"And...my two Hampstead poets?" added Roland, as the applause died away. "I need not ask you, Madeleine. Only delight casts such a bloom to a face."

At which Madeleine blushed even further.

"But, Laurence," asked Roland. "Have I clarified myself? Do you see the wisdom of the plan?"

For once, Poynter made no delay in stating allegiance. "When you said...a circle," he began, "I was confused. I hesitated. I pictured some endless, pointless trajectory." He traced the shape in the air once more. "But your mention of a book - a lasting outcome - turns our circle from a spinning wheel to a target." At which, Poynter hit the bulls-eye with his pencil.

"Well said!" gasped Madeleine.

"While I know little of your deeper motives," added Poynter, "on the strength of what's been said...I'll give the Circle my unqualified support."

Roland stood erect, with an air of gravity. He was no longer just a sociable host, but the instigator of a new movement. "At which point...we may claim to be founded," he announced. "If Horace has the coffee and cakes, we might break for a less formal chat. I've much more detail about future plans. I want all to feel included in the..."

"Yes, yes!" stuttered Douglas. "But look, Roland. I've been excluded long enough!" He wrenched the sheaf of papers from his inside pocket, laughing in tones of a resonant bass. "You won't stop me now!" he roared, knowing Roland would surely want to.

So it was that Roland sat, nodding in restrained - if simulated - appreciation. Indeed, nothing could stop Douglas. Wendy seemed keen, despite an alarming proximity to the bawling man. So close that her neck craned away by slow degree, so she soon had the attitude of a startled heron.

Madeleine opened her heart to the reader, even if his bombastic tones owed more to the cattle auctioneer than the luminary. Poynter made no secret of his utter distaste, fixing his features in the wincing expression one makes on tasting sugary tea, against habit.

Yet Roland was glad to let Douglas share his scribbles with the world - for the Circle would hear much poetry, both good and bad. The virtuous mechanism of its undertaking would allow the latter to become the former. Roland's mind cruised upon the grotesque imagery of the grating ballad as a surfer might challenge a wave, rising above the chaos of its surging depths.

There would be much to anticipate, in the summer months. Roland relished the prospect of more meetings, more poetry, more critical chat - and with the coming of autumn, the selection of the most radical verse, and the printing of a fine edition.

It would be a book to stagger the egos of his leech-like profession. It would dumbfound the critics in its artistic mission. To bring enlightenment.

Chapter Five

*A Precious Role*

To Poynter, the crumpled brown leaves of autumn evoked the many, many drafts of poetic composition he had written, corrected, despaired of and then...crumpled. Each poem came as fresh as a newborn child, with all its hopes before it. While the long and arduous upbringing attempted to coax brilliance into every beginning, only one in twenty caught an elusive insight.

Not all the discarded poems were bad. As Poynter sat reviewing the summer's work in the darkening October gazebo, he knew only a few of the few - the very best - could seek their chances in the anthology planned by CORV, the Circle Of Radical Verse.

Roland had organized a meeting of the poets each fortnight. While Poynter had not attended all - or even most - those he did had been quite intriguing. Poynter's motive, to which he had alluded from the outset, bore more than a calling to literary skill. He was both fascinated and disconcerted by Roland's authority, and sought to counter any forced aesthetic he might thrust upon the group.

Roland had always taken Poynter's criticisms lightly. As a critic, he had evolved the thick skin vital to that trade. Yet there had been a trace of irony in the manner with which Roland conceded to Poynter's cautionary statements. Perhaps his inner reaction differed from the impression he wished to give. Poynter

was no fool, and had detected Roland's appreciation of Miss Madeleine Quinn. Although prompted by her rambling rhyme schemes, this had grown from a casual liking to firm romance. Roland was passionate about Madeleine, and would no doubt remain passionate even if the standard of her couplets fell beneath the level of a crude limerick.

Did Poynter feel jealous of Roland? The friendship she had shown the poet had not lapsed since the CORV had been founded. They still enjoyed tea and cakes at their mutual addresses - despite the scowling disapprobation of Mrs. Quinn - and kept a keen interest in the other's work. Yet the task Roland had set in announcing the anthology had lit the creative fuses within them, and their eyes had more often beheld the summer sun glaring from a page of spidery verse than a living lawn of green.

Madeleine, it was true, would most likely be sitting on such a lawn while she wrote. But apart from his excursions to the local cemeteries, the bulk of Poynter's concentration had been spent hunched in the dim gazebo, silhouetted against the glory of the garden, or scribing in his study during the sombre hours of night.

The best of the poems would be selected at the October meeting, whence forth Roland would instigate the printing and production of the final volume in good time for the Christmas market. With a meeting that very evening, Poynter sat in fierce contemplation. He had narrowed his stack of composition to a final ten sheets. In turn, these would be narrowed by the meeting to the five or six good enough for inclusion.

Madeleine's artist crony, Simon Drake of the Enlightenment, had been asked to create pen-and-ink drawings based on his own vision of the verse. With a glowing forward by Roland and various typographical embellishments promised by his 'printer of fine editions', the CORV anthology would be slim but sumptuous: a small dollop of luxury, like an exclusive brand of caviar.

As the sky became bluish-grey in the late afternoon, lending the scattered leaves an ashen quality, the gazebo lantern shone through its stained glass windows...defining the rocking, studious figure of Poynter in the agony of final choice. Just ten poems each for the meeting, Roland had specified, knowing how each poet would otherwise be tempted to recite a lifetime's achievement. Of Poynter, three segments of his recent Graveyard Cycle were deemed fit for submission...although the best, the Stones of Highgate, still lacked a pure distillation of atmosphere, and he held it back on this occasion. Poynter also omitted the early works he had begun before the Enlightenment, retaining just one he had read that evening - A Calling to the Shroud of Night - which lacked his desired mystical scope, but nevertheless caught the feel of a winter's evening in a series of chilly metaphors.

Little of the summer sun glimmered in Poynter's poetry, except where a chink of light touched upon a grave or shrouded tree with a patch of sudden luminescence...in truth, only casting the shadows into a darker reticence. Poynter would tend to lurk in the shadows, and found the brightness of the sun to be a dazzling intrusion: so much so, he had considered the purchase of tinted

spectacles for use in such conditions. Yet any acquired tolerance of brilliant daytime might tilt his habitat away from the shade...and thus affect the manner of his reticent attitude, and the poetry in turn. On balance, Poynter thought it best to follow his own inclinations and cultivate his verse in the cracks.

"I'm incredulous - just incredulous - at the work before me," said Roland, the oval table of his library covered with papers like that of some Fleet Street editor. "It makes the task of selection both difficult and simple...for I could ponder every combination for hours, finding respective merits in each...or pluck a random selection, with equal merit in the choice." Simon Drake nodded, leafing silently through the works and visualizing possible illustrations.

"Perhaps each poet might select the favourites from their own submission," suggested Madeleine. "Or even better...we should swap our papers, and trust in the judgement of our fellows."

"But the editor's role!" snorted Douglas, slapping the table. "We can hardly make our Mr. Twine redundant!"

"I take no offence at the suggestion," replied Roland. "For my role combines that of editor and publisher, and as such I have suggested the work I wish to read in the creation of this very Circle. How the Circle chooses to present itself is hardly my concern, for I am involved in the more organizational matters. Whatever the wish of the Circle is the wish I shall follow, knowing the result can only be good."

This high-minded reference to the Circle as some kind of sentient entity was typical of the recent poetry meetings. Since the formal establishment of the CORV, Roland had issued two small-circulation newsletters typeset in a dense, decorative style. These had outlined his passionate belief in the enterprise, and his utter faith in the participants to produce truly worthy, truly radical verse. Yet Roland had always seen the CORV as light relief from his own critical career - and seemed to undo the stays of disciplined appraisal of an evening, as a showgirl might loosen a corset. He would bask in the flow of language from Madeleine, Poynter and Wendy as they read their latest works...only saving a hint of disapproval for Douglas and his dum-dee-dah monologues. Many a false line or half-hearted phrase had slipped past this casual version of Roland, only to be snatched from the dry air of scrutiny by a sudden intercession of a listening poet. The poets, indeed, were becoming the real critics - and the man who held this vocation had conceded a precious role.

Poynter had not yet realized the truth behind Roland's reticent position. Being a supremely clever individual, Roland knew the greatest tribute the Circle might pay to its creator was a degree of self-sufficiency. He would provide the room, the table, the wine - the role of the debonair host - but how forced would this enterprise be if he relied on his own agitation? The Circle had a life of its own...so Roland took pride in referring to it as an entity, ensuring its thriving visibility in the literary world.

"Perhaps I might broach a suggestion," murmured Poynter. His volume was low, but sufficient to break the ponderous silence. "I would not wish to seem loutish or crafty - yet given your position, Roland, it seems the anthology might best be chosen in the presence of poets alone."

Madeleine shot an uneasy glance towards Poynter. What was he implying? That Roland should be ordered from his own private study? Yet a smile lightened Roland's features, easing the tension in his brow, as the concept mooted by Poynter found mutual favour. "Indeed," nodded Roland. "It seems my Circle is growing independent."

"I'm sorry," gasped Madeleine. "Laurence was in no way saying you're unwanted."

"He may say what he will," explained Roland in a courteous tone, "for there is no offence to remedy. Quite the reverse! My supreme pleasure comes from your motivated spirit: my creation stretches its literary limbs and enjoys an independent life." Roland stood, his figure still stately in the loose shirt and unfastened tie he wore in casual mode. "Please accept the responsibility of the final say. I shall withdraw to the lounge and the wireless, where you may find me when decisions are made."

"Very reasonable," said Douglas, rubbing his hands at the prospect of this morsel of power.

"All I ask is that your decisions are reached tonight," added Roland. "My typesetter is keen, my printer ready, and our artist - Mr. Simon Drake - itches to create the illuminations." At which,

Simon twitched his fingers in confirmation. At which, Roland made his dignified exit.

Douglas slapped the table in irrepressible glee. "Well, let's get cracking!" he snorted. "Chuck this dreary thing for a start!"

"Wendy's not here to represent herself," said Madeleine. "We should not brand her work dreary."

"Even so...five each, isn't it? Better pass the papers, choose the rest, damn the thing and get round the pub!" At which both Madeleine and Poynter, despite their aesthetic differences, winced to a visible degree.

"It's not as simple as that," said Poynter. "Your own ballads, Douglas. We can't choose five. They run to a number of pages each."

"Size doesn't matter," murmured Douglas. "It's the message. You need the big bruisers in there."

"Then choose the two you feel most happy with," chirped Madeleine. "They might stand among the smaller poems...as an island dominates a scattered archipelago."

Douglas blinked at this jolly image, unable to fathom its justification. "I've submitted ten works of poetry, as requested. So five are meant for selection."

"A poem being a distillation of thought and emotion," added Poynter. "Which means, a close-knit form of words."

Douglas gulped for air like a grounded fish, perhaps floundering on the beach of his island. "Yes, but I've laboured on these words, Laurence. I've done a great deal of knitting!" Which

conjured an image of Douglas drowning in a sea of wool in the minds of his fellow scribes.

"Nobody is saying you haven't," said Madeleine, "and your work will be represented in the anthology. But this is a fine limited edition, Douglas...the very best in quality publication on the finest rag paper, illuminated and beautifully bound. As the fulcrum of the CORV, we have around seven pages each. Wendy has submitted a batch of three compositions...while our more transient members, often a single work. Along with Roland's introduction, we have more than covered the page count. We should not care to reject those from our circumference, so it is for the fulcrum to show restraint."

Poynter looked at Madeleine with a new respect, impressed by the harder edge she had shown. She might seem frilly and fluffy, but was hardly flappable in maintaining the integrity of her art. Douglas sat visibly shaking, his hand so tentative it could barely slither to the vintage port. He finally retrieved the half-full glass, raising it to a pursed mouth.

"Have you way, then, young pretenders," said Douglas. "You write of nothing but your feeble hearts. At least I've had a life." With which he downed the port, grabbed the decanter and ignored the heads of his companions as they bobbed to their studious task.

Simon Drake had sat placid throughout, unsure where these machinations would lead. Now he took out a sketchbook - pencil tip quivering over the paper's surface, ready to draw highlights from

the chosen poems. Poynter and Madeleine continued their ruminations. Simon's pencil continued to quiver.

\* \* \* \* \*

The alcohol anaesthetized the show of pique on Douglas's part, so by ten he had forgotten not only his anger but - frankly - why he was there at all. "The poems," said Madeleine, prodding his arm. "We've finished! Laurence has gone to fetch Roland!"

"The...poems?" drawled Douglas, lifting a heavy head from the table upon which it had quietly dozed. "That's very clever. Poems."

"Yes. The whole book's planned, Douglas. We've two of yours! The Strider of the Heath and Upon my Soul!"

"Wh...? Upon my...Strider! You've selected The Soul? But that's marvellous. You're a marvel. My greatest works, in print!"

Meanwhile, Poynter had arrived behind Roland's armchair, the critic outlined by the glow of an ornate lamp to the side of a shuttered television cabinet. Horace the butler stood rigid to one side, the coppery light emanating from the lampshade lending him the aura of a metallic sculpture. Roland had been sitting in quiet, with only a low-volume classical symphony to ease a potentially oppressive silence, so had heard the turning of the brass knob behind him - and known the selection was surely at an end.

Poynter had not needed to address the critic. Roland had turned automatically, meeting the eyes of the poet in mutual respect. Poynter had nodded, Roland had smiled very slightly. Then, from the library, had drifted the slurred, garbled words of The Strider of the Heath. "Douglas seems happy," mused Roland. Even Poynter felt a twinge of amusement.

\* \* \* \* \*

A tape of a Richard Keel piano recital formed the backdrop to the aesthetic ruminations of Mr. Simon Drake: he set his eyes, mesmerized, upon the typeset proofs - and then attempted to convey the thrust of each poetic gem through the medium of pen-and-ink. These bold, graphic embellishments to the first ever CORV edition were the final touches before its pages began to clank through the printing press, the covers stamped in gold.

And strange images they were which Simon drew: a sinewy tree merging with clouds for a Poynter dirge, a lone figure - possibly Poynter - lurking at its base. A bird flapping over hills and dales for a Madeleine flight of fancy, a butterfly included as a subliminal portrait. A grim scene of a choking industrial town added weight to the social realism of Wendy Weaver, while pieces by Lucy McConnor and Harold Pope - never mainstays of the CORV - were enlivened by a distant cottage and ghostly soldier. Each of the Douglas ballads filled several pages, so the elements Simon added were small motifs: bagpipes and a distant scarecrow.

A sense of lassitude had befallen the Circle as it waited to see the fruit of its labours. Poynter laid his pens aside awhile, reading several volumes of esoteric history concerning the Knights Templar, Freemasons and other ordered societies. He had felt the CORV had something in common with these movements, although it was hardly as exclusive, and hoped an increased knowledge of their various philosophies might sharpen his personal mythology.

Madeleine's endeavours had never been celebrated by her mother, who was engaged in an undertaking opposed to that of the Enlightenment. Mrs. Quinn was spending much time consulting ledgers and tomes, seeing solicitors and brokers, hatching financial plans. Madeleine took much solace in her walks upon the heath, her prissy clothes concealed beneath a voluminous coat. She enjoyed following the paths in geographic obedience, rambling across the grassy stretches, or crunching autumn leaves in the patches of woodland. Imagination was her principal companion.

As Madeleine approached one of the cool, expansive pools, she paused by an empty bench where she had paused a year before - sometime in summer. She had been struck by a sombre yet handsome figure who had been seated there, staring out at the waters. Madeleine had approached, as she approached now, with the trailing branches of a willow tree brushing her head. She had sat, as she sat now, at one end of the bench - even though its current emptiness invited her to the middle. The view was a simple one, which allowed for contemplation. A vista of trees reflected in the far side of the water, dark and inverted. Their rippling crowns

gave way to an opalescent sky. Its dullness was transformed in an alchemy of light, by the magic of reflection.

The bench was of simple brown wood, and inscribed in memory of 'TAMSIN AMANDA COLE'. Madeleine was touched to see she had been 'LOVED BEYOND EXPRESSION', and wondered should a similar sympathy be extended to her own person. Mother was hardly warm in her altercations, and Madeleine had few close friends. She doubted her own demise would inspire such an inscription, or even a bench on which to place it.

That summer, she had not had time to study the inscription. She had turned to the figure beside her and asked - "I've seen you before, haven't I?" - whereupon he had responded with a subtle inclination of the head. The man had observed her blue summer dress, matching hat and the eager scrutiny of her gaze.

"By the lake?" he had queried. His skin was pale despite the sunshine, extenuated by the white shirt and old-fashioned braces just visible beneath an open waistcoat.

"I often come to the lake," was the answer. Madeleine smiled at a couple of ducks, thrashing at the edge of the water. "We are blessed by this wonderful Hampstead Heath! Who could bear a city clogged with tarmac and stone, with never a green intermission?"

The young man had snorted. "You can drown in the lake," he said. "You can freeze on the heath. It is not a place to romanticize."

"But I've seen you here," frowned Madeleine. "Or was it here? Maybe further on, up the hill?"

"The view from Parliament Hill is a fine one," said the man. "Especially as the nights draw in. The fading dusk of orange and grey above a city of delicate lights." Its gentle form rose behind them, fringed by a few trees. It was hardly a challenging climb.

While chilly in its implication, the picture conjured for Madeleine was a poetic one. It tantalized the taste buds of her literary desire. She wanted to hear more. "You're a weaver of words," she had told the speaker. "Could it be we share a similar interest? My name's Madeleine Quinn. I write poetry. Well...hope to! I've got enough time!"

The young man's expression had lightened as he extended his hand, meeting the one Madeleine had offered with a restrained but genuine shake. "Yes, I do believe you've seen me," he murmured. "Mr. Laurence Poynter, new to the district. Orchard House, in the Keats' Grove. Near the library. I am a poet."

"Why, I must have passed a thousand times!" gasped Madeleine. "I'm often in the library, delving through this and that. Escaping Mummy, you know!" At which point Madeleine's laughter had become choked with a sudden cough...and it had been a startled Poynter who had sat through this minor fit till the girl had recovered her composure.

"I apologize," said Madeleine. "I've been sick. Had a job in town. High-class caterers. I was soon to be the boss."

"I'm impressed," intoned Poynter, hardly sounding so.

"Mummy is a partner in the firm, you see. I was on the fast track to the top. But it wasn't what I wanted. The pressure. I was ill all winter. They had to let me go."

"It sounds a vulgar occupation," said Poynter.

"Ha! Well - we weren't the works canteen, Laurence. Full silver service, weddings, banquets, whatever. Quinn and Cardew of Chelsea. Terribly trendy! I was always eating the cakes."

At which, Poynter raised an otherwise heavy eyebrow. "Partial to a gateau myself."

As Madeleine sat in her long winter coat, she visualized the rest of her chitchat with Poynter. Of course, he had always been somewhat intense and withdrawn - although not to the point of his recent condition, and the long exile in the gazebo. At least Poynter had sought inspiration, two summer's ago. Now it was Madeleine's prodding which urged him to seek broader horizons, beyond his domestic enclosure.

The remembered Poynter vanished. The summer was gone, replaced by another that had also departed. Madeleine sensed an edge of chilling sensibility, as frequently expounded by Poynter. It expanded to the temperature, as she tightened her woollen scarf.

Madeleine stood and walked towards the edge of the pond. The foreground shrubbery rose against the scene, as the level of the ground descended. Tufts of vegetation broke the more distant water, creating tiny islands, while a few ducks moved across the surface. One came towards her, inscribing a V-shaped wake. It

appeared a luminous silver against the dark reflections of the trees, as the water's undulation caught the pearly sky.

Madeleine glanced up, to the thinning leaves of the panoramic trees. Yes, she had seen Poynter before, up on Parliament Hill. He had been an outline in the distance, but the profile was distinctive. He had been gazing towards the towers that rose in the east. The monoliths of London business, half a city away. Perhaps she had seen him again, at the railway station...although she could not be sure.

Madeleine could never be certain of their initial encounter, however much she trusted her memory. It could only reveal each layer of truth, as time would allow. Those words on the bench had been the first.

Chapter Six

*Convenient Charm*

As Madeleine contemplated the placid waters of Hampstead Heath, her mother was in a state of contrasting agitation. The sheer excitement of financial possibilities caused her to jiggle up and down on the sofa, in a manner which would have met with disapproval had it been the way of her daughter. As it was, Mrs. Quinn held a consistently hypocritical view - and enjoyed the glee of unashamed greed with Madeleine off on her ramble.

"To think we could make a return of forty percent on such a low investment!" she smiled. "It really is a delicious prospect."

"I'm gratified," said her visitor: a tall man with a lean, attentive face and smoothly gelled hair. He sat on the sofa beside her, but sideways, examining her every reaction. A briefcase full of papers lay before him. "It takes an imaginative outlook to appreciate such golden opportunities. I would not offer such a chance to anyone."

"Quite right, quite right," murmured Mrs. Quinn. "And with your own commission so reasonable..."

"We both stand to gain, Mrs. Quinn."

At which moment, not far away, Poynter was beginning a new chapter of an esoteric volume: one he had ordered specially from a mail order service specializing in out-of-print publications. He barely noticed the tinkle of teacups as Polly placed the tray beside him, the steam rising in a cloud of yellow mist against the

fading October sun. She glanced through the French windows, regarding the details of the garden, and was astonished at how much seemed to be curling and crumbling away to reveal the skeletal twigs of winter.

At which moment, Roland nodded to the foreman of the printing works who he had employed on his new venture. The foreman whistled to the gaffer, who turned, acknowledged the thumbs-up sign with a nod, turned back, whisked the oily cap from his head and waved it wildly to and fro. A seated man reading a tabloid newspaper saw the motion at the corner of his eye. He acknowledged its importance with a sullen salute, and pulled an ominous lever.

A grinding filled the dim, cavernous chamber as lubricated wheels began to turn. Intermeshing cogs whirled in synchronization, chains clanked, cylinders rolled. The man hunched close to check the workings, peering cautiously - and received a splatter of ink in his face. He wiped it on his sleeve like a messy eater and grinned at the rumbling machine.

The machine was his faithful companion. They knew each other well. The paper was rolling in, the pages rolling out: The Circle Of - The Circle Of - The Circle Of Radical Verse.

At which moment, in a village near Colchester some fifty miles away, Mrs. Quinn - Madeleine's auntie - realized in a flash of revelation where she had placed the pot of wholegrain mustard. Sadly, her attempts to reach it by stretching merely pushed it to the back of the cupboard - so she climbed up onto a three-legged

stool, hoping to retrieve it more easily. Sadly, while she managed to take hold of the elusive jar, gravity also took hold of her.

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"I am flattered you could stop, Mr. Craig," said Mrs. Quinn, offering a preliminary crumpet to the solicitor. He was no less restrained in his attention, but accepted the hot nibble with gratitude. "True, I can hardly offer a banquet...but the cook is capable enough."

"This is very welcome," said Mr. Craig, stirring his delicate china cup of Earl Grey tea with an almost musical rhythm. "Always remind me of my schooldays, crumpets," he added, biting the circumference in a poised and tentative manner. "Used to toast them in the sixth form over a log fire. Ate six or more in one go!"

"Oh! Well, if you really fancy that quantity..."

"I'm quite content with this," declined the solicitor. "And I don't want to spoil my dinner!"

"I just hope the cook doesn't spoil it," added Mrs. Quinn.

"Of course he won't," the guest reassured her, though with no supporting evidence. "I'm so glad we've made progress, Mrs. Quinn..."

"Come, now! Call me Pamela. All my friends do, Mr. Craig. That's why I hardly ever hear it."

"Now I'm sure that isn't true," sighed Mr. Craig. This was either a genuine show of affiliation, or an excellent tactic to please his client. In either case, it was a boost to Mrs. Quinn's self-confidence.

"I like a close crowd," she continued with a narrowing of the eyes, her lashes painted with mascara to resemble jet-black cobwebs. "But the needless chatter of a cliquish brigade? Give me the quiet any day."

"Amen to that," nodded the solicitor. "Or should I say - silence in court?"

At which silly attempt at humour, both Mrs. Quinn and Mr. Craig burst into helpless laughter. So much so, neither detected the opening of the door and the entrance of the anxious Madeleine - who had just returned from her wanderings upon the heath as the sky darkened into night. "I'm missing all the fun," she said, sheepishly, unsure whether this was the preferred situation.

But her mother choked back the merriment, returning to a visage of polite formality. "Mr. Craig...this is Madeleine. My only child." The neutrality of her intonation suggested one had been enough.

Madeleine performed an immaculate curtsy, which Mr. Craig observed in astute delight and her mother in fuming embarrassment. "No need to cringe, child," she said in a tone so friendly it could only mask an inner spite. For Mrs. Quinn wished to seem the equal of Mr. Craig, not bowing and scraping like an ignorant serf.

Detecting these subtle undercurrents of personal tension - as he was so adept at doing in the courtroom - Mr. Craig offered a hand to the deferential Madeleine, indicating both his pleasure and surprise.

"You flatter my authority," he smiled. "I'm Jack Craig, partner in Craig and Leach...a firm of commercial solicitors. Your mother and I have been discussing financial matters - and we've enjoyed such a harmonious afternoon, I've been asked to stay for supper."

"Pleased to meet you," said Madeleine in a schoolgirl lilt, settling herself in an armchair. Her dress flowed around the cushions like a pink floral liquid.

"I'm afraid there's only tea for two," said Mrs. Quinn, in a tone that implied no inclination to increase the supply.

"Oh, I can fetch myself something from the kitchen," said Madeleine. "Perhaps cook will have a cake to spare."

"Well, don't get in his way," snapped Mrs. Quinn, offering a warmer explanation to her visitor as Madeleine left the room. "We can't afford staff, of course, but the cook's employed on a rotating basis. He cooks for several houses."

"A clever arrangement," nodded Mr. Craig, "if you don't all eat at once."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Quinn.

"But not an arrangement one would make through choice." He took a slow sip from his teacup, allowing Mrs. Quinn to absorb the importance of his words.

"You're a perceptive gentleman...Jack," she mused. "If we had more money, we could choose what we like."

"And money could be on its way, Mrs...*Pamela*. With sound financial advice." Mr. Craig never sat so far from his briefcase that he couldn't pat it in a symbolic manner.

"Very much appreciated," nodded Mrs. Quinn. "It truly becomes a gentleman to..."

At which point, her words were cut off by the sudden ring of the telephone. Visibly flustered her speech had been terminated so, Mrs. Quinn nevertheless regained her composure in an instant and - with a mere "excuse me" to Mr. Craig - took the receiver from the hook.

However, any pique she might have felt at such a trivial intrusion was soon nulled by the very real solemnity of the news it conveyed. Mr. Craig had seen many an expression of grief in the courtroom, and his face became grave as he observed that of his coiffured hostess...hardly making an utterance, yet conveying all in her shocked paralysis. "Hello...who? Yes, I'm Mrs. Quinn. What...? Oh no. Are you sure? I...see. Very well. I'll do what I can. Thank you." Mrs. Quinn put down the phone.

Her empathy with Mr. Craig was already sufficient for her to realize he detected her woe. She saved him an awkward question by broaching the news herself. "It seems my good sister Annabel - Annie - has had a nasty fall. She hit her head on the kitchen floor." Mr. Craig held his breath awhile, wondering if injury or demise were the result.

"She...might have died," continued Mrs. Quinn. "It was a very bad knock. But they've got her in hospital. It was lucky. She hit her head on a rug."

For some reason he couldn't account for, Mr. Craig found those last words faintly amusing. But the tone in which they were delivered was most unamused, and he quelled the reaction with a wave of concern. "My dear lady..."

"Please, Jack. I'm all right. I'd...better ring for Madeleine." Mrs. Quinn stood, withholding all further emotion, and walked to the polished door. Here, she tugged at the thick tasselled bell pull and elicited a tinkle in the kitchen.

"What? Not ready!" grunted the cook through his thick moustache, scowling at the bubbling pots.

"I'll go!" chirped Madeleine through her cake-filled mouth, wiping her fingers on a cloth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Roland's library had always given a dense impression of the literary, but its current state - as a repository for the new anthology - verged on the verbally claustrophobic. A fine red binding. A gleaming gold circle...above which, the word FULCRUM, below, The Circle Of Radical Verse. The cover of the book could be seen once, twice...eighteen times and more, at the top of each hefty stack. The oval table overflowed with a sea of copies, some open to reveal the majesty of their typesetting and illustration.

Roland stood proud - his form diffused a little against the bluish light, which faded through the slit-like window. The twin overhead chandeliers cast a warm glow upon the table itself, with the embossed gold leaf on many of the books catching the light in glints of reflection, revealing a tantalizing letter or two within an otherwise shadowy cover. The only sound was the dying crackle of an unstoked fire, and the matching rustle of paper as each and every page was scrutinized by Simon Drake.

"Of course, it's not perfect," mused Simon. "Much of the poetry is...commendable, but not masterly. There is a plodding symmetry to the presentation. The eye is never jarred into anger. We read the words, yet we never question the motive. What is the purpose of the book? To be a book to read, or an object? Do we read it, see it...or even feel it?"

"Hopefully buy it," murmured Roland.

"That too," nodded Simon. Roland's irony had not been lost on the wily artist, but neither had it been acknowledged. However, Simon adopted a more conciliatory tone. "You're right to be proud, Roland," he said. "I'm proud to have been involved. But one imagines an infinite quality through the early stages, and must live with the final result."

"Things change in the making," added Roland.

"Yes. To the newcomer's eye, the FULCRUM is a worthy edition. More than worthy! But I fear we...grasped at starlight, and merely caught the flicker of a lantern."

Roland frowned as he recognized this paraphrase of a Poynter verse: something had affected Simon. "A flicker might still illuminate the truth," he snorted. "But I couldn't be more pleased with our first CORV edition. Maybe Douglas clogs the flow a bit, but you can always turn the page."

"And miss my embellishments...?" hissed Simon.

"Which enhance the poetry, Simon. The vital aspect. The visual quality invites the reader to browse, but should not obscure the skill of the words."

"I never said it should," mumbled Simon, tugging at his goatee beard. "My only point was a personal one, no less than your own prestige. I have a vested interest in the writing too. How do my pictures seem if the poetry is bad? Will the reader pay them any heed?"

Roland picked up a copy of the FULCRUM, tilting it so a band of reflection swept the gold leaf like the scan of a radar screen. He weighed it in his hand as if only the physical substance could confirm the reality of a completed plan. But, no...not complete, for as he had already hinted, there was still the selling to do. "We need readers," explained Roland. "That's the whole idea. What they think of us is another matter, and not our right to decide. What we must do is find those readers, Simon. Give them the radical verse."

"Not literally..."

"Except for a few good friends. Otherwise, it's twenty pounds a copy - cheap at the price - with a good five hundred to sell.

They do no good in my library, Simon...for all I need is a copy to browse, and place on the shelves with pride."

"Indeed. The job of the salesman is a tiresome one." The phrase seemed to tire Simon, who flopped onto one of the chairs for some more goatee manipulation.

"Of course, it's a limited edition," said Roland, strolling the floor as if addressing some wider forum. "A very special object. Not the stuff for the paperback store."

"Yes..." murmured Simon in a buzzing, nasal tone.

"I know a few in the book trade. Find one or two quality outlets. Mail order might be possible, though postage costs a bit."

"Yes..."

"Perhaps an advert in the Telegraph?"

"Yes...but look, Roland. I've another idea. How do you think I sell my art?"

"Your art? How do you sell it?"

"Think. How do I sell my art?"

"But...I'll tell you, Simon. Because your art's awfully good!"

Simon sniggered with an air of feline contentment, snuggling against a cushion. "Very glad to hear you say so. But that's not what I mean. In what manner do I sell my art?"

"I've never thought..."

"I do stalls, Roland. Craft fairs, all over the place. Crowds flock for a framed cottage or whimsical woodcut. I work at the

stall, they watch, like what they see - and buy!" Simon clapped his hands together, their clammy impact resounding in the air.

"It's a thought," mused Roland, fixing his attention on the oval ceiling. "I mean...publishing is a true craft."

"Yes..." echoed Simon, resuming his purring mode of sociable insinuation. "You have a fine edition, Roland. Not some cheap and cheerful thriller."

"We could meet...and talk to our readers. Dammit! I like the idea!" Roland snapped his glance round to Simon, who wriggled to attention.

"I've found it a sound proposition," smiled Simon.

Roland performed a pacy manoeuvre on the parquet floor, as if perfecting a new tap dance. In fact, he was merely giving vent to his mental excitement, retaining a rational speech. "So - when can you start, Simon? Take a load now?" His eyes fixed Simon's with a sparkle of zeal, which required all the artist's nonchalance to refuse.

"I'm so sorry, Roland. I'd love to help, but I've got quite a wagonload already."

"Oh. That's a shame." Roland's tone was duller, but his poise still enlivened.

Simon hardly wanted to crush the moment, so added a further suggestion. "But ask the Circle, Roland. I'm sure the Circle will help."

"Yes. You're right, Simon. It's a job for the Circle Of Radical Verse."

\* \* \* \* \*

Racing away from London through the Essex countryside, Madeleine leaned on the buffet table of the railway carriage to compose a few lines to Roland on the back of the postcard she had bought: 'Swinging London' in garish snapshots, where the colours were always luminous or the images tinted by hand.

She had been in a hurry, and the card - although crude - would serve as well as any. The low orange sun glinted behind the passing bushes and telegraph poles, the card intermittently shaded and gold as she conveyed the regrettable news.

*My Dear Roland,*

*Sad to say, I cannot come to the CORV meeting and see the wonderful work you have done on the book. I am travelling to Colchester, to nurse my Aunt Annie who has had a rather nasty fall. She will be well, I'm sure, but needs me now - and Mother is so immersed in her business, she won't even deem to visit. I wish the book every success, and look forward to seeing you soon.*

*In Love and Poetry,*

*Madeleine.*

Beneath which, Madeleine had added the simple outline of a butterfly. Despite her intention, it was only identifiable as an Adonis Blue due to the colour of her fountain pen's ink.

It was only when the telephone rang two days later that Poynter became aware of the situation. He was enjoying his usual ritualistic breakfast, with a book on shamanistic tribes spread before him.

Polly returned earlier than expected, although without the customary plate of grilled consumables. "Sir," she beckoned in a stage whisper - keen to communicate yet less to interrupt. "A call from Mr. Roland Twine."

Poynter glanced up, alert, knowing the CORV book must be ready and keen to see the next development. "Thank you, Polly," he replied - for once striding briskly from the table, out into the panelled hallway. The phone was off the hook, its old-fashioned receiver laying like a dark fossil, so Poynter lifted it to speak while Polly returned to the frying pan. "Good morning, Roland," he greeted the caller, in a tone which - for Poynter - was jovial.

"Ah, Laurence. Good to hear you. Everything's happening."

"Good, good. I assume the book is...?"

"Stitched and bound! And it's a solid piece of work, Laurence. We've seized the initiative. The CORV's at the cutting edge!"

"Which was always the aim," added Poynter.

"Quite. I've been planning the next move with Simon, and Simon says..." at which point Roland faltered, aware of his lapse

into nursery rhyme prose. "Simon *suggested*," he continued, "that we run a couple of stalls. Sell the thing ourselves!"

Poynter caught his breath. "Sell it?"

"Yes. Reaching our readers, Laurence. That's what it's all about. I tend to be rather busy, so the Circle must spin alone. And I'm glad it has the momentum!"

Poynter mulled the concept over. He lowered himself onto the velvet stool, beside the telephone table. "I'm quite busy myself, Roland. This recent hiatus has allowed me to open a new branch of study - one I'd been hoping to follow awhile - and my current reading list fills most of the day."

"Of course! Goodness knows, you've done enough for the Circle already. But we can't just let the Fulcrum gather dust. We'd have a lot of copies, and a lot of dust! If everyone gives just a *little* time. I mean, Simon has his own business - but Wendy's keen to organize the stalls. She can't do it all, Laurence. I mean, with Madeleine otherwise engaged, we can hardly hope to..."

"Madeleine?" queried Poynter, his low but incisive voice managing to cut off the garrulous Roland.

"Yes. Away," added Roland in a quick, clipped tone.

"Madeleine's away?" murmured Poynter.

"Oh...didn't you know?" said Roland. "I received a postcard this morning, from Colchester. Partly why I rang you, Laurence. Madeleine's helping a sick aunt. Nasty bump on the head."

While he managed to quell any disillusioned utterance, Poynter made a visible wince as if he, too, was in pain. He was

thankful the telephone was merely an auditory device, and was powerless to betray his features.

"She wrote...to you," whispered Poynter, after quantifying the impact of Roland's words.

"She did, Laurence. It's most unpleasant for the girl. I'd send a copy of the Fulcrum if I knew where she was."

Poynter bit his lip - sense keeping pressure in abeyance, yet anger sufficient to draw the blood. While he'd never shown Madeleine much affection, she had not begun their friendship for that. It was poetry - the written word - which formed their common interest, and not only was Poynter a near neighbour of Madeleine, in Hampstead, but he had known her longer than Roland. For this Richmond critic to be the sole receptor of such touching information seemed to skew Madeleine's alliance within the Circle Of Radical Verse. Her bias had gone away from Poynter, who had granted her his help with the Enlightenment. He now felt nothing but a pawn in her patient game, to win a home away from Mrs. Quinn.

"Is...everything all right, Laurence?" asked Roland, sensing the dull, silent impact of this speechless interlude. "I know you're quite close to Madeleine. Don't worry, we'll see her soon."

Poynter sighed. "True enough."

"But it's a shame...not just for her sake, but ours. Wendy needs help with the stalls."

"She does..."

"We might find the odd dabbler, but Wendy needs a key volunteer. Committed."

"The implication hangs heavy in the air."

"Laurence! The Circle is an inspiration...and so is the new anthology. Why not give Wendy a ring?"

\* \* \* \* \*

There had been little in the tone of Roland Twine to suggest any possibility of refusal. The insinuation of his voice had been most subtle and persuasive, implying Poynter should fulfil his duty to the Circle now Roland had fulfilled his own. Poynter had been shaken by the news over Madeleine - in truth, more than he might have expected.

Poynter had yet to analyse these feelings with any precision, although he soon rejected any tender conclusion. It must surely be a question of loyalty: of Madeleine's shift from a pleasant, platonic companion able to enjoy debates over metre and rhyme, to a distant, elusive socialite who saw her relationship to Poynter merely one of convenient charm. How nice such a fellow as Laurence should live just a few doors away. Beyond their literary bonding within the pages of the Fulcrum anthology, it seemed interaction between himself and Miss Madeleine Quinn was becoming increasingly distant and abstract.

Poynter knew he was hardly guiltless in offering Madeleine a cool and mannered relationship. Such coolness of the head was

necessary to his art, which - while dealing in similar subjects - was the very antithesis of Madeleine's own. Yet Poynter had assumed Madeleine understood this, and bore his company with gratitude and respect. Now, it seemed, she had another luminary...and was no skeptical sitter at the Circle Of Radical Verse, but had transgressed the boundary between poet and critic, becoming an affiliate of Roland Twine.

Had his influence affected her with an air of flighty detachment? Poynter still laboured at the cutting edge of hard-won metaphor and painfully distilled anguish. He researched those esoteric traditions of a thousand years and more, to lend a resonant authority to his words. Perhaps two weeks poring over sepia tomes might unlock an elusive revelation, which in turn would unlock the secret of a poem by changing just a single word. To Poynter, all that mattered was the final work - and such time could never be wasted, however subtle the revision so engendered. Could Madeleine understand this scholarly approach? Would she have patience for such exacting method? Or would she consider a visit to the Poynter residence a stifling and avoidable hazard?

Poynter knew none of this for certain. The unrelenting precision of his analysis drew a paranoid picture, yet was saved by the customary balance of his meticulous approach. Having considered one, disturbing, side of the argument, Poynter considered another...and realized how Madeleine might have been swept along in the rush of novelty, bowled over by Roland and his chorus of approval, yet not to be held for long. Perhaps she only

allowed this petty distraction because her utter faith in Poynter affirmed he was looking after her interests, and ensuring the success of their mutual project while she was indisposed.

Perhaps Madeleine respected Poynter more than he had given her credit, perceiving he would know her unspoken thoughts, while Roland needed blatant explanation. Such a state would be far more radical than excuses and blabber, confirming a subliminal affinity between the Hampstead poets. This rejected all trivial essence.

The third, and far simpler, interpretation totally failed to occur to Poynter. He was able to plumb the depths of his subjects while missing the surface sheen. Perhaps Madeleine had been in such a rush, she had merely forgotten to write.

In any case, it was in the balance of probability between these first two scenarios that Poynter found his mental peace. He knew, in time, how both patience and observation would reveal the elements of truth. If the first was proven, he should continue with the CORV and shame Madeleine's lack of praise for his sterling loyalty. If the second, he should impress her the more with his rational, unflustered stamina. It was with such a manifesto that Poynter telephoned Wendy, and offered his willing involvement.

Chapter Seven

*Tiresome Obstacles*

WENDY WEAVER was not one to take a duty lightly. Following her chat with Roland, she had taken upon herself the whole enterprise of arranging and running the stalls. Wendy had scoured local papers, magazines and notice-boards for venues - hearing one or two things on the grapevine - and chosen those she thought the more promising, avoiding the more brash and glitzy occasions. Soon, Wendy had drawn up a roster of suitable functions and selected a variety she hoped would work well. Paying a fiver here, a tenner there, she assembled a programme of dates for the CORV stall - and, with the help of Laurence Poynter, prepared to hit the road.

So Poynter soon found himself trapped in the back of Wendy's small car, with piles of the Fulcrum anthology on the seat beside him, as they set off on their initial endeavour. Such an undertaking was alien to Poynter, but given the hours of brooding he had spent on the Madeleine situation, even his insular nature found a measure of refreshment in the novel anticipation of the day.

They crawled out of central London, and arrived in Redhill just after twelve. It was a somewhat undistinguished town, five miles south of the city limits. Consulting an occasional pedestrian, Wendy soon found the road they were after, and Poynter

stared out at the older houses before a low, modern building appeared.

"That's it," said Wendy. She squinted at a sign by the road, as a spatter of rain began to speckle the windscreen. "'The Bellevue Nursing Home'."

Wendy switched on the wipers and twisted the car into the drive. Poynter steadied the wobbling stack of volumes, one of which eluded his grasp and slipped to the floor. "All right back there?" smiled Wendy, brushing a strand of bobbed red hair from her eyes.

"Surviving," said Poynter.

"Tie them with string next time," smiled Wendy. "You live and learn!"

Poynter's reply was a grunt. He wiped the copy he had retrieved, and scowled at the grey sky. "I have an umbrella," said Poynter, as he eased into his long overcoat. "Perhaps we should ferry the books to the foyer?"

"It's only a few yards," mused Wendy. "Look - who's that?" She pointed to a grey-haired couple, clasping polythene-wrapped paintings.

"Must be the opposition," murmured Poynter.

"They're all setting up," said Wendy. "It starts at one!"

"Then we'd best begin," said Poynter. He opened the car door, and put his foot down - not onto tarmac - but into a cold, oily puddle. It had rained a little earlier, too. "Blast," said

Poynter, more to mark the incident than curse it. He wanted Wendy to know he was suffering.

Poynter glanced at Wendy. "It's a flood."

Wendy peered through the misty window. "I'll drive right up to the entrance," she said. "In or out?"

"I'm wet now," said Poynter. "It hardly matters." He stretched his other leg to avoid the shimmering pool, then heaved himself out of the car.

Once upright on fairly safe ground, Poynter swiftly unfurled the umbrella. He shook his soaking foot as Wendy kicked the car into momentary life. The tyres made a coarse, grinding noise as they propelled the vehicle across the rough surface. Poynter squelched along behind.

During this brief excursion, he took time to examine the building. He regarded its bland architecture with a dull distaste: uniform brickwork, geometric windows and flat, featureless roof. Was this really where the Fulcrum would find its readers? Poynter had his private doubts.

But he strode ahead of Wendy, who had manoeuvred her vehicle so the books could be moved with barely a moment beneath the sky. Despite this, Poynter still held his umbrella aloft as Wendy did the heavy work. "I'll park round the corner," said Wendy. "Try and find Mrs. Walton. She's running the whole thing. Stay and guard the loot!"

Wendy left Poynter alone in the fluorescent-lit foyer, where he slowly closed his umbrella and regarded the pile of books.

Noting a small poster on the wall, he strolled over to read the text: 'Bellvue Nursing Home. Autumn Gift Fair. Bric-a-Brac - Crafts - Cakes - Refreshments.' Poynter scowled. It sounded a pathetic, amateurish affair unlikely to entice the crowds, still less advance the cause of radical verse.

After shunting the vehicle back a nudge, Wendy found herself by a smaller door. A glimmer of light through the glass suggested activity inside. She took a short cut and entered, unfastening her quilted designer anorak to reveal a blue silk blouse, hand-knitted cardigan and her usual tight velvet trousers. The door had brought her straight into the dining-room, where she was able to behold the full scope of the gift fair.

Five or six tables had been shoved to the sides of the room, upon which various offerings were displayed by the stallholders. One bore a great mound of wickerwork - straw hats, mats, baskets and the like - while someone else had an army of glassy-eyed dolls in mock Victorian costume. Another had a jumble of second-hand clothes, while the nearest, a selection of ceramics. A shorthaired woman in her fifties stood in the centre of the floor, watching the preparations with an attentive glare. Wendy approached.

"Excuse me - are you Mrs. Walton?" asked Wendy. "I'm one of the CORV."

"The who?" intoned Mrs. Walton.

Wendy realized how odd such a term must sound beyond its immediate sphere of influence, so she addressed matters more

directly. "I'm Wendy. We spoke on the phone. Is that our stall?"

Wendy glanced at an empty table.

"No," said Mrs. Walton. "Herbert has his home brew."

Meanwhile, Poynter had taken a seat in one of the soft chairs in the foyer. He guarded the pile of books as if the stall was already up and running, and every passer-by was a potential thief. But he was distracted by a voice to one side, and blinked from his reverie. "Excuse me? Excuse me, sir? Is this your pile?"

Poynter turned to see a man of small build but alert features, perhaps in his early thirties. He was wearing a shirt and trousers of a smart but casual appearance, their colours a complementary blue. More indicative of his role was the embroidered lettering, in white upon his breast pocket: 'Bellevue Nursing Home'. This could only mean a member of staff - a point made obvious by the wheelchair before him, and the ancient lady it contained.

"Sorry?" frowned Poynter, understanding the question yet disliking its insinuation.

"Could you move it aside, please?" asked the man with a smile. "My name's Rob. I'm a care assistant. We must keep the passage clear."

"I've come for the gift fair," explained Poynter.

"Don't care if it's the Olympics, sir - we must keep the passage clear." Realizing his humour was not appreciated, the assistant offered practical direction. "Just through there, in the dining-room. You need to see Mrs. Walton."

"We're trying to do so."

While keeping a courteous - if restrained - exterior, Poynter was fuming inside. He felt he had been whipped from his natural habitat into a loathsome, compromised world. But he could do nothing but nod and obey the man.

Poynter shunted the books to a side table - sliding the pot-plant aside - while the old lady watched with a beady, silent disinterest. Rob slid the chair forwards as the blockage cleared, keen to encourage her alertness, and attempted to lighten the atmosphere again with a few flippant words. "Quite a job lot there, isn't it? Buy them by the ton?"

"Pardon me?" snorted the surly poet, pausing in his manual labour.

"Take your pick, they're all the same!" said Rob. "Everyone likes a bargain. How much, a quid a copy? We'll have one for the library, sir."

"The book...is no bargain," corrected Poynter, "although its value is not in doubt. It is a selection of Radical Verse. We offer quality at a quality price."

"O-kay." Rob was glad of Wendy's arrival, her quick appraisal of the scene, and speedy help to clear the passage. "See you later," he added, trundling the lady off at a clippy rate.

"Making friends?" asked Wendy as they shifted the books.

"Just an orderly," replied Poynter.

"We can use this table," said Wendy. "Grab the end." Poynter did so with a distinct lack of vigour, and the pair heaved it round the corner like a pair of anaemic stretcher-bearers.

"Refreshments. That's what we need!" said Wendy once the CORV were up and running. The fair had been opened by a minor celebrity, who had a bit part in a television soap and had ensconced his father in the home. However, the slow procession of visiting pensioners and family bargain-hunters saw little in the Fulcrum anthology.

"In a moment," said Poynter. "I've got to dry off. My shoe's still full of water."

"Try the knitwear stall," said Wendy. "Buy some dry socks." Poynter squelched away in a mournful mood, and Wendy shook her head.

With half the afternoon over, it became clear the CORV had hardly made a breakthrough. Wendy had purchased endless cups of tea from the refreshment kiosk, and a multitude of fairy cakes. Poynter had focused his anger into stoicism. This discipline allowed him to watch each apathetic member of the public glance cautiously at their wares, wince at the price and move on. Several took a business card, printed with 'CORV' and Roland's home address. But since the cards were free, and attractive, they invited the attentions of thrifty magpies. How many would contact Roland, and order the book? A very small number, if any.

"How much, dear?" asked one old lady. Poynter was surprised to find her examining the pot-plant, which was still on the table. It brought relief from the solid spread of books.

Wendy tried to explain, but Poynter cut her short. He was satirizing the role of the salesman, as it was a role he would never have chosen. "Two pounds to you, madam," he said. "Very rare species." The shaking pensioner took out her purse and handed Poynter the coins.

"That was...disgraceful," whispered Wendy, with the lady out of earshot.

"Hardly so," said Poynter. "The lady's happy. We've recovered some of our losses." Wendy looked away from the gaunt poet, knowing she was the target of his blame.

However, Poynter did encounter one promising browser, towards the end of the day. A buck-toothed fellow in glistening anorak lurched in from the rain, lifted a copy and thumbed his way through. Wendy had been relieved of her duties, and was enjoying a chat with the knitwear lady while considering the purchase of a new cardigan.

Although Poynter seemed to be staring vacantly at the French windows, and the bleak, blue-grey sky they framed, his sidelong glances kept the reader's face under constant surveillance, hoping to analyse any reaction. The eyes would dart along a line or two of poetry: then he would snort or smirk, flipping the page over - sometimes reading more - sometimes jerking his head back in sudden repulsion, swiftly moving to the next sample.

Poynter watched this display for a minute or so, then decided - as any shopkeeper might - to offer his assistance. But despite his need to encourage sale of the CORV anthology, Poynter found the role of the merchant an uneasy one. Should he coin the literary equivalent of "Are you being served?" Perhaps, "Are you being enlightened?"

Yet even Poynter was not so pompous, and while the phrase fluttered in his consciousness, his actual technique was to apply a smile to his face as one might apply a sticking plaster - preventing unsightliness and an inner festering. He also contrived a few simple words, meant to address the intelligence of the man. These might put him at ease with the radical poet, and desirous of making a purchase.

Poynter timed his moment precisely, as a butterfly collector might swoop on a choice specimen, allowing the man's eyes to rest on one particularly insightful line before clearing his throat, leaning forward and speaking. "Each word is an item of value. Together, the words are a treasure."

The man looked up from the page, face alert but intentions incompatible. "That's a mournful read, I must say," he droned, reprising the offending passage. "'*Desolation is the final wine which all must drink at dusk.*' Very pleasant for a nursing home. You should read it to the old dears." He closed the book and replaced it on the pile, with a brusqueness of manner that implied no purchase was intended.

The sticking plaster stiffness of Poynter's smile flinched a discernible degree, but remained admirably intact given this ignorant disapproval. The contempt Poynter held for the scruffy lounge would require a range of expressions to convey, and each would be a fine subject for Simon Drake. However, Poynter knew the completion of today's obligations precluded a burst of rage.

There would be time for complaints and recriminations later. Wendy could be blamed for the choice of venue, Roland for his lazy detachment from the Fulcrum's fate. Why, these were words Poynter was proud to have written. They had survived his own ruthless pruning of flowery verse, and selection of which to submit...and made it here, past the final obstacle, the editorial clout of the CORV. Yet today, as an ambassador of the Circle, Poynter could only defer to this misinformed philistine and the banality of his brainless opinion.

"So who are you?" asked Poynter, switching the subject away from the Fulcrum. "Are you one of the residents here?"

A shock of anger struck the fellow's face for one grotesque, quivering moment - the sight of which, as Poynter would later recall, quite justified the whole excursion. Indeed, unwittingly, the man would become fictionalised in one of Poynter's winter poems, which cast the pettiness of such a character within the scope of a greater cosmos.

As Poynter had done before him, the man distanced himself from an altercation and presented a sheen of sarcastic charm. "I'm here for the fair, like you," he said. "Wife's running the

knitwear stall. I've been down the pub, sunk a few beers, come to pack up at the end."

Poynter declined to mention he had been a customer at this very stall, but if he had known - earlier - that his purchase might have aided such a couple, he would have suffered his discomfort in silence.

"I would not wish to detain you," murmured Poynter. This might have translated, in an honest analysis, to a highly polite "Get lost." Or something a little ruder. Or a lot.

The rainy drive back to London provided ample time for analysis, though Poynter was startled by the pleasantness of Wendy's mood. Despite the dreary hours they had spent that day, she seemed unable to condemn the scheme.

"I know we didn't make any money," said Wendy, slowing at a pedestrian crossing. "But it's a day out, Laurence. An experience. The knitwear lady was nice. I took her card. She'll make me a special cardigan."

"We're meant to be selling things, not buying a load of tat," said Poynter. He touched his nose to the cold glass window, scrutinizing the rainy darkness beyond.

"A little give and take," said Wendy, watching the lights. "There was tea...cakes. I enjoyed it."

"I have tea and cakes at home," said Poynter.

"Mmm. That business with the pot-plant. Regrettable."

"What else could I do, Wendy?"

"That man was very kind. The assistant..."

"Rob. He's a nosey devil."

"He seemed to like you."

"Charged me a tenner? For one measly pot-plant?"

"Well...the lady bought a bargain, anyhow. We made somebody happy, Laurence."

"Hope she spikes herself on that cactus. Fancy asking Rob for a bag." Poynter's mumble tailed away into silence as the lights turned green, and Wendy shifted the car into gear.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following weeks saw a number of similar expeditions, not all quite so unpromising, but neither inspiring to any great degree. Opinions would differ between Wendy and Poynter as to their relative success, with Wendy more tolerant and open to amusement, Poynter trailing through loyalty to the CORV and its tentative links with Madeleine. Suspecting Wendy would put a gloss on the whole endeavour, Poynter saw fit to pen a letter to Roland in mid-December, once the stalls had run their course, bemoaning the penance on which he had been forced to embark:

*My Dear Roland,*

*While I wish to continue in the Circle Of Radical Verse, I am compelled to express my bemusement at our recent attempts to sell the Fulcrum anthology. Wendy may well hold a different opinion,*

*but I for one feel the CORV is spinning on a fruitless course, taking it far from the merits of its foundation. The Fulcrum anthology should be an object of pride - yet our encounters with the so-called public reveal that it is with you, Roland, that the ultimate responsibility lies to secure readers for the book. Whether Simon's initial advice had any merit, our attempts to brand ourselves as salesmen has met with astonishing failure. I am tempted to blame Wendy - indeed, I have done so on several occasions - yet she knew little of the best procedure, and sought outlets with the ignorance of an amateur.*

*Two examples of the long, dull sessions we have faced, having told you of the Bellevue debacle: a table-top sale in a municipal hall, somewhere out in the sticks. Wendy thought we would be amongst antiques and curios. It turned out to be a menagerie of junk and jumble, plus a selection of hobbyists displaying their dubious craftware. We were wedged between chipped crockery and velvet hats, and spent a dull afternoon watching browsers shamble past. They sometimes bought an item or two either side of us, then passed as if we existed in a peculiar vortex that diverted their visual faculties. Again, one or two dodderers - or a keen beardie with nothing to spend - engaging us in pendulous monologues, but blessing us with little in the way of sales. I should add, when the first copy of The Fulcrum was sold, Wendy and I were washed with a wave of transcendent hope before the return of our previous lassitude.*

*The CORV was not the only fish out of water, I'm glad to say. A middle-aged man in a suit stood opposite, with a mock-up window on the table before him, alongside a range of cleaning products. He was clearly the representative of some commercial company, equally misinformed in his choice of venue, and I gained much amusement watching his futile demonstrations - ignored by the passers-by, who clutched their tawdry purchases as if treasures from a Pharaoh's tomb. But as time went on, a very real anger began to burn in me, and I considered kicking over the crockery stall to gain us some attention. Thankfully, Wendy restrained me.*

*Equally bad was our trip to a festive bazaar, held in a dowdy church hall in Purley. By now, neither Wendy nor myself held great expectations, so maintained our usual vigil with the fortitude of sentries - albeit sustained by tea and fairy cakes from another stall, in our habitual support of fellow traders. At one point, Wendy decided to encourage browsers by imitation. She explored the hall for several minutes, then alighted on our own display. Her rapturous attentions succeeded in gathering a small, antediluvian crowd, who stood as if reading in a public library before moving to the vulgar plastic beads at the next table. Such has been our experience of the marketplace.*

*We are lost without the services of a professional: you, who saw fit to create the Circle Of Radical Verse, but have felt fit to desert us of late. Such a man could draw this arc of the Circle's life to a neat conclusion, allowing the poets to recover their spirits.*

*We are near Christmas now, but enough is enough. We have sold five books in thirteen venues, wasting many hours in the process. Money is not important, for I am blessed with ample, but such effort to find so small an audience hardly merits the time. I trust you will attend to these problems, Roland, and ensure the Circle Of Radical Verse can flourish in the New Year and beyond. We must rise above the philistine, to reach those we might call enlightened.*

*For the love of...poetry,  
Laurence Poynter.*

The poet hoped the sneer on his face would be conveyed by the whisk of his nib. His confidence was not unfounded.

Chapter Eight

*A Dispirited Mood*

POYNTER'S GAZEBO had become encrusted by a mosaic of translucent ice. This lent a diffused nature to the winter daylight, which fell through its stained glass windows. The ironwork glistened with frozen crystals, as if a coating of sugar had been applied, while a similar dusting tinged the garden to a monochrome setting of greyish-blue. However, no moans of creative effort emanated from the gazebo. The crisp silence was broken only by the chirrups of birds, pecking for scraps of food.

Observing the scene from his study, Poynter attempted to balance the influential factors that wavered in his mind. He could negotiate the path to the gazebo, and sit cold within its octagonal enclosure. There, the discomfort might further the incisive bleakness of his verse. Or he could maintain his sedentary position, knowing its comfort lent detachment from the outside world. An analytical retreat.

This dilemma summarized a conflict within Poynter's heart. Was his mordant view best perceived subjectively - through immersion in personal experience - or through objective, intellectual thought? The cold would chill his fingers in the gazebo, and the pen scribe slowly across the page. But would the words be more valid and insightful? Or was the power of insight one of understanding, best afforded by comfortable surroundings?

Poynter could contemplate the winter from his study, and contrast it with his own relaxation.

Yet Poynter's involvement with the Circle Of Radical Verse had caused a diversion from his initial focus. While the early days had been promising, and the Fulcrum anthology an object of pride, Poynter had become perplexed by the autumn developments: the tedium of selling the book, and Madeleine's aloof departure from London. His letter to Roland had received a courteous reply near the end of December, indicating Roland would try his contacts in the book trade to facilitate the anthology's sale. However, Roland expressed disillusion - at times bordering on offence - at Poynter's veiled accusations of personal laxness.

Sitting solemn at his bureau, Poynter turned his gaze away from the frosty panorama and considered the letter before him. He had unfolded it and re-read it many a time, and still found points of interest now the calendar displayed the month of January. He had not spoken to Roland since, or sent a reply. The embargo would be broken soon. The letter held much to fuel Poynter's brooding, and one particular passage bore scrutiny:

I cannot know or anticipate each tiny reaction to everything I say. It seems you have bottled your resentment for no short time - and while I have no desire to become aggrieved, I wish you had been more open in your criticism rather than hoarding it for a personal attack.

The Circle welcomes honest discussion on troubling issues, and I would not seek to confine such talk within a pedantic definition of relevance: poetry itself. As I said at the Fulcrum editorial meeting, it has been my very great satisfaction to see the CORV thrive without my continual stewardship.

Yet we must recognize any residual misunderstandings left in its wake. Whether it is a dispute about poetry, a dispute about poets, a dispute about critics or the world, the Circle provides a forum for sensible souls to settle these differences through reasoned debate. I trust you will respect this policy.

Sincerely,

*Roland Twine.*

Despite Roland's attempt to explain his line of reasoning, he was nothing but an administrator - lacking passion or poetry of his own. Yet his authority lent him power to induce dissent through an inability to resolve differences. Poynter wished he would side with the correct opinion. Invariably his own, of course.

Reading this dull, moderate language snapped something in Poynter. He made a sudden decision. Sliding the letter back into its smart cream envelope, he took one of his larger notebooks and stepped into the small utility passage. A door opened into the side alley, which ran the length of the house. Donning a coat and muffler from the hook, Poynter unslid the bolt, stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

The air was like a cold flannel upon Poynter's face, easing the heat of anguish that had threatened migraine. While he enjoyed the sombre emotions, and the atmosphere from which they evolved, there was a difference between atmosphere and seething trauma caused by a conflict of the mind.

Poynter's face appeared within the fretwork of the wooden gate that led to the garden path. He entered, and walked slowly on the icy veneer now coating the red brick tiles. Scraps of ice floated on the fishpond, while birds hopped between the naked black branches. Poynter's breath came as a cloud of tumbling vapour, dissipating as he moved forwards.

Polly entered the house by the front door, and stepped through to the homely kitchen. It was a room where her presence bore more influence than Poynter's. She deposited her bag on the wooden table, and slipped out of her fur-trimmed coat. The kettle was soon singing on the hob as Polly sorted through her shopping. There was a variety of foodstuffs from the delicatessen, many favourites of Poynter and some of her own. The labels were often decorative or antiquated, each a hallmark of a luxury brand.

Before he had entered the gazebo, Poynter had removed an item from his notebook. It was a small piece of cardboard, with a loop of string. He had fixed it over the handle of the door. Now the gazebo stood stark and silent in the frozen garden, with no hint of the life within. The only clue was this placard, and the wording it bore: *'Inspiration Brooks No Disturbance'*.

\* \* \* \* \*

The static leaves glowed greenish-amber in the static sky, unmoved by a static breeze. The static park held static pleasure-seekers enjoying the static sunshine, while a static dog gambolled in static motion across the static grass. Their static world was enclosed by a static frame upon a static wall, upon which sunlight fell at over one hundred and eighty thousand miles a second. This also illuminated the sofa that seated Miss Madeleine Quinn, reading her copy of the Fulcrum anthology. She found the poetry mesmerizing and hardly moved. Indeed, she was virtually static.

While Madeleine had browsed the poems submitted to the CORV, it was only now - when they stood black upon the printed page - that their true power was conveyed to her. She could not share the negativity of Poynter's vision. But it was a pure, authentic vision. Indeed, a radical, one. Madeleine had much admiration for Roland, but disagreed with his view of Poynter's verse as stilted, ironic satire. Reading the book this winter afternoon, only confirmed her opinion.

Even as she read the poems, Madeleine knew her attempts to cheer Poynter should never become a chore. Neither should she twist Poynter in a trivial direction, against the flow of his mood. For in such moods, the work was created.

Madeleine wished Poynter could lighten his emotional load, and increase the pleasure of their encounters. But she felt less

willing to judge his morbid fixation, and risk dampening the verve of his poetic tone. She would choose her moments with care.

'*Inspiration Brooks No Disturbance*'. The words might well have applied to Madeleine as she read more of the Fulcrum anthology. Deep though her concentration was, the invidious sounds of distraction began to break the spell. She had become accustomed to the low murmur that pervaded the passage. A peal of giggles cut the air like crystal shards, and she twitched away from the page. Mother, she thought. So easy to please when company was deemed welcome.

Madeleine turned the page, beginning an ultimately futile attempt to negotiate one of the Douglas ballads, Strider on the Heath. Despite the *rumpty-tum* nature of the language, it brought heather and clansmen clearly to mind. But the booming grate of amusement sounding down the passage, along with a higher female contribution, confirmed Madeleine's resolution that home sweet home lacked the stated ideal.

She closed the book and walked quietly along the long patterned rug, which ran into the entrance hall. Here, a doorway opened into the reception room where The Enlightenment had been held. The door remained ajar, inviting her to peep. Madeleine accepted the invitation.

Wary of observation, she craned round the edge of the door - glimpsing a vignette of Mrs. Pamela Quinn and her frequent visitor, Jack Craig. Craig was sprawled upon an armchair in his grey lounge suit, one leg propped high across the other, chortling

quietly to himself. The joke was obviously a private one - no doubt related to the sheaves of paperwork he had spread upon the coffee table, floors and chair. Mrs. Quinn held another sheaf, unfurled the uppermost sheet, and offered her solicitor an opinion.

"We must be firm with these percentages," she murmured.

"Maximum profit, minimum need...or should I say, minimum greed."

To which, Jack Craig heaved himself upright by grasping his uppermost knee, waving a hand in the air. "It's all in the daft contract. I mean, the *draft* contract."

Madeleine ducked aside before her mother could fix her with a steely, disapproving glare. Instead, Mrs. Quinn shared the joke with Mr. Craig, creating a whoop of laughter.

Laurence, thought Madeleine. I haven't seen him awhile. I've been moping in this household far too long, or mooching alone on the heath. True, Poynter had failed to attend December's meeting of the CORV, and she had sent nothing but a Christmas card since then. But now, with January well underway, it was time to speak again. The New Year could be good, for all of them. Even the most sombre of poets.

\* \* \* \* \*

With her master beyond the range of his ability to issue commands, Polly had achieved a stasis of her own. Without orders to dust, fetch and carry, Polly had settled herself into one of the big

wooden chairs lining the kitchen table. She enjoyed both the sandwich she had made herself and the pot of tea she had brewed. Her manner was still poised and formal, befitting the stark black and white of her uniform. There was no rush or bustle, only time to unwind.

So Polly was mildly disgruntled by the doorbell's chime, knowing she must rise, adjust her cap, and travel the passage to see who it was. The 'whoever' would also require a search for his whereabouts. Polly felt an inclination to sigh, her relaxing interlude broken. Nevertheless, she was proud of her job as a domestic maid, for it never seemed a servile activity. She loved the smartness of the uniform, the clicking efficiency of her heels, and the subdued but sultry make-up adorning her face.

Polly seldom smiled - which did not mean she was miserable. Indeed, she found a constant glow of satisfaction on seeing her features reflected in glass or mirrors, but suspected pleasurable reactions might dissipate the spell.

So it was a poised, graceful Polly who set aside the teacup, rose and went about her duty. Dabs of colour through the frosted glass suggested the caller's identity, in the manner of a watercolour sketch. Polly found confirmation as she opened the door, revealing Miss Madeleine Quinn.

"Afternoon, Polly!" smiled Madeleine in a chummy, schoolgirl way, hands muffled in the folds of her coat. "Quite frosty," she added, shivering.

"Oh, indeed, Miss Quinn," said Polly.

Madeleine inclined her head to the left, indicating the alley to the side of the house. "Hardly worth crunching up the pathway. Laurence couldn't be there!"

Polly frowned very slightly, a little unsure. "I haven't spoken to Mr. Poynter since my return, Miss Quinn. But if you'd care to come in, I can offer refreshment."

"Thanks, Polly," said Madeleine, stepping into the hall and removing her winter warmers. "You say Laurence is being elusive?" she asked, as the maid hung coat, hat and scarf on the hooks.

"He was here an hour ago, Miss," said Polly. "Mr. Poynter is hardly wont to leave on impulse. I'd fetched our favourites from the delicatessen, and looked to find the study empty."

"Perhaps the bedroom...?" mused Madeleine as they passed the stairs.

"I might venture up in a while, Miss," said Polly. "But it's best not to be hasty."

"Well...let him lie," shrugged Madeleine, swivelling on the heels of the boots she'd bought for the cold weather. "I'm happy with your company, Polly. Anything's better than Orchard House. It's torture!"

"Torture, Miss?" gasped Polly, as Madeleine led the way.

"Oh - I mean it, Polly. Quite an ordeal. I was trying to read our book, you see. The Fulcrum anthology. Anyway, Mother has this solicitor. Craig's the name. Crooked's the game, I bet..."

Her voice trailed off as she strolled to the kitchen, Polly ambling close behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Time had passed. Poynter didn't know how much. His breath had misted the windows of the gazebo, while the early dusk of winter had tinged the garden with a wash of chilly blue. Poynter had no light - no candle or lantern - so he sat as a silhouette within an enclosure of darkness, divided by the geometric windowpanes, one each side of the octagon. Above, the cherubs and leaves of the ceiling artwork had lapsed into indistinct gloom, while only the cool glint of his circular spectacles lent Poynter a facial definition.

He had been acutely aware of the cold...at first. But familiarity had brought acceptance, and - after a time - a peculiar enjoyment. The numbing of skin left naked to the icy air - upon the face and hands - had led Poynter to concentrate his mind inwardly, revelling in those deeper parts of his body where clothing had the power of insulation. His fingers were clasped together on the table before him, where his notebook and the gazebo's supply of pens remained ready for quick expression. But Poynter had failed to write anything. Words had not been his aim.

Poynter had come to the gazebo to think. He wanted to think beyond the present moment, the place, even beyond words and poetry itself. He had asked the fundamental questions, and pondered his very existence. He had been none too pleased at the answers, even

those he had managed to glimpse. It was difficult to trace the precise motive behind his isolated life...

Which led, more pragmatically, to a simpler question. What was the next step? For Poynter had become weary of the CORV, its cliquish banter, and the compromised nature of its output. He had relied on others, but neglected himself. It was time to choose another path.

If Poynter had chosen to lean forward, the perspective between the gazebo and the frosty, twilight garden would have revealed more of the old brick house. Its shape was stark and angular upon the fading sky, the chimneys looming tall and spindly. A sliver of smoke told of inner cosiness - confirmed by an orange-yellow patch of illumination, which indicated the kitchen window. Any glimpse was hidden from Poynter, being blocked by the gazebo wall. It was unable to urge his return.

Madeleine and Polly were equally forgetful of time, though in an entirely different context. The garden outside had vanished, for the window became a mirror as the outside world darkened. It reflected a reversed view of the kitchen, where grass and bushes had been. More at ease here than at her mother's residence, Madeleine had chatted to Polly as if to a friend, not the private servant of Laurence Poynter.

In the absence of her employer, Polly had softened the formality of her own manners to a lighter, more whimsical mood. She smiled gently at Madeleine's anecdotes concerning Poynter, Roland and the Circle Of Radical Verse, and sat enraptured at

Madeleine's sincere - if ponderous - recital of a new poem she had begun, *The Fountain of Favoured Delights*. Some of the delicacies Polly had purchased for her own consumption - from her own allowance, of course - were opened and nibbled between them. More water was put on to boil, and the teapot topped to the brim.

Soaring on a dose of excess caffeine, Madeleine's eyelids drooped as she gazed at the kitchen reflection. A china cup steamed in her hand. "Laurence and I differ so much," she murmured, smiling slightly as if amused by an inner knowledge that shunned a full admission. "I spoke to him first through recognition, for he presented a familiar figure on the heath. Then I found we had poetry in common, and discussed our mutual views. But my own - one of light and a positive outlook - encourages a sharing of the spirit, whilst Laurence - with his cool introspection - shirks both the critic and admirer."

Polly nodded slowly, fingering the floppy bow at her neck. It comprised the more twee element of her costume. "So...do you admire Mr. Poynter, the man?" she asked coyly, as if wary of her master's ear.

Madeleine considered the question. It was hard to separate the poet and his work, although the same concern applied to herself. Yet she was in rapture, while Poynter in torture. She might be happier, yet Poynter had chosen his path.

"He writes...very gloomy poems," said Madeleine, gingerly, unsure how versed Polly would be in literary terms. "Do they reflect the man...or create him?"

"I wouldn't presume to say," said Polly.

Madeleine restrained much of her following giggle. It was all very Upstairs, Downstairs. Careful to place the shaking cup on firmer foundations, she leant back on the wooden chair and studied the maid before her. "You see him all the time, Polly..."

"I wouldn't presume to think, Miss. The job's what it is, and I enjoy it."

"Even with Laurence in a dour mood?"

Polly mulled this over, and offered an honest reply. "I wouldn't presume to understand Mr. Poynter. He is a highly individual man. But I once knew such dour moods, and lacked the channel of expression. I couldn't create poetry, Miss Quinn. I bottled it all inside. So I became a sullen, sad personality without friends or a role in life."

"So your moods...created you?" asked Madeleine.

Explanations were not new to Polly, who had offered them many a time. The dialogue was usually more direct, lacking the elliptical, exploratory approach of the poet and her quizzical etiquette. Polly knew it was best to state her situation simply, meekly, in terms of truthful precision.

"Miss Quinn...Mr. Poynter has been very good to me. I would neither seek to criticize his poetry, nor criticize the man. I wouldn't presume to understand the first, and have no cause to judge the second. For Mr. Poynter has not judged me, Miss Quinn - and my moods were as dark as his own."

"But now...?" asked Madeleine, her curiosity quickening.

"Let me put it like this," said Polly. "I believe...our emotions create our personalities..."

"...and poetry is an emotion?"

"Of course. Whether it reflects or creates our personality is hardly the point. The two relate to each other."

"I agree. I'm more happy when I write about my happiness," said Madeleine. "But I only write when I am happy."

"To one who does not write," added Polly, "there is no poetry. There are no words. There are only...physical actions. I grew dour, Miss Quinn, because the moods reflected the man, and also created him. So how could I change these moods? I did so by changing the man to a *woman*, Miss Quinn, and allowing the moods to create the woman and her to reflect the moods. I'm very happy here, with Mr. Poynter, now the operation's over and done. Polly...is no longer a man, and moody like Mr. Poynter. She was a man, Miss Quinn, and memory persists. So I can understand my master, and never judge."

Poynter was sitting in a void now, with nothing but a pool of blackness enveloping his static form. The cold had reached such a point of extremity that his body had stopped feeding symptoms to the brain. Indeed, his brain was creating a false sensation of warmth that brought a measure of comfort. This was actually the more dangerous aspect. For Poynter forgot how cold he was, and how the frost could bite.

Not that he was considering external factors. Poynter's mind was focusing inwards, towards the centre of his life force: the

heart that pulsed the blood round the body, and formed the centre of emotions. It was in the heart that Poynter delved for the treasure of certainty, as one might search the filth of a riverbed for hidden gold. For he could see his heart beating in his mind - or rather, a fanciful visualization of the organ. It was jet black, shaped like the symbol on a playing card, and overgrown with cloying ivy. The veins spread as roots and branches, and the blood within was black.

What was the next step, he asked again. The CORV had been an inadequate venture, so he must venture forth on his own. Poetry, of course, but from parts of his soul deeper than he had ever gone before. Perhaps a book to rival *The Fulcrum*, but with no other poet than himself. The source of inspiration lay in the very depths of his heart.

Which title? Something to grip the readers, and entwine them in his literary tendrils. *The Voice of the Black Heart*? No. *The Morbid Heart*? Or...*The Book of the Gothic Heart*!

The title came as a revelation. Poynter jerked up from his stiffened position, and emitted a groan of exultation. It rose from the depths of his stomach, and boomed from his shivering lips like a note from some great pipe organ.

Madeleine continued to stare at Polly, fascinated. Perhaps her scrutiny revealed the subtle traces of a man behind those pleasing, feminised features. Maybe the slightest squareness in the jaw, the slightest boldness to the nose - though she would never have guessed if not told.

Polly was used to such observation, and paid it little heed. "I'd best check on the master," she said, glancing at the clock, "or he'll think me most neglectful." Polly bustled to her feet, smiling brightly at Madeleine. "Perhaps you can stay for supper?" she added. "Mr. Poynter is sure to make you welcome."

Polly started towards the door, but Madeleine's attention was diverted by a faint, almost subliminal sound. It was a low note, like a sigh of the wind, though she knew the air to be still. "Shhh," she hissed, gesturing how Polly should pause. "Wait. Listen. What was that?"

"I heard nothing, Miss."

"Quiet. Listen..."

Despite having found the answer to his question, there was no sparkle in Poynter's eye or gratified mellowness of visage. The gothic sensibility precluded fallible traits. As Poynter snapped from his brooding vigil, he was hit by a wave of conscious reality and realized quite how cold he had become. His fingers seemed as brittle as icicles, his skin tingling with a wintry kiss. He staggered up from the wooden chair, stumbling with clumsy motion to the door. His hands slipped on the smooth brass handle, barely able to grip - and his face gawped through the window of the cast-iron gazebo, just above the sign he had hung outside: '*Inspiration Brooks No Disturbance*'.

For a moment, these were not the features of a decadent and mannered poet, but those of a frightened and vulnerable young man. Then Poynter twisted the handle, slumping to the red brick path.

Madeleine twitched at the distant scuffle, glancing out at the garden...or at least, that part of it lost beyond her own reflection. "Something outside," she murmured. "Surely not...?"

"Mr. Poynter!" gasped Polly, gripping the edge of the table.

Madeleine jumped up, unfastening the back door and stepping out into the icy garden. Polly followed through duty, fighting hard to control her nerves. Their heels clicked on the path at a steady pace, neither wishing to dally nor trip in haste.

The curves took them round the rockery, evoking a miniature Alpine landscape...past the spindly skeletons of dead summer plants, beneath the bow of a tree, then on towards the gazebo. The patch of white comprising Poynter's homemade sign was just discernible in the gloom - and Madeleine ran forward instinctively, slowing as she spotted the silhouette of Poynter sprawled on the path, upon a background of icy, reflected starlight.

"Laurence..." gasped Madeleine, crouching to steady Poynter's arm. "You're frozen!"

Poynter's voice came in a faint, gravely murmur. "Time. I needed...time," he said.

Polly sped the rest of the way - a little tentative in her actions, but keen to help. She caught sight of the sign on the gazebo. "'Inspiration Brooks No Disturbance'," she whispered.

"Let's get him up!" said Madeleine. They each took an arm on their shoulders, Poynter rising to a kneeling position, then painfully upright on his grazed legs. His trousers were torn at

the knee, the skin scratched into ragged flakes and pierced with particles of grit.

"Easy, now..." said Madeleine. "Let's get you in the warm."

"It's all right, sir," smiled Polly. Her composure was much recovered as she grasped the importance of her role.

"Th...thank you," said Poynter, the words slurred and barely intelligible. Numb and shaken by the fall though he was, Poynter forced his legs to march onwards. However, the best march he could manage was a slow, heavy shuffle.

Madeleine wore boots of a cosy, lace-up design, and the heels were high and graceful. Polly had also added inches to her height with shiny, pointed shoes. While each might have teetered alone, they moved in strength together...forming four corners to support Poynter like the legs of a moving chair. His brogues dragged less as they took the weight, and at times rose free of the path.

Virtually lifting the poet aloft, Madeleine and Polly clicked patiently along the twists of the garden path. They reached the glowing slit of the kitchen door, its warmth beaming into the cold. Soon, the door was bolted and the garden undisturbed. Nature was the only creative force, and night its inspiration.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Poynter recovered by the warmth of the kitchen stove, Madeleine's face swam large in his vision. It was as round and pale as the moon, although lightened by a true affection. This

twinkled in her bright, wide eyes and gentle, pink-painted mouth. She was surrounded by a splash of yellow from the kitchen wall, with a gleam of silver from the pots and pans hanging on their hooks.

"Laurence," said Madeleine, quietly. "You've had a bit of a bump. Sit still. We've loosened your tie, and there's hot soup on the hob."

Madeleine glanced aside to check the bubbling cauldron.

"We need to speak about poetry and life," she added. "The way we did before the Circle. Remember how we shone at The Enlightenment?" Poynter stirred slightly at a flood of memory, but Madeleine calmed him with a stroke of his hair.

"Roland took us on a different path," said Madeleine. "The Circle Of Radical Verse. For me, it has been a good one - although I understand your vexations."

Madeleine drew closer to Poynter. "Of course, Roland had lots of ideas," she said, "and not just for the book. He planned regular meetings of the Circle, but knew how pen and paper grind a poet down. It's time for an outing, Laurence. 'Inspiration brooks no disturbance'."

Poynter blinked at his own quotation, but Madeleine hushed him into peace. "You work too hard, Laurence. The work has become a disturbance. But a pleasant outing to a quaint locale? That's an inspiration! Maybe the Norfolk Broads, or a taste of Sussex. Rich in atmosphere and detail!"



Chapter Nine

*Heart of the Parish*

QUITE OFTEN, Mr. James Amery-Beevers would become enraptured by an aura of harmony achieved through a combination of vaulted ceiling, stained glass window and the ethereal sounds of the human voice. Indeed, it was to his continual astonishment that human voices - in unison - could serve to create an auditory vibration so suggestive of the ultimate, heavenly realms.

Yet the gentle undulations of the choir served to relax him at the pew. Beevers glanced down from the highest realms of monumental masonry, absorbing each and every niche of the ancient church. He looked past the glazed depictions of sacred figures, to arrive at the focus of his utmost veneration. The image of Jesus Christ on the Cross, depicted through the golden shimmer of brass, and gleaming upon the altar.

Although Beevers was a few rows back, he could discern the details in the tormented face, the crown of thorns entwined. The choir raised their voices to an almighty climax, and Beevers felt a surge of devotion as he clasped his hands upon his lap, closing his eyes in silent prayer. Then the music drew quiet, and Beevers allowed the subdued light of this spacious, hallowed interior to fill his vision once more.

Beevers turned his gaze upon the pulpit, where a slow, steady figure climbed the steps to look out across the church. The figure surveyed the interior with an evident mastery, his eyes resting on

the brown, huddled pipes that loomed high above the keys of the church organ. The man raised his right hand slowly, the forefinger straightening to point, the eyes narrowing with insightful determination.

"Mice," said the figure.

The choir stopped with a click.

Beevers was quite concerned at this statement, though it was really no surprise. He removed the headphones of his Sony Walkman, and stood upright amongst the otherwise empty pews.

The days were growing longer now. The longest night had passed some weeks before, even if the calendar saved New Year till the end of December. There had been flurries of snow around the middle of the month, and one amazing blizzard. This had turned Hastings into a blur of white. It had vanished with the speed of a snowstorm toy, melting in the fresh sunlight.

A glow still lingered beyond the church windows. It was a blending of pink, amber and grey like a peach dusted with ash. It was enough to define the outlines of saintly martyrs, who lingered in a glazed, spiritual presence. They had seen many a winter sunset.

"Mice...?" repeated Beevers in a low, somewhat humorous tone.  
"Are you sure?"

The figure looked down at him. "Quite sure," he murmured. Nonetheless, the acoustic of the old stone walls allowed the words to resound softly throughout the building. This ensured no mice,

cognisant with the English tongue, could doubt the gravity of his suspicion. "You remember the scuffling?" he added.

"The scuffling in the pipes?" queried Beevers.

"One particular pipe," came the answer. The figure took out a small tin of polish, and set to work on the pulpit with a portion of rag.

However, the question of ecclesiastical wildlife was not one to spoil Beevers' meditations. He manoeuvred himself from the narrow confines of the pew, and strolled the few steps to the altar. Here, he examined the drapes and statues adorning this sacred alcove, then smiled at the attentive verger.

"I always love a church in the evenings," said Beevers.

"Before the congregation have arrived to fill the air with praise. The mice will be...quite inaudible, Mr. Tattersfield."

The verger snorted. "The words are glorious, sure enough, but it's not a very harmonious flock. And their babbling and clattering in the service? It's a wonder the Reverend don't bang the gavel."

Beevers nodded sagely, his amusement one of recognition, for he was familiar with the vagaries of the worshipful public. He was a stout man with white hair and a rather jowled face. An expression of philosophical gravity could switch in a second to an eager, jolly enthusiasm. "Lord knows, we want them to come," he said, with tones rich, warm and resonant, yet with an underlying lilt of humour. "But before their arrival, Tattersfield...all is

hushed and waiting. The last daylight vanishes like, ah...like melting ice!"

"That's one way to see it," murmured Tattersfield. His elbow pumped up and down with quick, mechanical motion as he applied the wax to the wood. Inspired by the mood of his surroundings, Beevers spoke in an expansive manner.

"You know - I've often thought a church like a theatre," he proclaimed, spreading his arms as if commanding the stage. "A great empty barn of a building, with an audience eager to listen..."

"Not just now," said Tattersfield. He glanced through his spectacles at the empty rows.

"Soon, Tattersfield, soon," said Beevers. "All it takes is the actor to shine with brilliant oration. Why, here's the best script in history from the eternal playwright!" Beevers tapped the mighty Bible that lay open before Tattersfield, who stood half a height above him on the pulpit.

Tattersfield's face slid into a reluctant smile. "I'm only the verger," he murmured, although happy with his polish for now. "There. That's how the Reverend likes it, sir. Perhaps I'll straighten the hymn-books..." he added, negotiating the curved wooden steps down to the stone floor.

"May I be of assistance?"

"Of course, Mr. Beevers. Always welcome a hand."

The two walked together along the length of the aisle, Tattersfield in his mid-sixties, Beevers a decade older. Beevers

was also ahead in terms of height, although both were a little portly.

As the pipes of the organ reared into view, Beevers resumed their previous topic. "So, have you seen the mice?" he asked.

"No, sir. But I've heard the scuffle."

"So you said."

"Up and down the pipes," added Tattersfield. He served as an occasional organist, although with none of the dexterity of a certain Mr. Rogers, who had served his apprenticeship on the Wurlitzer.

Beevers continued to stare up at the pipes, imagining the relative scale of a scampering rodent and the tall, cylindrical forms of the instrument. "I remember...many years ago," he mused, "I opened a travelling carnival. This was in the days of my rural parish, when my ribbon-cutting skills were quite in demand. One of the attractions was a small tent, with a sign above saying 'Mouse Town'. There was a glass-fronted cabinet inside, containing a miniature replica of an Elizabethan street. Or perhaps it was Victorian."

"Old, in any case," nodded Tattersfield.

"Anyhow, the mice scampered up and down, quite at home..."

"In bonnets and bowlers, sir?"

"The fur God had given them, Tattersfield. Anyhow, the...highlight of the performance, with a small crowd gathered, involved the attendant flipping a switch so the tent was plunged into darkness, and the lights of the cabinet shone as if by night.

One could see the more timid mice lurking in the buildings, although a close scrutiny revealed millet and other mousy edibles rather than a period supper. I thought the stars very effective at the time. Holes punched through the sky."

"Not...nibbled?" snorted Tattersfield. "The mice could munch through the heavens."

Beevers leant for a moment on the side of a pew. His heart warmed at the sight of the embroidered cushions, donated by a local needlework group. "It was the lack of spiritual content which bemused me," he observed. "For the Mouse Town featured nothing in the way of a church. There was a tavern, a baker's shop, even a windmill - although the motor had broken down."

"A motor, sir?" queried Tattersfield. "How about the wind?"

"It was only a model," said Beevers. "But the Christian faith was denied to the tiny creatures. I did offer my suggestion to the attendant, who claimed no authority in the matter. He maintained I should lodge my critique with the manager."

"And you did so?" asked Tattersfield, as they reached the far end of the church. The pair arranged hymnbooks with the precision of a multi-volume encyclopaedia. Beevers answered with a sigh.

"My delight at opening the carnival put me in a difficult position. I did not wish to appear churlish, However, I had a sly word with one of the parishioners - who mentioned it on my behalf - and I believe some progress was made."

There was a scuffling of shoes in the church porch way, prompting Tattersfield to attend his principal duties. "S'cuse me,

sir, the Reverend's here," he said - at which, the man entered through the heavy wooden doors.

The priest was tall, with lean, somewhat hollow features and a receding hairline. He was not particularly old, however, for this was his second parish in forty-four years. He had divided his time between the church and medicine, before choosing between the vocations. Indeed, his title was the Reverend Dr. Trevor Newton, able to help in both spiritual and bodily matters. For the most part, the medical prefix was dropped. He was known as the plain Revd. Trevor Newton, or Father in confessional terms.

The Reverend Newton had a hovering, somewhat impatient way of conducting his business, as if continually seeking to regain mastery over an eternally lapsing schedule. In truth, his tasks were less of a burden than the weight he set upon them: a moral Beevers had often sought to convey, with sarcasm his only reward. The Reverend shared myopic tendencies with Tattersfield, possessing a pair of half-rimmed spectacles. In this aspect, Beevers was superior, priding himself on twenty-twenty vision.

The Reverend Newton surveyed the church in the manner of a senior official, before removing his tweed jacket with a jerky flourish as if ready for a corner punch-up. However, his placid, studious gaze was complemented by the bland vocal monotone he used to address the others. "One hopes for a fair attendance, Mr. Tattersfield. Evensong lacks the dutiful element of a Sunday service. With the season of Lent approaching, there is no excuse for apathy."

"I quite agree, your Reverence," said Tattersfield. Taking the jacket, he moved to a side door which led to the vestry. This was a nook of many purposes: a place of utility, study and relaxation. It was used by the priest, the verger and others who donated their time to the cause.

Beevers glanced back at the altar, considering these words, and chose to offer his support. "It will be good to leave the winter behind," he said. "One feels a new energy towards Easter. A magnificent invigoration! New life blossoms in springtime, and the world is green again. The eternal story of the Resurrection tells how faith is never misplaced."

"Hmmm," came the noncommittal response from the Reverend. He paced slowly towards the pulpit, as if questioning the procedure of Christian worship. His remark came in a murmur of sarcasm, almost indiscernible. "No need to recap your old sermons, James." The Reverend turned, and regarded the empty pews. "What may work in some rustic parish has little bearing on our own vicinity."

It seemed a curiously ungracious remark. Even so, Beevers did not take it too much to hear. He was becoming used to this surly cleric and his methodical approach to the job. The Reverend was punctilious in ritual and oration, yet strangely lacking in passion. Even faith, it could seem. Beevers recalled the Bishop of Durham, whose misplaced questioning of the holy truth had resulted in a flash of lightning. This had left little doubt as to the Almighty's aggrieved reaction.

Without wishing to lecture the priest, who was relatively new to the vocation and newer still to the parish, Beevers offered a measure of personal philosophy. Hopefully, he could abate the Reverend's pessimistic outlook.

"Faith isn't a commodity to be...doled to the masses," said Beevers, brightly. He began to stroll down the aisle with a knowing smile. "It must be...inherent within the priesthood, and all who follow the calling. A man of faith may stand in an empty church, denied an audience of converts, yet still benefit from the quiet moments. The spiritual may be heard in the very silence of the building, the stillness of the air. Such is the peace of God, Reverend Newton, which allows us to find our own peace. The peace of a faithful soul." Beevers touched a hand to his heart.

Such an outlook might have found favour, to a receptive ear. The matters that had vexed the Reverend Newton were, as usual, mostly trivial ones. Such talk of peace and stillness was in conflict with the visible evidence.

The Reverend was quick to notice, and quick to turn the tables. "Such a stillness would be helped...by *this*?" he queried. The Reverend tapped a bony finger on the stereo headphones, which hung round Beevers' neck like a ceremonial bangle.

Beevers' eyebrows rose for one bashful second before he switched to the defensive. "Ah...but this was choral music," he said. "Celestial voices, it seemed to me."

"Provided by batteries, cog-wheels and wires?" frowned the Reverend. "If one's faith is so easily attained, Mr. Beevers, one

fancies the church should disband altogether. We could issue true believers with a set of cassettes, for easy worship on the beach."

"Hardly so," replied the target of this sardonic response - although its speaker was turning to meet Tattersfield, who had emerged from the narrow doorway. The verger was clutching an ecclesiastical vestment on a wooden hanger, marked with the name of a top London hotel.

The acoustics of the church had carried their voices clearly, and Tattersfield had a keen ear for gossip. Neither he nor the new incumbent had warmed to the other's approach, despite their time working together. The Reverend Newton had been the vicar for four years, but this was a glimmer beside previous stints. Even Tattersfield had been present for a worthy duration, and respected the late Reverend Saunders the more. His passing had been a shock to the parish - coming as it had so soon after the demise of Mr. Littlejohns, who had coaxed the organ into such convincing life.

If the manager of Mouse Town had ever installed a church, Beevers' portable cassette player might have supplied an authentic soundtrack. As it was, the harmonies provided by the evening congregation hardly set the buttresses humming. There were fifteen or twenty present, singing together, with tones from flat to angelic discernible.

The lights of the church glowed warm within its blocky silhouette, black against a deep blue sky. The night was clear and cold, so the stars were scattered brightly. The dense cottages of the Old Town nestled all around, with the sea several streets to

the south. The bulky hump of East Hill loomed above the rooftops, along with its opposite partner - West Hill. They enclosed the neighbourhood like bookends.

Further west, the more recent parts of Hastings provided seaside attractions, multiple stores and a sweep of residential suburbia. Coastal lights led round the bay through St. Leonards, Bexhill-On-Sea, then on towards the tip of Beachy Head. This jutted out to sea beyond Eastbourne, a neighbouring seaside resort.

\* \* \* \* \*

While it remained early to an adult, the time after evensong was late to a child. Paula sat by the bed of Duncan, her son, in his small room at the back of the house.

They lived in a lane that rose from the side of All Saints Street, just to the side of East Hill. The street had a wide variety of cottages and half-timbered houses, while the southern end opened onto the seafront near the fishing quarter.

The front of the house was spared the sound of passing traffic, for it could only be reached by pedestrian means. With its quaint garden and brightly painted window-frames, it was a delightful place to bring up a child. Paula had managed to keep it so, despite the moments of depression. Her husband Warren had died six years before, while Duncan had still been a toddler.

Paula felt sure her son possessed some memory of his father, even if it lay dormant beneath his juvenile activities. One day, she hoped, Duncan might remember a little of his past. There were photographs to help, or replace the experience, even if Duncan had no recall.

Duncan had taken after his father in some respects. His hair was brown and a little tufty, unlike Paula's naturally ginger tinge. She had augmented this with various concoctions, to create a striated effect through blonde to red. An artistic eye had led to the deft use of blue, green and lilac throughout the rooms of the house. Paula liked these cool, restful colours, and they held domain in all but a single room. However, Duncan's was not the exception. The colours let the browns of the wooden furniture stand out, in a complementary manner.

Paula wore a necklace of tiny, shiny beads. It was one of her own creations, as she had been making jewellery for several years. The hobby had become enough for a part-time income, while the house had been paid for by her husband's insurance. It had not been a noble or even interesting death. He had been jogging in the country park one afternoon, hoping to enter some charity marathon. No-one could say exactly what had happened.

Warren must have taken his sense of purpose and discipline too far. Instead of heeding the warnings of pain, he had carried on. Paula could imagine it that way, very easily. Warren had liked to push things to the limit. It had been that way with the shelving units, which he had determined to assemble in a single

day. When Paula had informed him that midnight determined the end of the challenge, Warren had insisted on a more definitive sign. Clocks, he had said, were a mere invention. He had worked through the night until sunrise, before conceding the impossible nature of the task. The job had been finished in another hour, after a more careful look at the instructions.

An interlude must have passed, in the country park, between the moment Warren's body had faltered and the first person found him. Warren had still been alive, but unconscious, and it had taken a while for the medical team to reach the location. If he had chosen to fall along the promenade, the delay would have been obliterated. Perhaps it would have made the difference between life and death.

Duncan had been smaller then, and Paula had not wished to bring him with her. There had been a two-hour wait until the neighbours came home, when she could leave him in their care. Paula had rushed to the Conquest Hospital, on the northern edge of Hastings. It was not far from Maplehurst Wood, which they had enjoyed so much before Duncan's birth. Warren had been pronounced dead of cardiac arrest, before Paula had arrived.

Again, the delay might not have been critical. But it might have made a difference, somehow. Paula could never know. She tried not to think about it.

"What's next...?" murmured Duncan, from his pillow.

Paula smiled, and turned the page of the storybook. It was one of Duncan's favourites, Goldy the Fish and the Pirate's Dish,

in which Goldy the goldfish escaped from his bowl and swam out to sea. Paula could never understand how Goldy could live in salt water, but the matter was cheerfully ignored by the book's creators. In this adventure, Goldy encountered a group of pirates who were organizing a birthday party, and escaped becoming one of the courses. It was an entertaining if somewhat grotesque story, with the pirates depicted in a gross, ogre-like fashion by the illustrator. Paula preferred the tamer sequel, in which Goldy helped out with the Turtle's Wish. There was a third book, too, which they didn't have. But Duncan loved hearing about the pirates. He should have been able to read more by now, but didn't find school so easy.

Paula became more enthused as she gave voice to the characters, added a slight gruffness to their tones. "'Goldy jumped straight out of the trifle,'" read Paula. "'He flew out of the window, and down the side of the ship. "Grrr! I wanted to munch him!" said Pirate Dan. But Goldy was far too quick.'"

Duncan sniggered. "Where's that big...Pirate Spiky?"

"Not till the next page," said Paula. She knew the story back to front. "'Pirate Bunkle jumped off his bed. "Oi'll get the slippery little rascal!" he sneered. "Oi'll suck him out the sea with a straw!"

"Have you got a long straw?" asked Pirate Dan.

"We can fix the short ones together," said Pirate Bunkle. He was a very, very stupid pirate...'"

\* \* \* \* \*

Outside, in the lane, the terraced windows glowed in diminishing perspective. The blue-grey of the January night was a wash of neutral colour, upon which dabs and flecks of light defined the shapes of the town. Beyond, the rising hump of East Hill lay dark against the sky. It marked the beginning of the country park, which ran east along the coast. A soft drizzle had moistened the scene, so the pavements shone with a glaze of reflection.

A quick glance would not have revealed a presence in the shadows of All Saints Street. This was a place of cottages and half-timbered houses - each with its share of quirkiness, although none so differed that the unity was broken. It was here that the figure stood, regarding the antique street lamp that marked the lower end of the lane, its gas replaced with the whiter clarity of electric light. This cast a cool glow to the lower steps that led up into the lane, an iron banister in the middle.

The figure extracted itself from the shadows, and walked quietly into the pool of light. Its coat was long, dark, and resembled a cloak as it swung gently from side to side. The rim of its hat was broader than conventional fashion, at least in the contemporary world. In times of brilliance, it must have cast the face into a concealing shade. In times of cool and rain, such as now, it provided a circumference of personal shelter.

The figure glanced at each house impassively, as it moved upwards along the lane. Rising six steps up, it strolled some

twelve paces along the paving, up another ten steps, then continued up the paved slope. Shaggy bushes brushed upon its coat, protruding from the gardens close on each side. There was another lamp, like the first, and a further stretch of paving before the pattern was repeated, merging with the gloom.

The figure glanced at each house impassively as it moved along the lane. Many of the windows were lit, and provided glimpses of internal scenes. Perhaps each was the setting of a domestic play, lit for one's own entertainment.

It was not the obvious or luminescent that would satisfy. The figure drew to a pause by one of the houses, where the lilac window-frames were made grey by the evening gloom. A pleasant little garden, too, although it was only a few feet deep. There was only a distant, orange light, seeping through an open door. But the figure could sense something. An emotion, within. There was something...warm. Love. A bonding.

This did not invoke the man it knew, but others who shared the house. A mother, perhaps...and her daughter? The figure concentrated, hard. No...a boy. A young and sensitive boy. He was definitely her son.

Vulnerability, it thought. A useful knowledge. Every piece was an asset, in fulfilling the work.

The figure sensed a tread from some way behind, although not from the end of the lane. It had not been alerted by auditory means. The movement was further up the street, but approaching.

The figure glanced at the number of the house, to confirm its inquiry had been correctly founded. No error had been made. Then it walked in a determined but unhurried pace, back the way it had come. The damp sheen of paving made an effective contrast with this angular, creeping outline.

As Beevers arrived at the lane, he glimpsed someone moving down the street. The figure was too distant to identify, and was facing away. Beevers had no cause to investigate, for the weather had changed during his time inside the church. Many had retreated to their homes or pubs, so any wanderer became the more obtrusive. Each must have a place to go, or purpose to fulfil. Hastings was no vast city, but had a thousand intrigues within its borders. Curiosity was easily roused, and just as soon forgotten.

Beevers entered the house, along the lane. The living-room was unlit, but an orange lamp glowed near the staircase. He found Paula in the kitchen, at the large wooden table that was never quite cleared of crockery. There was a pinboard bearing postcards, leaflets and scribbles. The radio was on, quietly, playing a local music slot.

"Good service?" smiled Paula, glancing up.

"Pleasing enough," said Beevers. "How's the little man?"

"Asleep," said Paula. "We had most of the pirate book."

Beevers snorted. He took a soft chair in the corner, and tried to subdue a yawn.

"I feel like that," added Paula. She took a sip of invigorating coffee.

"It's been a long winter," said Beevers. "Christmas is a wonderful time, but the season bites in the end."

"Yes," murmured Paula. "I was just thinking..."

Beevers raised an eyebrow. "Oh...?"

"Nothing," smiled Paula. "This and that."

"The Reverend's...coming along," said Beevers. "I cannot advise him, but we have our little debates. I hope my words mean something."

"Sure they do, Uncle," said Paula. "Have you thought any more about Edgar's letter?"

Beevers made an assenting grumble that, from him, implied no sense of tetchiness. It was part of his personal vocabulary. "I'd like to see him again," said Beevers, with greater clarity. "He wants to come over, for a couple of days. It's just a question of..."

"Whatever," said Paula. "It's no problem."

"We don't want to be...in the way," added Beevers.

"James," said Paula, with a dash of mock admonishment. "It's your home, too. That's how...Warren would have liked it."

Beevers made an assenting nod. This seemed to rouse Doris, who lay by the heater. She was a mongrel dog of moderate size, rescued from a pet sanctuary. Beevers scratched her behind the ear, while musing on Paula's words. "There, Doris," said Beevers, before referring to his nephew. "A fine man. A good husband."

"You're the 'brother of Daddy's Daddy'," said Paula. "That's what Duncan says. He still knows he had a Daddy, although he doesn't remember him."

Beevers nodded sagely, but made no reply. He felt Paula would prefer to be alone, despite her encouraging words. The old man eased himself from the chair once more, denying Doris a further stroke. "I'll go straight up," he said. "Rather tired."

"Give Edgar a ring," said Paula. "Ask him over."

"A letter will suffice," replied Beevers. "He doesn't have a phone. Goodnight." The retired priest turned away from his grandniece, and moved towards the passage. Soon, he was resting in the only room where her sense of colour was absent.

## Chapter Ten

*Refreshing Conversation*

It was hardly a pilgrimage from Canterbury, for the train would bring Edgar Wallis at little exertion to himself. But he would have a Canterbury tale or two to tell, and Beevers would be grateful to hear them. Despite Edgar's vast intelligence, and his reputation for remarkable insight during academic debate, he was - in truth - quite a bumbler in practical matters. Beevers suspected many a weary porter or counter clerk would have offered their help or advice on the journey, whether the problems concerned wrong tickets, missed connections or difficult choices at the buffet. But the services had withstood the demands placed upon them, and Edgar had arrived in Hastings.

After meeting Edgar at the station, they had taken a taxi along to the Old Town. Beevers always enjoyed the walk despite his advancing years, but Edgar found such exertion difficult. The pair stopped off at the church, where they joined Tattersfield in the cosy nook which he had made very much his own. It was a narrow room to the side of the porch way, where miscellaneous items could be kept and aspects of business undertaken. The nook was shared with the Reverend Newton, who stored ecclesiastical garments on a corner rail. There was also a spare grey suit for civic duties, and a variety of garden tools. Newton had donated the tools on his arrival, having found them in the vicarage shed and disliking the toil of horticulture. Tattersfield had certainly been grateful for

the armoury, which had added to an existing, formidable array. Tattersfield had set to work with an extra vigour, trimming the more formal patches of the graveyard, whilst allowing the wilder patches to flourish.

A local needleworker had created a stitched sampler, displayed over the writing desk. It depicted the church standing amongst the fisherman's cottages, with the sea almost lapping at the lychgate. A fishing boat bobbed on the woven blue waves, while a tiny figure waved to the shore. Beneath, the name of the parish was embroidered in a bold gothic script.

Enjoying his tea, Beevers pointed to these details. He always liked to look at the sampler, and reprise his stock remarks. "High tide," he murmured, "or artistic licence. What strange creatures swim in the deep?"

"Only those the Almighty put there," said Edgar. He disliked any implication of the macabre, despite the fictions wrought by his near namesake.

"I hardly meant otherwise," said Beevers. "God's menagerie is a varied one. Remember that giant octopus...?"

"The squid," corrected Edgar.

"Indeed, the *squid*," nodded Beevers. "Washed up on the beach. A gangly great mass, out of its element. It was a legend, once. The Kraken of old!"

"Best not think of it, sir," said Tattersfield, as he filled a solid brown pipe. Once a match had been applied to the shaggy surface, the pipe belched a smoky cloud of almost volcanic

opacity. While Tattersfield was no expert on Theology, he was still a man of faith. He had studied little of the Bible, although the words seeped in through the many readings he listened to or overheard. "Noah saved a fair batch of animals," said Tattersfield. "More than we see round here."

"Mmm," crooned Beevers, as he leant back in the creaky chair. The diagonal struts of the small, leaded windows were black against the pale blue sky. The needlework sky seemed brighter, although a treble clef and marks of musical notation hovered above the church tower. They told of the congregation within.

"It was good of Mrs. Littlejohns to give it," said Beevers. "A shame few ever see her work."

"We enjoy it," said Tattersfield. He offered Edgar a biscuit from the cylindrical pack, which he had bought at a corner shop. The tea brewed in a cosy-clad pot, its wool another example of cottage industry.

"She must miss her husband very much," said Beevers. "Yet she is still a pillar of the parish. I admire that kind of faith."

"Any kind of faith," murmured Tattersfield.

"How do you mean?" inquired Edgar.

Tattersfield had offered the comment, with no thought to its clarification. He found himself suddenly a little self-conscious, as if he was the amateur dunce between two men of learning. "I spoke out of turn," said Tattersfield. "I apologize. I know you have dealt with troubling matters. You cannot endorse every kind of worship."

Edgar appeared a little wistful. The effect was heightened by the pall of pipe smoke, which was not his own creation. But it acted as a veil of separation. "Do not worry, Mr. Tattersfield," he murmured. "I understood the gist of your meaning."

"The decline in the congregation," nodded Beevers. He took a biscuit for himself. "One can only offer the true faith, and hope it will attract the many. The church has its social functions, which enlarge the circle of interest. When it comes to real devotion, we should be thankful for those who seek these portals rather than scornful of those who do not. Take my friend, the Rabbi Mortimer. You would not see him in here. But when it comes to the discussion of Theology, it's hard to prise us apart."

Tattersfield smiled.

"Even so, there are paths it is best not to follow," added Beevers, "and some we certainly *must* not. The question of faith is important. But not faith of any kind..."

\* \* \* \* \*

St. Valentine's Day had recently passed, on the fourteenth day of February. If Paula had received an appropriate card, she had remained silent at the pleasure. At least Duncan had added his own painted heart to the kitchen pinboard. He had given another to a playground friend, although she had not returned the honour.

In the third week of February, the days were noticeably longer than those of the month before. The promise of spring was

apparent, even if its realization was still a matter of faith. A faith of another kind to the church, perhaps, but still a very real concern. The stalks of the daffodils were lengthening in close bunches, with streamlined tips probing the air. These had yet to burst open, to display the familiar flower. Each would have its yellow petals, and a frilled centre like the horn of a musical instrument.

The nocturnal hours had retreated from late afternoon, so the five o'clock sky was a delicate, frosty blue. This granted a little pale daylight to the many who worked through the business day. They would otherwise be denied anything but artificial light, until they rose for work in the morning.

By a quarter to six, the sky had faded to a more intense blue, which remained lighter towards the horizon where the sun had set. There were no clouds on this particular day. Just a graduated shade, which found its deepest tone overhead. The middle tone lay between these relative extremes, and might have been that of a summer's day when viewed through polarizing spectacles, or seen in an underexposed photograph. However, the luminosity was considerably less, while the foreground buildings were rendered in silhouette and speckled with an increasing number of illuminated windows.

The light in the sky diminished as the sun invisibly descended, on its continued drop below the horizon. The air would grow colder, the stars would appear. By half-past six, the evening

would be night in all but name - and the hope of sunshine, late in the day, would still be a latent promise.

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Edgar smiled in gratitude for the dinner he had enjoyed, sitting at the kitchen table. It had been given a cloth for the occasion, and was enlivened by the placing of two stubby candles. Beevers had finished his own some minutes before, as had Paula and her son. Duncan poked at one of the saucers on which the candles glowed, and turned his attention to the box on the counter. "Is it pudding yet?" he asked.

"When we're all ready," said Paula. "How about it, Edgar?"

"I'll have some...presently," replied Edgar, who was unused to such a large plateful.

"We can wait a few moments," said Beevers. He was looking forward to the sponge cake, with a dollop of ice cream.

A clock ticked in the hallway. The case was of natural, unvarnished wood, and hung on the light blue wall as if it were floating in the sky. The shadows of two old men brushed past, on their way upstairs. Edgar led the way, as he had visited the house before. Beevers followed close behind, with a tray of refreshment. There were cups and a warm teapot, insulated with a quilted cosy. A suitable interlude had elapsed after consuming the ice cream, to avoid any tooth-tingling sensations.

Edgar paused by a door on the landing, and turned to his friend. "This door...?"

Beevers nodded. "Please. Open it."

Edgar did, and the pair entered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Of course, Paula had suggested her taste in decor to her Great Uncle. Although he had never declined, she had understood his liking of the current scheme. It had been there when she had bought the house, with Warren, and they had slowly altered the place. This undertaking had received a blow on her husband's death, and the room had never been touched. On his arrival at the house, Beevers had been more than satisfied by the appearance of the room. He preferred the old wallpaper to any fashionable mode, although it seemed a little sombre to Paula. The room was a place to sleep, but also somewhere her uncle could retain his personal trappings.

Beevers had books on Theology and other matters, although little in the way of fiction. There were souvenirs of his clerical days, and framed photographs displaying family members from before either world war. A painting showed a pleasant village, encompassed by the parish boundaries in which Beevers had served his priestly career. There was probably more traffic now, and intrusive road signs. Beevers had seldom returned.

Offering Edgar his easy chair, Beevers sat by his desk. There were piles of old letters, along with fresh correspondence. A wickerwork basket held copies of a newsletter, which Beevers had once produced for his parish.

Shortly, Edgar removed the cosy from the pot and performed the tea-pouring duties. The clear, brown liquid trickled into the cups with a bright, refreshing sound. "Perfect," said Edgar. "A lovely dinner - and the pudding. But a good cup of tea is the most reviving."

"I do agree," said Beevers. "I certainly received plenty when I had the parish. My regulars would always have the kettle on. Some even kept a special cup for me to use."

"That was good of them," remarked Edgar.

"Of course it was," smiled Beevers. "Mind you, I was a little worried. Perhaps they thought I had something contagious!"

Edgar snorted. It was his usual way of expressing merriment, comprised of an imploding laugh. Edgar was never one to show off, or be particularly demonstrative. "You were sorting through the magazines," he said, glancing at the wickerwork basket. Edgar could recall his previous visit, over a year before.

"Ah," sighed Beevers. "*The Parish Gathering*. I was leafing through a couple, the other day. But I still haven't put them in order. Sheer procrastination. There may be one or two missing, I can't be sure. I didn't number the early copies."

"How many were there?"

"I produced about fifty issues. Not always on time, I have to say. Two or three times a year. Sometimes more."

"Have them bound in a book," said Edgar.

"It would be a very fat book," replied Beevers. "Maybe a set of volumes. That would give it the ring of authority. Yes - it's a good idea."

"Might be expensive..." mused Edgar.

"Hmmm. Maybe I should invest in a bookbinding course. I would like some challenge like that."

Edgar nodded. "But there were challenges, in those pages..."

Beevers took a random magazine from the basket, and flipped through the pages. There were twelve or sixteen in each, produced on a range of typewriters ranging from the heavyweight to rickety. "I tell of the challenges, of course - those I was able to tell of - and there's even a crossword puzzle." In an inspired moment, the compiler for this particular issue - a Mr. Lipton - had drawn his squares in the form of the Christian cross. He had worried if the concept was tasteless, and had been pleased by the editor's positive reaction. Others had been less favourable.

"A real brainteaser," said Edgar. He put replaced his cup on the tray, for a moment. Somehow, this small action quickened his friend's attention. Beevers knew Edgar wished to raise more important matters.

"I never mentioned how the Edmondson case turned out," said Edgar. "I remember how curious you were."

"My, yes..." gasped Beevers. "Mr. Barry Edmondson!"

The use of a descriptive term, such as Case or Mystery, was the rather literary habit of his elderly friend. Such words made an unusual circumstance into a definite example, provided the facts were true. "You mentioned him when I last came over," mused Beevers. "The man with the pub."

"That's the one," replied Edgar. "It's not far from the centre of Canterbury. I would have taken you there..."

"I seldom drink," said Beevers. "Jesus may have turned the water into wine, but I would have been happy with a squash."

"I'm sure Mr. Edmondson could supply you with something," smiled Edgar. "However, he is better known for his cask ales. These matters are incidental. Why was he becoming an increasingly nervous man, despite running a popular and respectable establishment in a cathedral city? Why had he even thought to give the business up? I had noticed his quiet manner on a number of visits - and while Mr. Edmondson was never the most outgoing man, I could not gauge why his smile appeared to be a standard mannerism, and why his face often bore a blankness."

"You are right, Edgar," nodded Beevers. "I should have gone to the pub. I relished my week in Canterbury, but did not expect to find work there."

"Neither would I thrust it upon you," said Edgar. He lifted his tea once more, relaxing into the flow of his anecdote. "I sometimes take a whisky in the afternoon, in the lull between lunchtime and evening trade. I enjoy the sunshine, pouring through the old windows and creeping across the wooden tables. Even an

ashtray, so lit, can seem a thing of beauty. For a retired man like myself, it is easy to follow such a schedule - and it gives me a break from the study, where I am otherwise settled and reading. Unless, of course, there are practical matters to attend to."

Beevers found his attention quickening. Practical matters, for Edgar, meant his involvement in happenings that might need an unusual description. Whether a Case, Mystery or Problem, any circumstance that fixed Edgar's attention would be of the most intriguing sort.

"After some thought, I decided to vary my schedule," said Edgar. "The aim was to observe Mr. Edmondson at different times, to see if his moods varied. In order to avoid suspicion, I made a chance remark that my afternoons would be altered, due to some voluntary tasks I was performing in a local hospital. The tasks were completely fictitious. This allowed me to call on the pub one morning, to make my observations. I sat with a coffee for half an hour, but little was gleaned from the visit. A barmaid looked after the customers, while Mr. Edmondson saw to the cellar."

"You tried another time?" asked Beevers.

Edgar hummed quietly, in confirmation. "After concocting another fiction. The early evening brought a different story. Mr. Edmondson was so busy with customers that his strained smile seemed almost genuine. I had drawn up my findings on a spreadsheet, which enabled me to make some deductions. The pub was less busy on a Monday or Tuesday, when Mr. Edmondson appeared at

his lowest. I now concentrated on the later hours, in this early part of the week. Once, I lingered past eleven o'clock, when Mr. Edmondson collected the last few glasses. I could see him visibly shaking."

Beevers furrowed his brow, in deep concentration.

"Then, James, I performed a cruel experiment. When Mr. Edmondson's back was turned to me, I made a low rumbling cough. The effect was extraordinary. His nerves were so shaken, he dropped one of the glasses on the floor. At that point, I blew my cover and asked what was wrong. He locked up the pub, and out came the whole story. He had seen the ghost of a man, sitting at a corner table. It was of a middle-aged man, who had been a regular until his death in a car crash. The figure would appear on a Monday or Tuesday, late in the evening but before the pub was closed. Mr. Edmondson had been watching that night, but seen nothing."

Beevers nodded. "No wonder your cough startled him."

"Mrs. Edmondson gave me tea upstairs, where I explained my interest in supernatural research. They began to see me as a friend. From then on, I was always in the pub on Monday or Tuesday night. Mr. Edmondson became noticeably relaxed, while I kept a vigil near the seats where the ghost was said to appear. As the pub was still open, I was unable to deploy much in the way of equipment but did not wish to draw undue attention to myself. By chance, a couple left the corner before the pub was obliged to close - it must have been five-past eleven - so I was able to test

the temperature with a simple thermometer. I detected a sudden drop, of some ten degrees Fahrenheit. This became an intense cold patch, which needed no instrument to confirm. My attention was diverted by Mr. Edmondson, as I had never seen such a look on his face. His eyes were bulging, and he visibly quivered. 'The man,' he gasped. 'Mr. Bowen. Charlie...'"

Beevers glanced across the room, so vivid was the tale. There was no spectre to be seen, of course.

"I gazed into the corner," said Edgar, "so my eyes swam into a half-focus. There was a faint shadow, suggestive of a man, although I realized Mr. Edmondson could see it more clearly. 'He died,' said Mr. Edmondson. 'He was in a crash. I was going to...speak to him.' I knew what had to occur. I said, 'Please - speak to Mr. Bowen. Tell him what you would have said.'"

All thought of tea had dissipated from Beevers' mind, as he concentrated on Edgar's face. It was hard to believe this rumpled character, in his old jumper and knitted tie, was capable of such incisive action.

"Mr. Edmondson could understand," said Edgar. "He could speak, with me to act as witness. Perhaps it seemed more rational, to have a human ear in addition to a spectral one."

Edgar appeared to enter a mild, trance-like state as he recounted the words of the sorrowful landlord. It was if he was channelling the words, form the ether.

"'Charles,' he said. 'I didn't want to interfere. But you'd had too many. It wasn't safe to let you drive. I was going to let

you sleep in the bar that night. Give you a couple of blankets. But I thought of Liz, coming in the morning. What would she think? The pause was deadly. I got distracted, so when I tried to say something - you'd gone. Please forgive me, Charlie. Please know that I meant to tell you. Don't cast a shadow here, because you loved the pub. Take my friendship with you.' As he spoke, my impression of Mr. Bowen had become more distinct: a thin, placid man in a smart suit, with receding hair and spectacles. Perhaps he was a trader, or local official. Some trouble in his life had made him take more drink than he could handle. But he had always loved Mr. Edmondson and his cheery pub. He had not wished to leave it in a bad spirit, so his soul had lingered in sorrow until these words were spoken. Poor Mr. Edmondson was in tears by then, but I was riveted by the ghost before me. I could see its expression turn to one of relief, before it rose from the chair and faded. I gauged a rapid increase in temperature, and the lifting of an air of depression."

"Has the ghost...ever returned?" asked Beevers.

Edgar shook his head. "I believe it was of an unusual kind. A lingering crisis apparition. Normally, such a ghost vanishes after a few days after appearing to one who is ill or on a deathbed. In this case, only Mr. Edmondson could release the spirit."

"Did he tell you what had happened to Mr. Bowen?"

Edgar sighed. "Most of it, I've told you. The man had problems at work, which inflicted difficulty on his marriage. This

was already under strain due to a family quarrel. Alcohol can allow the mind to relax, and think. But too much..."

Beevers nodded. He could tell what was to come. "The poor man drove his car in an inebriated state..."

"Quietly inebriated," said Edgar. "Mr. Bowen was no drunken lout. He was a placid man, but the road was a blur. He whacked his car into a lamp-post and died at once."

"Horrible," sighed Beevers. He had almost been put off his tea now, although the story had brought a chill to the room. "But at least his soul is at rest, God-willing. I shall say a special prayer tonight."

Edgar nodded sagely. Then he reached for the teapot, as if conversation could now lapse to refreshment. Beevers reached for the fan heater in the corner, and initiated a blast of warmer air.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edgar stayed until the Sunday, sleeping on the sofa downstairs. He enjoyed the church service with Beevers, and a stroll along the seafront towards St. Leonards, while they spoke of many subjects and exchanged simple gossip.

The pair had shared several adventures of a supernatural kind. Beevers had not dealt with the occult for a while now, since the trouble in Bexhill five years before.

Once Edgar had departed on the train, Beevers decided not to hurry back or take another taxi. He began a slow, reflective

stroll through the streets, moving south-east towards the Old Town. The daffodils were yet to blossom in anything that might be called a 'host'. Where there were glimpses of gardens or flowerbeds, flashes of yellow caught the eye as the more adventurous buds split their seams. The early spring flowers added dabs of colour to the gardens, and were a sure sign that life was returning after the long winter.

Perhaps it was his age, or some other foreboding, which had caused Beevers to worry during the winter months. Morgan had been inactive for a number of years, and Beevers had almost forgotten their tense encounters until Edgar had raised the subject. It had been the coastal walk that had prompted him, as they leant on the railings to speak. What had Edgar said? "Do you remember Morgan? We need to keep watch..."

Then the length and importance of the recollection had led them to a cafeteria. Although Beevers was enjoying the freshness of the air, his thoughts were a little troubled. For all his bumbling habits, Edgar's grasp of spiritual evil had a remarkable clarity. That was why Beevers had sought his counsel in the past, when he had tackled a demonologist in his country parish. They had foiled the man together, in disturbing scenes that never made *The Parish Gathering*.

The pair had brought a measure of peace to the sinister practitioner, even if he did not appreciate the fact. Indeed, he had been alarmingly noisy in condemning it. Only the most tactful

manoeuvres had kept the matter quiet, if not totally unknown to the public.

Then Paula's husband had died. Beevers had already left the Parish, and came to Hastings to comfort her. She had offered him a home, with her young son. All should have been well.

The more recent clash with Morgan had been an unpleasant one. Beevers had been forced to act decisively, with the extra burden of age. Even so, his past experience was of benefit, and the knowledge he had gained from his later reading. Helped by Edgar's practical intervention, they had ensured the organizers of the Bexhill Ouija boards had been seriously discouraged.

Morgan's circle had been disbanded, although the man had made some unpleasant threats. The future would be his, screamed Morgan. Nothing had come to pass. Now, half a decade had washed over the incident. It was a chilling anecdote, but nothing more.

There was no love lost between Morgan and Beevers, although this was not a tenable position for a Christian soul. While he was wary of approaching Morgan, Beevers wished to heal the wounds. The retired priest had granted forgiveness to the angry historian, and said prayers in his name. The man had tried to channel tortured souls, and tie them to the living.

Whenever they glimpsed each other in the street, as would happen every month or so, Morgan had not betrayed any particular hostility. His gaze had been bland rather than hostile - and on one such occasion, Beevers could have sworn to a smile. It may have been the smile of one who had genuinely lost, and had the

good grace to realize. Or, taking the more cynical view held by Edgar, it may have been the smile of one who was veiling his intentions. Perhaps Morgan was seeking to mock his rival, in believing true power was his own.

Beevers shivered at the very implication. His dog seemed to detect the unease within, and muzzled closer to his legs.

"Careful, Doris," murmured Beevers, as they paused at a corner.

"Don't trip me over, now..."

The moment served to lift Beevers from his ruminations. He continued at a brisker pace, with a more positive note in his heart. March would arrive in a day or so, bringing the observance of Lent. It was a time of chosen denial, when those of faith could reflect on the meaning of Easter. To Beevers, that was the most wonderful time of year. He loved to celebrate the event of the Lord's resurrection, through both formal service and social occasion.

The Christian faith was paramount to Beevers, and his retirement from the clergy had in no way diminished the fact. If the shadow of Morgan had a positive role, it was to remind Beevers of a greyer palette that defined the darker side. He sought to inspire Paula, Duncan - his wider circle - with values he had come to cherish. It was an amenable task to help those he loved, which demanded a lesser skill. A far harder task lay in helping a troubled soul, and it was a no less valuable one. It was perhaps even more valuable, in preventing anguish and pain.

The sun grew yellow towards late afternoon, with the suggestion of dusk to come. In that moment, Beevers made a new resolution with the fervour of a far younger man. He could recognize the sensation within himself, as when he had taken his Holy Orders.

Beevers had learnt a lesson from Edgar's visit, and the troubling topics he had touched upon. It was wrong to deny a dark side, if a dark side was there, in order to remain in personal comfort. Beevers would open his eyes a little wider, watch a little more closely. If he next saw a matter of disturbance in the parish, however trivial, he would use his best endeavours to heal it. Faith was a life's vocation, even if the clergy was not. Beevers would not be distracted again.

Chapter Eleven

*Witty Company*

TOWARDS THE END OF MARCH, Madeleine's idea of a trip to the south coast was becoming a more attractive prospect. The clocks had been advanced by an hour, stretching daylight into the early evening, and the daffodils had unfurled their yellow, tasselled displays. The days were mild or cool in an unpredictable alternation, so the scarves and mittens of winter had not quite been banished. But the bitter cold and rain was fading, along with a freak flurry of sleet which had appeared early in the month. Most days had the soft, milky light known as cloudy-bright, while blue skies were not unknown.

Roland had been busy finishing a book of critical essays, of which he was a major contributor and principal compiler. It was a project that had concentrated him through the winter, to the point where the regular meetings of the Circle Of Radical Verse had become redundant. They had been suspended by mutual agreement, although the CORV had not been abolished. The group could always meet again, after this period of abeyance, with a renewed energy and vigour.

Madeleine's affection for Roland had been the main outcome - a prospect they enjoyed more easily beyond the strictures of a monthly format. Neither did Roland wish to suppress the tone of his emotions within the restrained expectations of a formal group.

However, the thought of an outing had lingered. Roland would have preferred a smaller version, with him and Madeleine alone...although his desire to please her extended to compliance. So the miserable Poynter had been invited along, as had the friend of the group, Ernest.

The prospect of exertion held Poynter firm in his bed, on the chosen morning of the journey. Although his eyes were closed, he could sense the sunlight edging past the window by the orange glow it created through the flesh of his eyelids. After some time, the clock by the bedside made a bright waking call. The time was earlier than Poynter would have selected, but there was a timetable to the adventure. A careful plan. Poynter opened his eyes.

A taxi took Madeleine and Poynter from their homes in Hampstead, down to Richmond in the south-west of London. The chunky black vehicle deposited them in a fine residential street, on the pavement by Roland's house. His gleaming Bentley stood in the driveway, its dark green lending an extra reflectivity to the immaculate, waxed finish.

Madeleine beheld the scene with delight as she watched the cargo being loaded. The collection of cases and baskets resembled the crates of a ship, reproduced in miniature. Each was placed in the boot of the car by Roland's butler, Horace, who proceeded with his usual surly demeanour.

The activity was overseen, and assisted by, Roland himself. The critic looked up, spotting the newcomers, and strode forward

with a spring in his step. Roland had donned a fresh suit of cream linen, which suggested a boyish explorer or colonial official. Poynter had retained his darker attire.

"Quite a party," said Madeleine, tilting up the brim of her wide straw hat. She had selected a rather rustic mix of long pleated skirt and tweed jacket, although the jewelled details spoke of an urban deliberation.

"Just a few supplies," said Roland, acknowledging Poynter with a brief nod. Poynter had never seen the house in broad daylight, and made a study of the details. This allowed him to escape the eyes of his host, with whom he had engaged on a dreary correspondence not so long ago. The place seemed more expansive in the sun, but correspondingly less private. The shrubbery belied numerous breaks through which the road could be glimpsed, and the gardens of neighbouring homes. Although their houses had an equivalent quality, Poynter would not have switched his residence for this.

"Ernest should be here in a moment," added Roland, glancing at his watch. "We said eleven."

Madeleine began to reply with a murmur, as she glanced at the butler. He was pushing down the lid of the boot. "Is he...?"

Roland understood her meaning. Horace would be a dulling influence on the day. "No. I'll be driving," said Roland. "I'd like to. Ernest can steer."

"Surely the driver's job?" questioned Poynter, turning his gaze away from a brick feature of the garden.

"Of course," smiled Roland, with diffidence. "*Broom, broom!*" He mimed a steering wheel for a moment. "Ernest can steer with a map."

"He'll be in the front, I take it?" asked Madeleine.

"But my dear...how can we be parted?" gasped Roland, placing a gentle arm on her shoulder.

"I believe I may bear it...for a while," smiled Madeleine. "Depending on the fun in store."

"If it's food, we've some excellent rolls," said Roland, "and you won't be short of a drink."

This caused Madeleine to curl an eyebrow, and speak with a note of concern. "You'll be driving," she sighed, strolling to the front of the car where she tapped the elegant fender.

"Needs must," said Roland, "even on a day like this." The increasingly static poise of the butler drew his attention, more than any sudden gesture.

"All is ready, sir," said Horace. "Shall I telephone Mr. Bingham? It would seem he is running behind, sir."

However, Poynter anticipated Roland's next remark by pointing his finger down the driveway. The figure of Ernest had appeared, carrying a canvas bag.

"There's the man!" said Roland. "All set to go." Madeleine crunched back down the gravel, and took the bag. There was a glassy chink from within, suggesting more refreshment.

"Soft drinks," said Ernest, "for Roland."

"I'm an old softy," said Roland.

Madeleine ruffled his hair. "You're *my* old softy."

\* \* \* \* \*

So down they drove in the Bentley that Sunday...Madeleine in the back with Poynter, sipping wine and nibbling a snack; Ernest up front with Roland, desperately trying to navigate with a huge flapping map. There was chatter, there were jokes, although the line was drawn at poetry. Much of the time, Poynter allowed his gaze to drift beyond the crystal clarity of the windows, watching the blur of trees, buildings and countryside as they passed beside the road. The motorway was an ugly strip of modernity that he preferred to ignore, closing his eyes in a half-doze and allowing the chatter of the others to drift among his thoughts. Poynter felt a moment of detachment, not from physical space but his own turmoil. He sensed the glimmer of a lighter mood, an earlier time, before the grasp of his current preoccupations.

The glimmer both enlightened and frightened him. It offered a path beyond his mannered obscurity, which had trapped him in the form of dry, pedantic expression. Could he cope with the sense of release? The lightness, the lack of a duty? Poynter recoiled as he might from an excessively tender touch, which might irritate rather than soothe.

It was a feeling that had come to him before, after Madeleine had telephoned one morning near the end of February. She had reminded him of the possible outing, which had been her idea back

in January. It was incredible how fast the time had flown, with another spring drawing near. Poynter had written little poetry in the intervening time, transferring his attention to the burgeoning collection of books he had increasingly amassed.

While he stopped short of the occult and supernatural, possessing a natural incredulity, Poynter had become evermore absorbed in matters of theology and the esoteric. In particular, he had read of various creeds and belief systems such as the Gnostics, Knights Templar and the Priory de Sion. It was not that he wished to join any such group, or compile a document on their activities. Rather, he felt a growing affinity with their closeness of purpose. Each had a dedication to a cause, which many would deem obscure or elitist.

Of especial interest to Poynter had been the pieces he had read on the Hellfire Club. It had been a group of aristocrats who had met in the eighteenth century to subvert the established order, espousing principles of blasphemy against religion. While they were wilder than his own activities by far, there was a sense of liberation in the knowledge that others had gone before. The sense that anything might be possible.

Even so, such studies were hardly the healthiest of pursuits. Madeleine's telephone call had been a crack of light - or rather, a whisper in the gloom. She was a distraction from his ruminations and, as such, she should have been spurned. Yet there was a vicarious posture in all of this study, which held an element of instability.

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At a deeper inner level, Poynter had welcomed the interruption that Madeleine's contact had brought, the day the telephone had rung. "Laurence...remember that seaside trip?" said Madeleine, in a tone which conveyed an infectious smile. "Let's make it! The weather's getting better. Roland would love a break."

The name Roland had not been so welcome. Poynter recalled how Madeleine had found him attractive, even if the cause had been his poetry. Yet his intensification of the poetry, his further hopes to demonstrate his prowess, had led to an increasing gulf. The wretched CORV and its tiresome anthology had thrown them apart. This thrusting critic of literature, Roland Twine, was the centre of her world.

These thoughts had filled but a second. Poynter was keen to keep his options open, however cynically he might view those options. "It sounds...a possibility," said Poynter. "I have not seen the sea for quite some time."

"The sea...and the coast," replied Madeleine, although she stopped short of her *green velvet hillsides*. "There are towns, castles...we couldn't do it all in a day."

"When will you be going?" asked Poynter.

"Say, a couple of weeks," smiled Madeleine. "I'll have a chat with Roland, see what he thinks. Can I put you down as a 'yes'?"

Nothing was as simple in the world of Laurence Poynter. Each question, each request, had to be considered with a sense of gravity. He had sat in the gazebo once more, to think, with the painted figures dim above his head in a poised echo of vivacity.

Should he call Roland? Confirm the arrangement? Was it really the best thing to do? Poynter's questions seemed to run in a chain. What if he went? Would he like it...or was it a waste of time? If he wanted to go, should he do so...or was work still the vital thing? But surely...surely...it might even be a help.

Poynter marched from the cast-iron gazebo. Its roof was sharp, like a pyramid, and had seemed to focus his thoughts. Avoiding a snail on the pathway, he went on past his cherished rockery, through the tradesmen's entrance and into the house. He blinked inside for a moment, the hallway dim and yellow with net-curtained sunlight. Curling up on a blue velvet stool, Poynter lifted his refurbished Bakelite phone. After the briefest of pauses, he began to dial for Roland.

\* \* \* \* \*

The car was approaching the county of Sussex, on the south coast, when Poynter made one of his few positive contributions to the day. He expressed his boredom at the continuing motorway, which appeared - to him - as a "wretched grey streak." Roland explained he had never fixed the route, and that they might explore the smaller roads. These seemed more befitting the classic car.

Roland was soon driving through the east of the county, amongst the villages past Burgess Hill. Madeleine could sense Roland's pride in the vehicle, for the slower speeds he took in the narrow streets were not purely for reasons of safety. They allowed the car to be admired.

The route led them to the county town of Lewes, where the party took a welcome tea and a stretch of their legs. Poynter glanced up at the castle, and regretted the lack of time to explore. It was the sea that had attracted Madeleine, and the sea thrust the journey forward.

The car passed the looming hump of Mount Caburn, which dominated the village of Glynde, before turning south to follow the River Ouse. This took the party to the port of Newhaven, where they turned east along the coast. The small resort of Seaford rushed past, before the countryside became more remote and unspoilt in character. The area seemed hushed and remote, despite the proximity of large populations. This was the setting that Madeleine had craved to see, and even Poynter felt his spirits rise.

Ernest had indicated Beachy Head as a potential destination, although Roland preferred the concept of an urban tour. Madeleine had been the peacemaker, suggesting an afternoon on the cliff-tops followed by a drive along the coast, perhaps as far as Hastings or Rye. That way, each could see a little of what they fancied. Roland had agreed heartily - although if this was a concession to

his tenderness for Madeleine, rather than an acknowledgement of her wisdom, the truth was hidden with subtlety.

The Bentley turned left as it approached the cottages at Birling Gap. They had once been greater in number, for coastal erosion had claimed several addresses. The car followed the road around the side of a hill, cut in half by the cliff face like an apple sliced in half. It was topped by the stubby Belle Tout lighthouse, which had long been converted to a home. Soon, Roland and his party passed the woodland patch known as the Horseshoe Plantation, coming to life after the winter, and turned left again as the road followed the coast.

The car became an encumbrance on this part of the journey. Madeleine squealed in delight at the rolling downland, which fell away at the very edge of England in the form of a mighty chalk cliff. The land rose to a vista of jagged edges, softened by a hazy sunlight, where the turf conceded to a sudden drop of altitude and the hissing sea below.

"The edge of the world!" gasped Madeleine. Poynter opened his mouth to better the remark, but found that he could not do so.

"Where shall we stop?" she added. Madeleine was keen to step onto the swathe of green, which appeared so tempting past the windows.

"Why - the Head, I suppose," said Roland. "It's not far."

"Then we shall walk," said Madeleine. "We've been cooped up for hours."

"It's too far for me," said Roland. "I want a picnic, not a hike. Didn't bring a Bentley to *hike!*"

"You can start without us," said Madeleine. "Let me off! Come on, Laurence. Let's go for a walk."

"Deserting the ship?" asked Roland, with a tone of mock gruffness.

"We'll see you soon," said Madeleine. She glanced at the strip of green that ran between the road and the edge of the cliff, then urged Ernest to come along. "I bet we need a navigator," she said. "Out in the wilds, all on our own. Roland can stick to the road."

"I think...I wouldn't mind," said Ernest, folding the map.

"Very well," said Roland, slowing the car. "You chaps run along. I'll trundle the next mile or so, meet you up ahead."

Madeleine stepped out of the car, and passed between two wooden posts onto the edge of the grass. She breathed the coastal air in sheer delight, and tugged Poynter to join her. "Ernest?" she inquired, prompting the old man to forsake his loyalty to the vehicle. With a brief nod to Roland, Ernest joined the others on the grass.

"See you later," said Roland. He beeped the car's horn in a short, unnecessary burst before taking the Bentley off along the cliff road. It shrank towards the hazy hillside in the east, alone on the narrow road. The car turned right, and became lost behind a slope of yellow gorse.

The three figures were left alone against the vast backdrop, with the soft blue sky of a spring afternoon casting a pearly light on the downland.

Poynter glanced at a wooden sign, erected nearby. It read 'Cliff Edge', with a black and yellow pictogram depicting a figure falling from the crumbling brink. Poynter turned to Madeleine, but she was already taking long, bold strides towards the edge of the cliff. The turf rose away from the road with a sense of innocent continuity. From this angle, it was hard to believe the land stopped yards away, where the tussled grass met the sky. An occasional seabird sat perched on the brink, oblivious.

Madeleine whirled in glee so her pleated skirt expanded like a wide, twisting fan. Poynter was captivated by the glimmer of the sea, and studied the way the edge dropped in his view as he stepped forwards across the grass, revealing more and more of the salty waters. Even so, the horizon was semi-veiled by a luminescent mist. The sea had a greyish-blue freshness, with a sepia tinge towards the shore as the sand reflected light through the undulating water. The contrast was heightened with delicate foam, as the sea rolled into the shore. Ernest laughed, and opened the bottle of soft drink he had retained for himself.

The beach was a landscape of chalk boulders, compiled from many a cliff-fall. The cliffs were white, yet not in a bland and unfeatured sense. The top few inches were brown earth, like marzipan on a cake, and this had stained the upper portion with occasional streaks above the vastness of the chalk below.

Poynter joined Madeleine near the edge of the cliff, after proceeding at his own restrained pace. She looked at him, and the sun painted a yellow arc around the rosiness of her cheeks. Her face became a delicate lilac in the shadow, as her skin was tinged with the colour of cool, reflected light. The sash tied to her straw hat fluttered lightly, defining the gentle breeze.

"I'm so glad you came, Laurence," said Madeleine. "I hope you're enjoying the day."

Poynter took a deep breath of the clear, fresh air and nodded. "I was ambivalent," he said. "I was...fighting different aspects of myself. But I think...a change of sensation was required. I think..."

At this, Poynter's words began to falter. He found himself distracted from the moment, surprised at his own hesitancy and - correspondingly - unable to deal with it. Poynter felt an unusual sensation. It was a throbbing of his temples, a tingle in his eyes.

Poynter placed a hand over his face, as if dazzled by the glare of sunlight - but he knew the manoeuvre would not have fooled Madeleine. He glimpsed the look of concern on her face as he turned away for a moment, sagging slightly, groping for a handkerchief to wipe his eye. Madeleine gripped him gently by the shoulder, astonished and concerned, while Ernest watched their silhouettes from a distance. He judged the unusual nature of the postures he could see, and came running at a clumsy but exertive rate.

"Hey, there...is the young man all right?" asked Ernest. "He hasn't got a touch of vertigo?"

Madeleine smiled at him. "Yes. Maybe," she said, knowing this was not the truth. "*Laurence,*" she whispered, edging him further back from the edge of the cliff. Madeleine nudged Poynter ever so slightly, so the move became his own. Poynter sank down to the grass, with his legs sprawled before him, dabbing his brow with the handkerchief as he registered the proximity of Ernest.

The older man offered Poynter the bottle, which Madeleine edged to the younger man's lips. It was a carbonated fruit drink, which he would usually have reviled. Its spontaneous tang of flavour settled his nerves for now.

"That's it. Take the lot," said Ernest, glancing back at the girl. "You were right. Cooped up for hours, it's bound to get a man down."

While Madeleine agreed with Ernest, she knew - in the case of Poynter - that travel sickness wasn't the cause. She nodded a silent reply. "Come on, Laurence. Are you feeling better?" she asked. "Take my arm. We've still got to catch up with Roland." Poynter began to shift his weight, beginning his effort to stand.

"Look, perhaps I can run ahead," said Ernest. "Flag down the car..."

Madeleine smiled at the nobility of the suggestion. The Bentley had long vanished along the undulating coast. She had noticed Ernest's breathless attempt at running, despite her other preoccupations. He could hardly go sprinting any further.

"That's a very kind offer," said Madeleine, "but I don't think it will be necessary. Can you stand up now, Laurence?"

Poynter replied with a grunt, and eased himself up with the assistance of Madeleine. He offered Ernest the half-finished pop bottle, which the older man took without comment. "Made a fool of myself," said Poynter.

"Of course not," said Ernest.

"You just went a little tizzy," said Madeleine. "Can you walk? I'll hold your arm."

Ernest stepped forward. "Perhaps I can...?"

"No. We'll be all right," smiled Madeleine, with a bright but firm diplomacy. "Don't let us hamper you, Ernest," she added. "I think Laurence would like to walk a little slowly. In fact, it would be a great if you yomped along a bit. Tell Roland why we've taken so long."

"Yes!" said Ernest, grasping the plan. "He could drive back, he could fetch you..."

"Please," said Madeleine. "No. Ask him to lie out the picnic, if he hasn't already. We'll be there before long."

"Right," nodded Ernest. He turned around and hustled along the rising grassland. His figure quickly became a silhouette upon the pale blue sky, and dropped out of sight as he moved on the higher level.

Despite the words she had said to Ernest, Madeleine knew that Poynter was not likely to be slow in his movements. He had a longer stride than she, and would be less likely to dawdle over

the delights of nature. Madeleine had decided to sacrifice botanical diversions in the service of friendship. She nudged Poynter along the route that Ernest was following, at a much faster rate. They rose to the top of the slope, discovering a zigzag of cliff edge along a slowly rising plain. Then she began the conversation she knew he wanted, but found impossible to begin.

"We cannot always find the words," said Madeleine. It was the paradox of this statement that it explained the way they felt.

Poynter nodded. "It can be difficult. A change of habit," he said. "When one has such a fixed regime. A sense of purpose. It was a sudden...flash of difference."

"We all need a change," said Madeleine. "We all have many moods. Sometimes there is difference within us. At other times...we look beyond." It was never the habit of the two poets to state a point in any but circular terms. However, the circles could turn to inward spirals as the centre of truth was revealed.

"I'm glad I came today, Madeleine," said Poynter. "I'm sorry about the embarrassing performance." As if to confirm this poor verdict of himself, Poynter tugged his arm away. Madeleine, however, caught hold of his wrist and cupped his hand in hers.

"I believe we understand each other," she said. "There is no need to speak directly, if it hurts you."

"I try to find the truth, in my words," said Poynter.

"But our work is our words," said Madeleine, "and we cannot work all the time. Laurence..."

Poynter ceased his progress along the cliff-top, and looked at the girl directly. She was a step ahead, and turned to glance back at him. Poynter's face was level with the Belle Tout lighthouse, now receding into the west. She could see the curve of the road they had followed, around the north-east of the hill. There was a quizzical hardness in Madeleine's face, which he could not elude.

"I haven't always said it," said Poynter. "But I'm glad to have you, as a friend."

Madeleine nodded. "We'll always be friends," she murmured.

"I didn't expect...things to be the way they are," said Poynter. "The Circle Of Radical Verse."

"It has been a fascinating year," said Madeleine. She eased Poynter on his way.

"I don't know...what to make of Roland," said Poynter. "We haven't seen eye-to-eye."

"He respects you," said Madeleine. "He's told me."

"We share certain tastes," said Poynter. "Certain friends."

They walked on together, silent for a minute or so, as Poynter's words hung in the air. The next brink fell away, revealing an expansive view into a dip of land. There was a craggy stretch of cliffs, rising ahead with a rough majesty. The top of Beachy Head lighthouse peeped above the grassy edge nearby, displaying its red and white candy stripes.

A man in a blue jumper jogged past, alarmingly near the edge. Madeleine waited till he was out of earshot, although he had paid

no attention to the pair. Madeleine sensed it was better to state her case simply, in this moment of isolated peace. It would never be easy, otherwise. It wasn't very easy now.

"The way Roland is to me...as a friend," said Madeleine, as they began the downward slope, "is the way...you were a friend to me. At least, I thought so. I hoped it might...become so."

Madeleine began to sniffle very slightly, and found a tissue in the pocket of her tweed jacket.

Poynter nodded slowly, allowing the information to penetrate his mind. "Yes. I see that now," he intoned. "You...hoped I was a friend of yours...in the way that - he - is now. I've always thought of you as a friend, but...nothing more."

They paused at the bottom of the dip, so the lighthouse was hidden again. Rabbit holes broke up the turf near the edge, and bushes distracted from the starkness.

"Another poet," said Madeleine, dabbing her eyes.

"It was...difficult to grasp the situation," said Poynter. "Perhaps I should have...given it more time."

"We all need time," sniffled Madeleine. The hiss of the sea was constant. Low, and almost subliminal. It began to blend with Madeleine's tears. However, Poynter could tell the difference.

"My dear - it seems you have caught a chill from that salty air," said Poynter. He was keen to avoid another scene. "Maybe we should step a little inland."

"Oh, Laurence!" groaned Madeleine, burying her face in the tissue. Poynter stood stiff, dithering in the moment of crisis. He

glanced ahead for Ernest, but the hiking bachelor had long vanished. There was just another slope of grass, rising ahead.

"Madeleine," said Poynter, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I mean...Roland is a friend of yours, and...I'm a friend as well. I'm a friend...in a different way."

Madeleine nodded, as she wiped her eyes.

"We'll always be friends," said Poynter. "We have our poetry. It brought us together."

"And it...took us apart," gasped Madeleine.

"Yes," said Poynter, uneasy again. He glanced towards the pale horizon, almost lost in the glare of a blended sea and sky. The light filled his spectacle lenses with reflection, so they shone with the sheen of an optical instrument.

"I shall take these feelings onboard," said Poynter. "Perhaps there's a poem to be written. Maybe we can...understand things."

"We always understand," murmured Madeleine. "But do we ever feel?"

There was little to say after that. Poynter offered Madeleine his hand, and they continued up the slope ahead. The couple shared only pleasantries and observations on nature, which - although distracting from inner trauma - equally served to avoid its resolution.

Chapter Twelve

*So Much Promise*

Roland was already enjoying a bulging roll by the time he was joined by Ernest. They were both enjoying cake when they spotted their companions, moving with some space between each other. Madeleine would occasionally pause at a specimen of botany, while Poynter glanced at the hills and sea. Roland was unaware of their previous discussion - but it was clear the introspections had passed, and the walk had become recreational.

Beyond, the stubby tower of Belle Tout Lighthouse overlooked the scene, from its precarious position by the edge of the chalk. So precarious, indeed, that a complex operation had moved it back some years before. Even so, no light shone there now. It was a home for someone, away from the crowds, even if it possessed a perilous future. The sea, so it was said, would one day reclaim these entire cliffs, and etch its way further into the land.

At some point, the proximity between the poets and the critic became so that Roland felt compelled to acknowledge the return of the others. He stood and waved somewhat mechanically, as if directing an incoming aircraft. The glass in his hand sparkled like a heliograph. It held nothing but lemonade.

"Here they come," said Roland. "Better unpack the picnic."

"The stuff we haven't eaten!" said Ernest.

"There's plenty of food," said Roland, with mild irritation.

Madeleine approached the picnic across the undulating plain, upon the top of Beachy Head. The grass caught the light here, in a rippling texture of lime green and yellow. The grassland upon the further cliffs was less luminous - diffused by distance - but was modelled by the light in a subtle chiaroscuro.

Roland had chosen a place a little below the summit, where a plaque, benches and observational telescope attracted groups of visitors. There was also a pub and countryside centre, a hundred yards or so to the east, although he had no plans to visit either. As far as Roland was concerned, the sooner his little bandwagon left for urban climes, the better.

There was a trick of perspective as Madeleine moved up the slope. Suddenly, she loomed large against the vista behind her. Poynter was still a dark and ambling figure, edging above the cliffs. He became dwarfed by the marching girl from Roland's point of view, while her skirt billowed to block him from sight. It was an effect similar to a monster film, where a giant creature rears up above tiny people. Poynter had no idea of the illusion - but the effect was not lost on Roland, who had seen several such films in his youth. Perhaps the relative sizes were indicative of the relative value he placed on the Hampstead poets.

"Breathless!" gasped Madeleine. "Here's the reward." She kissed Roland gently, before flopping onto the grass.

"Pork pie, my dear?" asked Roland.

"I think...a cheese salad roll," said Madeleine. "With pickle."

"We've got pickle," said Ernest. "We've got plenty of pickle. Why not a drop of wine?"

"Yes, please," smiled Madeleine. "Oh - what about Roland?"

Ernest knew what she meant. "Don't want to prang the motor over the cliff."

"Go ahead," said Roland, easing himself back into a sitting position. "I'll have a glass, it won't do any harm." He opened another basket, with several bottles within.

Ernest squinted into the glare of the late afternoon sun, watching Poynter's gradual approach. "Walk do you good, then?" he asked. "Loosened me up!" Ernest jiggled his limbs.

Roland arranged three glasses on the bright cotton cloth, which defined the territory of the picnic. He did this with great precision, as if aligning them for display.

"Make it four," said Madeleine, glancing towards Poynter. He was now rising close against the sky, although there was no-one behind him to dwarf.

"Another glass," said Roland, adding one to the other three with a decided lapse in his enthusiasm. Ernest removed the corkscrew from the basket, and set to work on a bottle.

As Poynter approached the picnic, it offered a welcoming scene. The crockery reflected the sunlight in its pale blue glaze, topped by the coloured speckles of food. He could see Madeleine smiling in his direction, although Ernest was distracted and Roland's back was turned. For no reason he could determine, Poynter sensed a slight hostility in that posture. Perhaps a

stiffness in the shoulders, a lack of gestures or glances. Roland was steadying the glasses on the uneven surface, waiting to be filled.

"I've made it," said Poynter, with a rare lightness. He adjusted his spectacles, and sat carefully on a corner of the cloth.

"We'll soon revive you," said Madeleine. "Which first, the food or the drink?"

"The drink would be a stimulation."

The cork rewarded Ernest's efforts by popping from the green glass bottle. Ernest lent forward and poured the first glass of wine, rich and red in the sun.

"Madeleine," said Roland, releasing his grip on the glass. This prompted Madeleine to take hers. He steadied the remaining trio of glasses as Ernest poured more.

"Thank you," said Poynter, taking the next. Ernest filled the remaining two without interval, and they were taken by Roland and himself.

"There's still more," said Ernest, holding the bottle against the sky. He brought one eye close to the curved surface, and squinted through the liquid. The clouds seemed green and distorted, like the clouds of an alien world.

Madeleine regarded the bottle for a moment, becoming rather wistful as she sipped her wine. "I've always felt it sad," she remarked. "A little poignant...when a bottle of wine is empty. It has so much promise, with its cork and label. A source of

pleasure. A companion. Until the wine is poured, and its job is done. We have nothing but an empty vessel. It is no longer the object of desire, but an unwanted object to be cast aside."

Roland snorted, almost spilling a drop. "You are needlessly sentimental," he said. "A bottle is just a bottle. It's nothing when the job is done."

"But it has character, in a way..." mused Madeleine.

"Then why don't you drink it?" said Roland, with a stern edge to his voice. Madeleine was a little taken aback, but the rebuke had been a mild one. Roland drank his wine at a fast, refreshing pace, while Madeleine furrowed her brow before sipping her own.

Soon, laughter and chatter were drifting from the picnic, across the rippling grass. To any who might observe from a distance, it would have conveyed the sense of seamless friendship. But it was Roland who did most of the talking. His tales of other literary types and their foibles were most entertaining, and caused universal merriment. The fellow poet, Douglas, was the focus of easy satire. So was the inimitable media figure, William Gloverman, and his positions on every ludicrous board.

"A group of us met, some years ago," said Roland, "in a London restaurant. Can never remember the place! That was when I suggested the idea of an English Critical Club, where our sort might talk away from the artistic types. We didn't want them knowing our plans, and trying to out-fox us! Of course, William and I were often at loggerheads. I've always trusted my own aesthetics, and was quite happy with a social gathering. I put it

crudely, but William wanted something different. He wanted us to compare notes! He thought we could set a better standard, for the artistic bunch to aspire to. The very real arbiters of taste! I said, 'No.' So did Gerald. Even Roger remained cautious. So William goes off in a great big sulk, and before we know it...I'm top of the agenda at another meeting, of the British Arts Discussion Board!"

There were amusing points, most certainly. But the tales were quietly domineering and boisterous in their flow, ensuring no other topic was broached or insights found. Roland had taken his urbanity to this coastal setting, and would not let it falter. Poynter could tell what was going on. Roland was saying, in his own way, who was boss. This applied not only to the outing, but Madeleine herself.

After some time, Poynter stood and wandered away from the picnic. He walked as he had after stepping from the car - but having given vent to his emotion, Poynter was able to view his surroundings in an objective way. The cliff was at its highest here, on Beachy Head. The edge was a little uneven, and trimmed by tufty wildflowers where turf gave way to the drop below. The earth had been eroded into broken layers, with gravel in the hollows. Grass continued to grow on the upper portions of cliff, although perspective rendered the sheer drop invisible.

The Beachy Head Lighthouse was neatly framed by the shadowed edge of chalk. It sat almost in silhouette upon a shimmering ribbon of light, cast by the sun's reflection as it moved west

through the afternoon. A sandbank split the sea in a two-tone effect, so the closer part had a lighter, greenish quality before the slate blue of more distant waters. Poynter breathed deeply, taking in the maximum air. The peace of the atmosphere.

Poynter knew how poetry might be inspired by nature, for there were many great examples preceding Madeleine Quinn. Poynter knew the view before him was inspiring, but his sense of creativity was at odds with a common admiration. While Poynter could see the beauty of the sea and the soaring cliffs, which held the land aloft, he was more empowered by his understanding of its potential bleakness.

Despite the warmth of the afternoon, Poynter knew the sea was cool and deceptively smooth. It could drown a man, or an entire ship. The soft grass ended at the edge of the chalk, where a step forward would bring death with little delay.

As he stood there, Poynter held his life in the balance. It would be so easy to end it all.

The increased giggling and nudging between Roland and Madeleine had urged Ernest to follow Poynter. He felt like a guest lingering at a private encounter, between a couple too polite to express their wish but who conveyed the meaning he should go. As Ernest strolled away from the picnic, his mood remained amiable enough. However, he understood how Poynter must have felt during his moment of turmoil. Ernest had given it some thought during his solo walk along the cliff-top, but without any further conclusion.

The sun cast their shadows away from the cliff, and to the side, so Poynter had no clue as to Ernest's approach. He was a little startled by Ernest's cough, which the older man had contrived to alert him. It was lucky Poynter had been no closer to the edge - for as it was, just a couple of strides would have taken him to oblivion.

"I thought I'd leave them alone for a while," said Ernest, glancing back at the picnic. The couple were in each other's arms, rolling gently on the grass. Ernest was relieved that Poynter did not glance back. He continued staring at the waves.

"Watch this!" said Ernest, with a schoolboy grin. He held the empty wine bottle lightly by the neck, and swung it gently towards the sea. "Goodbye, world!" he chuckled, releasing the bottle. It curled away from his hand, and vanished behind the brink of cliff. There was a moment of quiet, followed by a sudden tinkle as the bottle grazed the chalk. The remaining nip of wine dashed a blood-like smear upon the cliff, although it was impossible to see from above.

Ernest snorted. He glanced back at Poynter, but was disappointed to see the younger man was paying no attention. Poynter gazed at the sea for a few more seconds, before turning away from the edge. He began to walk in his stiff but unhurried manner, away from the rest of the group.

Ernest clucked his tongue, a touch bemused, before basking in the view. He glanced west, towards the jagged cliff from where Madeleine and Poynter had emerged, and the higher mound to the

right. This was topped by Belle Tout Lighthouse, which resembled a small castle from this distance. Beyond, the cliffs of the Seven Sisters curled round to enclose a patch of pale blue water, while Seaford Head offered the most distant promontory before the coast was lost in a distant haze. Ovular clouds sat above the scene, lazy and still, as if scudding was too much effort. More rarefied strata spread high above, cool and diffused.

The journey we have come on, thought Ernest. And here we are, for this moment, before moving on. His eyes swept north, across the grazed fields inland. The plain of green was broken only by a few hedgerows and farm buildings. How I would like to stay here, thought Ernest. Alas, the party would soon move on.

A chill ran through Ernest. The rivalry between Poynter and Roland had not been tempered. They had brought a psychological tension to this, a most vivid and carefree place. It was no place for prejudices, but a place to...be.

For all his verbal dexterity, Roland was blind to the world around him. It might have been the scenic backdrop of some tiresome play, with he the arrogant star. Poynter had responded to his environment, perhaps, but sought to overlay its influence with a mannered, poetic obsession.

Roland was smiling, but there was a coldness in his eyes. Poynter appeared sombre, but there was a lighter spark within. Madeleine had hoped to awaken it, but her efforts had been quelled.

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After giving in to Madeleine's desire, it was time for Roland's part of the day. It was a shorter session than he had expected, given the extended walk the others had engaged on. Passing Eastbourne, the party drove along to Bexhill-On-Sea, where they enjoyed the splendid De La Warr Pavilion. It was a sleek modernist structure in an otherwise traditional resort, which complemented the panoramic beach.

As sunset turned the colour of Turkish delight, the car drifted into Hastings for a final slap-up meal. Roland parked in a side street, in the west of the town, where it merged with the district of St. Leonards. They found a restaurant after some meandering, and settled for a long session. Any thoughts of sightseeing were lost in the starters, main courses and deserts.

"Any more...inspiration?" asked Ernest.

"I'm stuffed," groaned Madeleine, with a smile nonetheless. It was obviously a groan of pleasure.

"The pudding was excessive," confirmed Roland. Even so, its consumption had not been compulsory.

"Pleasantly so," added Ernest.

"You take pleasure in excess?" queried Madeleine.

"You ate it all," said Ernest.

"True," said Roland.

"Wolfed it," added Madeleine, giggling.

Roland seemed ready to concede the point. "Hmm. Greedy little pigs are we."

"Snouts in the trough, eh?" nodded Ernest.

"Oink!" Madeleine made the noise, not the word. She was becoming a little tipsy.

"Don't fancy pigswill," mused Ernest.

"Pigs don't have a choice," murmured Roland.

Ernest agreed. "Just eat..."

"...and be thankful," said Roland. He was pleased to be the host once more, confirmed in his superior position.

"Do they serve...gourmet pigswill?" asked Madeleine.

"Only for gourmet pigs," said Roland.

Ernest peered at the last inch of wine in the last bottle. "Just a dribble," he said. "Split it four ways?"

"Three. I'm the driver," said Roland. "Woozy as it is."

"Bentley's lasted years!" said Ernest. "Fate won't scratch her tonight." His eyes fell upon the silent sitter. "Laurence?"

"Very quiet," said Madeleine.

"Had a good day?" asked Roland, in a mannered tone. "Any more...inspiration?"

"Perhaps," nodded Poynter.

Madeleine smiled. "I'm glad!"

"Pickle your fellows in prose?" snorted Ernest. "Tell the tale. An adventure!"

"A racy yarn," said Roland, playing for more attention.

"'Along the coast they came, that madcap band. Pub stops, café

stops...a wonderful day by the sea.'" This was the day, as Roland would have wished it. But Madeleine was more than satisfied, which pleased him despite her diversions.

Poynter felt he should be more specific. Clarify the situation. "Poetry," he said.

"An album of seaside ballads?" pressed Ernest.

"Not quite," said Poynter, almost amused.

Madeleine sensed the slight tension in the air, despite her dizzy head. "Laurence," she said under her breath.

Then Poynter had an idea. It was something that had occurred to him earlier, up on the cliff, but became a definite course of action. It was time to make a move for a change, and put Roland in his place.

Poynter addressed the girl as if the others were mere spectators, irrelevant to his prime motive. "You were right, Madeleine," he said. "I was becoming embroiled in my labours. My poetry. I mistook personal confusion for the angst of creation. I had lost the clarity of vision. The cool, perceptive eye. It would be good to stay awhile. To become...refreshed."

Poynter revealed his wallet like a pack of cards. He had no trick, but he had a trump. "I'd be happy to settle the bill."

"Gosh, Laurence," said Madeleine.

Roland was taken aback, much to Poynter's delight. "My friend, no," he said, waving a hand. But there was a faltering tone in his voice. "I say, that's not part of the deal," added Roland. "Must be a hundred pounds..."

"No matter," replied the poet. "Clarity of vision is priceless. I regard this as an investment."

It was worth the money to see Roland's face twitching, as a rival had outshone him for once. It confirmed Poynter's suspicion about Roland's game, with its constant play for status. It also confirmed the decision that lay before him, however odd it might seem.

Ernest had missed the drift of the conversation, in his careful division of the wine. But he noticed Poynter's money and sensed the bill was due. "We're off?" asked Ernest, with a blunt simplicity.

"Can't stay all night," said Madeleine.

"Indeed," said Roland.

"Maybe," said Poynter. "Or maybe not." This left the group a little puzzled.

"What do you mean?" asked Roland.

"A hotel...?" inquired Madeleine.

"It doesn't matter," said Poynter. "But I shall not be returning tonight." Poynter caught the eye of a passing waitress, who nodded. She moved to fetch the bill.

"I live in grandeur," said Poynter, "but I need a change. I need to see another side."

"Pah!" spat Roland.

"Don't worry, Madeleine," said Poynter. "I'll send you a postcard. Perhaps I'll write it in verse."

Poynter stood silent on the pavement as the Bentley began to chug. Madeleine's wave tempted him to lapse in his decision. But he knew a train of thought had begun, and it could not be resolved otherwise.

Poynter huddled deep in his long black coat as the car manoeuvred away from the pavement. There was a rumble of wheels on the tarmac, and the Bentley vanished into the night.

Madeleine felt alone in the back of the car, as Ernest engaged on some languorous anecdote. She felt a continual fidgeting sensation, and often glanced back through the window. The streets and buildings were different as they cruised along the coast, heading for the road to London and home. At no point did Roland hesitate in his progress. Perhaps he was guilty at accepting Poynter's word, and suppressing all hesitation.

Should they stop, turn back, see if he was there? It still wasn't too late. But Madeleine was unable to justify any objection, which could only sour the mood. Poynter had made his decision. He had the money to fend for himself. Shaking the worry from her mind, Madeleine slumped across the empty seat and fell into a doze.

The car diminished along the coastal road, alone and stately in the night. Its sound tapered to a distant hum, lost beneath the hiss of the sea. Its lights became diminishing sparks before the vehicle turned a corner and these, too, were gone.

Chapter Thirteen

*A Troubled Soul*

JAMES AMERY-BEEVERS had no use for alarm clocks. He never rose at a fixed, precise hour...it merely depended upon the weather. Rain might patter on his window, loud and drumming, yet it would not be enough to wake him. Thunder might crash all around, vibrating the very foundations, and Beevers would barely stir. But the tiniest hint of sunlight, of warmth - as on this bright spring morning - would raise him keen and early like a bugle call.

He made a strong pot of tea in the kitchen, where Doris the dog was a nuisance till she was dutifully fed. "Take you out later," said Beevers, patting the animal into patient subservience. Then he opened the morning paper, rustling the broad pages in his quest for understanding.

Beevers had a particularly vivid set of facial mannerisms, swinging from the brooding frown to a jovial benevolence. This tendency was much in evidence as he read the paper, reacting to world news, home news and the cartoon strips.

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As Poynter awoke, he was mystified by the sight of fishing boats. They had been hauled up onto a shingle beach, with men in oilskins bustling with ropes and baskets. The scene had a misty quality,

distant and still, behind a glaze of reflection. It was framed by strips of tatty wood, covered with a flaking gold finish.

Poynter began to remember the events of the night before. He had found a guest house, entered, booked in. So what had happened before? Something about a car, a meal and a cliff-top. Then a lighthouse, a picnic. *Madeleine*.

The sleepers which blurred Poynter's vision softened the four corners of the room, further diffusing the effects of the morning sun as it fell through the net curtain. As Poynter listened, he could hear the distant cry of seagulls. He was still on the coast, in Hastings. *Madeleine* was back in London, with the others.

Before long, Poynter was taking breakfast in the dining room, along with another guest. The strains of local radio drifted from the kitchen, and Mrs. Hargreaves arrived with slices of toast. "There you are," she smiled.

"Thank you," said Poynter. He had chosen a cooked breakfast of sausages and beans. While it was crude beside his usual croissants, his body was grateful of the steaming plate. The sea air had made him hungry.

"Good stuff!" chortled the man beside him, waving a sausage on a fork. Poynter nodded.

"Good stuff," repeated the man, more calmly. He returned to his food with no further word.

Poynter explored the seafront as a traveller might when landing from another world. He walked at a solemn pace, gazing blankly at the various attractions. There was a crazy golf course

with its miniature obstacles, such as a lighthouse and spinning windmill. The boating lake had been occupied by a colony of seagulls, including the central islands with their undulating flags. The gulls bobbed and dipped as if it were a nature reserve, while the boaters pedalled around. A mutiny aboard one vessel caused distress to the attendant. His cry of recall only resulted in rebellious laughter.

Poynter reached the bleeps and whirrs of more noisy pastimes. The go-karts and roundabouts of a little fairground, for both junior and older passengers. There was even a ghost train with crudely painted ghouls, built to mimic the traditional fishing huts.

Poynter moved nearer the shore, and walked back along a path between pebbles and grass. His eyes looked past the green-tinged domes of the De Luxe Leisure Centre, up to the strange humped bulk of West Hill that loomed ominously behind the façades. Seagulls twisted before its rocky brown sides, which rose in slab-like layers patched with bushes and scrub. The splinters of Hastings Castle were visible at the top. Such height! It was inviting. A post from which to observe.

Poynter crossed the coast road with its busy traffic, and entered the pedestrianized George Street of the Old Town. This was far more to his liking. The brick-paved thoroughfare was lined with taverns, antique shops, picture galleries and restaurants. He paused to look in one particular establishment, with a distinctly esoteric flavour. Its windows were filled with statues of African

and Asian origin, some bronze, some wooden or earthenware. Most depicted gods like Ganesha and Kali, and Poynter sensed a poetic potential.

As he craned forwards to study their detailed surfaces, Poynter heard the sound of a tinny brass band behind him. Distracted, he turned to see an old man waddle past. He had a khaki cap low over his eyes, and flared navy-blue trousers that flapped as he walked. The man was carrying a tiny ghetto blaster, which blasted his favourite martial music to all and sundry. He remained oblivious to ridicule and disapproval.

It was time for the castle, thought Poynter. He steeled himself for the minor climb with lunch and a pot of Earl Grey tea. Leaving the pleasant cafeteria in which he had considered the prospect, Poynter wandered into a network of rising twittens.

Poynter spurned the West Hill Lift, which would have saved him considerable effort. The whole point of the trip, he remembered, was to loosen his sedentary ways. Poynter had never wholly accepted the agenda put by Roland and Madeleine as to the outing's justification, but his mind was clearing with a dose of sea air.

Not that light verse was his ultimate aim. Far from it. The conceptual glimmers he'd experienced on Beachy Head had remained in his subconscious mind, and would mature in their final execution. Poynter recognized how these glimmers would be best nurtured through experience. If this meant a little discomfort, so be it.

There were steps, and pathways with banisters, which led up from the terraced streets. It was hardly a difficult ascent - although Poynter plodded like a retired colonel, a breeze tugging at his jacket. He soon reached a wide and windswept field, where the path led to a tourist café. The building also housed the upper station of the lift.

Poynter walked a little higher, to the brink of the cliff. The grass ended where the sandstone spurs jutted above the rooftops. There were angular chunks below him, in eroded formations. The seagulls had previously been confetti against the backdrop, but they now swooped bold, cheeky and fast. Poynter ducked wildly, unaccustomed to nature in the raw. The view wavered for a moment like a lantern-slide. The poet staggered, then toppled to the ground.

The gulls seemed to screech in amusement, as their grey shadows raced across the geological shapes.

Unhurt - but feeling rather foolish - Poynter was embarrassed to see a figure watching from some yards away. It waved, yelled and approached. The figure's dog was the first to arrive, licking Poynter as he clambered to his feet.

"That was a nasty tumble," said Beevers, smiling as he frowned. This had become his trademark in semi-comic situations.

"Oh, it might have been worse," replied Poynter. "These birds! Surely they'll crash before long."

"They're aerobatic experts," said Beevers. "Doris - here!" The dog came loping to heel.

Poynter brushed some strands of grass from his sober, dignified clothing. It was hardly made for such slapstick. His spectacles had become a little dislodged, and he straightened them with a decisive gesture. Their lenses reflected the sky a moment, so his eyes glazed over with a milky light.

Beevers glanced beyond the streets of Hastings to the lapping waters of the English Channel, stretching to a hazy horizon. Taking a moment to collect his thoughts, he turned to the stranger once more.

"It must be...incredible when it's foggy," said Poynter, regarding the view below. "This hill...it would be an island, floating over the town. Roofs lost in the clouds..."

"I've seen it like that," warned Beevers. "Most treacherous! I hope you'd take every precaution should the situation arise. You'd not wish to repeat your topple - and next time, over the edge!"

Poynter's lips tightened. What should he make of this odd companion, with such eager concern for his welfare? "I do not fear the elements," he told Beevers. "A slight turbulence in the weather appeals to me. It has power. Mystery. Especially with no-one around."

Poynter gave Doris a gingerly pat on the back, and decided to tell the truth. "I regard myself...as an outsider," he intoned, his long face rigid as he spoke. "One who appreciates...a certain bleakness? It requires a level of solitude."

Was this a veiled request he should go, wondered Beevers. If so, then perhaps he should stay. He had met all types on the hill and often fell into conversation. Beevers missed speaking to all and sundry since his retirement from the church, whether in the coffee morning or confessional.

Perhaps the youngster might be thinking of jumping. Beevers had to set his own mind at rest. "I wouldn't call this a lonely spot," he said. A smile tried to lighten the mood. "Oh, we still have this varied spring weather to contend with, but in summer? It's a very different scene. Kids, kites...and more dogs than Doris!"

Poynter's face was unchanged. "One can be lonely anywhere, er...?"

"James," said Beevers. 'Mr. Amery-Beevers' was a mouthful, and the fellow needed a friend.

"Indeed," replied Poynter. "Anywhere...and cities are more lonely by far. A brash, modern form of loneliness to which I have never aspired."

Beevers was taken aback. "Aspired?"

"My emotional tastes tend to the dark chocolate rather than, let us say, the fruity pastille." Poynter fumbled in his pocket, offering Beevers a chunk.

"God's air is my confectionery," said Beevers.

They descended an ambling path, which curved to a wide ledge some twenty feet below. It was a shallow basin grown with scrubby grass, the sides blotting all sight of the town. Apart from the

sounds drifting from the playgrounds beneath, it evoked the remotest wilderness.

Close-up, the sandstone's colouration was more distinct: yellowish grey striped by orange-brown, the pattern created in various layers of orange sediment. Generations had tried to gain a little immortality by inscribing initials onto the soft rock. In places, the sheer amount of graffiti made a strange effect. So many names, so many words and letters scratched on the crumbling surface that they became an abstract design. They crossed many times into a knobbled, geometric texture like designs on an Aztec construction.

Poynter held a palm over one of his spectacle lenses, gazing with the other eye. The cliff seemed vast and towering with his vision so impaired - until a seagull shadow gave the clue to its true proportion.

"A stark but inspiring place," said Poynter. A gust of wind took hold of his severe, side-combed hair, and two strands stood for a second like whiskers before he managed to smooth them down.

"Bracing but bleak," said Beever.

Poynter nodded his agreement. "There is the fluorescent-lit bleakness of the shopping mall. I would tend to avoid these places."

"You dislike civilization?" asked Beever.

"I'd not call that...civilization," said Poynter. "But the sea is wild. I respect it. Yes - I hope we'll see some real weather. The kiss of rain on one's cheek."

"Ah! You're no tourist, then," said Beevers.

"I write," mumbled Poynter, as if slightly ashamed.

"About what?"

"My moods. My feelings."

"Misery?" asked Beevers. He hoped to help this troubled young man.

"I can apply my misery," replied Poynter.

"Why should you *wish* to?" frowned Beevers. "I prefer the more positive path."

"A positive path...to where?" asked Poynter. His voice was a sarcastic monotone, edging on the brink of cynical descent.

Beevers decided to explain his interest. "I was a man of the cloth. The Revd. James Amery-Beevers! Now retired, but I still like to help...in affairs of the heart and soul."

"A most difficult job," said Poynter.

"It's a devil of a job!" exclaimed Beevers. "But very much worth the doing. Yes - I never forget my vocation." Doris was becoming rather restless, and Beevers started back along the rising path.

"I have a kind of vocation," said Poynter, strolling behind. "Though hardly a standard career." He paused for a deep, sniffing breath. "There is...something I am trying to keep alive. Not the feeble anguish of this shabby modern world - but a classical, more noble emotion. It is the mist and cool I wish to grasp in my work. The damp sheen on one's face beyond the glow of a cottage window...friendless, but seeing those inside warm and intimate

with high tea and cosiness. The atmosphere of the churchyard on a frozen winter's morning - the day one's lover has died."

"A book?" asked Beevers. "You're writing a book?"

"The Book of the Gothic Heart. A collection. Poems I've toiled on for years."

"The patience of a saint!" smiled Beevers. "But who would publish such a thing?"

"I need no publisher!" snapped Poynter.

Beevers was taken aback. "A strange attitude for an amateur author," he observed.

But Poynter explained his plans. "The poems will be printed in a slim hard-backed volume, expenses paid by myself. I'll spread copies amongst junk shops, jumble sales and bric-a-brac stores. Perhaps even a church bazaar."

"Always on the lookout," said Beevers. The Revd. Newton was planning his Easter Fair, and Beevers was closely involved.

"I am not a bitter man," said Poynter. "Where you look to the sunshine, I prefer a more...drizzly day."

"Yes..." added Beevers, "but don't catch a chill."

This seemed to throw Poynter a little. In a sense, he realized how Beevers was skirting the truth. But he had always found smiling, humour and happiness to be empty, banal, short-term phenomena. The interview was becoming tiresome.

"A pleasant few minutes, James...ex-Reverend," said Poynter. "It's good to meet the local residents."

"My daily walk," nodded Beevers. "I expect we'll meet again."

"Perhaps we shall," muttered Poynter - who turned briskly, striding off to the castle.

All types, thought Beevers as he scratched Doris under the chin. He took a single glance behind him. There was Poynter, back near the edge. His figure stiff against the drifting clouds, staring out at the waters.

While this unexpected encounter with the retired clergyman had broken Poynter's reverie, the poet knew he must be open to every possibility while exploring the nooks of Hastings. Why else had he elected to stay here, rather than return to London?

Poynter had approached the castle to escape a prolonged encounter, although he was curious enough. He found himself dipping from the old man's view as a flight of steps took him through the chunks of sandstone, and around the mound upon which the castle had been constructed. The sloping sides were grown with small trees and untidy shrubs, and Poynter felt his imagination stirred.

The entrance kiosk was on the far side of the mound, behind an arched sign above the open gates. Poynter paid the admission fee and took a stroll around the grounds, weaving in and out of the clumps of masonry that made up the castle remains. It was easy to see why the site had been so attractive. The sun shone a soft yellow onto the pearly sea below, with the pier jutting out to the west. Despite its Victorian nature, it seemed a modern incursion. The light painted the grey castle shards with an amber warmth, while a cool breeze rippled the grass.

Two giggling Japanese girls in duffel coats were Poynter's only companions, and he watched them askance as they photographed each other before the ancient, scenic backdrop. But they had noticed the gothic poet, and one approached with a shy but friendly disposition. "Excuse...sorry to interrupt! Could you please...?" She waved a small, automated camera.

Poynter snapped the pair in a vaulted archway, seated side-by-side on a wooden bench while his own shadow sloped into the frame. He handed the camera back with a polite but parting nod.

The poet entered a wooden door, and began to examine the dungeons. They were small, but curved and surprisingly organic, snaking their way through the sandstone as if they had just been carved. Poynter relished the closed atmosphere - and as he regarded the gritty sandstone, the symbolism of the photograph struck home. His own shadow had entered the image, lurching beside the girls. It had personified his mental workings in relation to their beaming smiles. They would never know. They would return to Japan with the photographs. In a small way, he would be going with them.

As Poynter stood, he felt something crawling on his shoulder. Squirming a little, he maintained a stoical position. First, he would analyse the sensation, then discover what it was. Had a repulsive insect crept down his neck? No. It was not so much a physical sensation, more a feeling of being watched. Allowing his nerves to tingle a little further, Poynter whipped round on the spot. He was alone.

The poet stood still for another minute. There was no further manifestation. Had his nerves played a trick, to be calmed by logic? Or had he felt the touch of a spirit?

Above ground, Poynter peeped through a stone portal in the eastern side of the castle. He glimpsed the tip of a church across the sunlit, grassy plain. The broken castle towers reached knee height above the ground within the keep, although they dropped the height of a man outside. Mesh fencing and barbed wire provided defence unknown to the Normans.

As he stood, Poynter thought of the old man again. James. That had been his only introduction. Poynter had offered even less. His probing questions had sharpened Poynter's own response. It had been less of a distraction, more a test of ideas. "I expect we'll meet again," the old man had said. So what of his own response?

"Perhaps we shall," had been a dubious reply. Poynter had been eluding further encounters. "I hope we shall," would have been the wiser, if not for any sociable reason. Poynter would like to know more.

\* \* \* \* \*

Poynter did not so much inhabit Hastings as oscillate from its centre. The intricacy of the town appealed to him, and he followed each and every road. So much so, Poynter telephoned Polly at his London home and said he would remain for a week or so.

Poynter sat for hours on various benches, watching the world go by. He also ventured up the sinewy curves of Alexandra Park, which led from the centre of town. Poynter passed a lake when he noticed two boys playing football, from the corner of his eye. The luminosity of the football struck him, and he dreaded the inevitable moment when it came bouncing over. Poynter increased the pace of his walking, but to no avail. The ball shot off at an angle, and approached at a fast trajectory.

"Here - mister!" yelled one of the boys.

Poynter knew he was expected to perform a skilful kick. Anything less could only bring mockery. Alarmed at the prospect, Poynter decided on evasive action. The confused poet dived through some bushes, leaving the boys mystified. One ran to catch up with the ball, and stopped it on the path. He glimpsed Poynter emerging from the shrubbery, brushing the shreds from his clothes.

Ever curious, Poynter carried on through the park. Its delights meandered into suburbia, where it became an area of astonishing woodland. The tree-trunks were covered with leafy creepers, while the branches were mostly bare. The ground was dotted with flowers of yellow, white and lilac. It was a little early for bluebells.

Poynter became distracted by the quiet beauty, and the trickle of water through the central ravine. It was known as the Old Roar Ghyll. This had been eroded in the sandstone, where verdant ferns evoked a jungle - although with cooing pigeons and English birdsong.

A poem occurred to Poynter, and he scribed the first few lines. Each word took a minute, as he posed serenely on a log. The poet's attire had become less strictured, with the jacket removed. His shirt was open, and waistcoat unbuttoned to reveal a pair of braces. The early evening sun cast an amber warmth.

Poynter had the manner of an amateur naturalist, waiting in the heart of creation. But his ruminations searched for the shadows. At times, Poynter found himself enraptured by shimmering leaves, or the glow of moss upon bark. He was troubled by such feelings, and the lack of focus they suggested. He had his work to complete.

On another occasion, Poynter was musing near the town hall when a familiar figure strolled past. He recognized the retired clergyman. The stout figure was distinctive enough, along with the little dog. Poynter made no acknowledgment, but let the man walk past. Then he embarked on incisive action. Poynter began to follow the man.

A gentle swishing sound permeated the interior of the stone building. It had the timbre of natural materials, but an artificial rhythm.

Poynter and Beevers moved through the streets of Hastings, with Poynter the more elusive. He learnt the art of lingering in doorways as Beevers glanced into shop windows, or adjusting his spectacles if his quarry paused to chat. He followed Beevers through a tunnel onto the coastal strip, and along into the Old Town.

The gentle swishing sound continued in the stone building. The rhythm was supplied by Tattersfield, who was sweeping the floor of the church.

Poynter was becoming tired. He groaned at each tea shop they passed. Was the pursuit worth it? Yet the old man had honed in on him, so Poynter was only returning the compliment. The fellow would not escape.

Tattersfield had reached the end of the central aisle. He moved into a side alcove.

"Top marks," said a dry, somewhat austere voice. It was edged by a faint acoustic. Reverend Newton had emerged from his office, and was observing Tattersfield at work. "We must have the correct ambience," he added. "Not spit and sawdust."

"Reverend," murmured Tattersfield.

"It's been left rather late," added Newton, gazing at the floor. "The place was looking dusty at Eucharist."

"I'm sorry, Reverend," mumbled Tattersfield. His voice was quiet, but carried across the church.

"Dust does not behove a clean spirit," said Newton. "We've so many feet in here, at Easter. Please keep the place clean."

"I will," said the verger. The vicar returned to the door.

Tattersfield paused for a moment, and leant on his broom. "Dust does not behove..." he murmured. Tattersfield shook his head.

Beevers approached his destination, in the north of the Old Town. Poynter watched as he crossed the road. Beevers entered the

gate of a parish church, and strolled along the path. After leaving his dog by the entrance, Beevers stepped inside.

Poynter noted the point. Beevers was no longer a priest, but remained wedded to his faith. This was his place of worship. Allowing a moment or so to pass, Poynter crossed the road.

There was a board of notices next to the gate, which Poynter studied with care. The calendar had entered Holy Week, and there was a full list of services. Monday to Wednesday had a Eucharist and Address at eight each evening, although Poynter had missed the first of these. Maunday Thursday brought a Eucharist and Watch at the same prescribed hour, while Good Friday and Easter had a whole range.

Poynter suspected the old man's dabbling, intervening nature would not keep him passive for long. Neither would his faith allow it. Perhaps Poynter should attend one of these services, to mislead the old man. It would create an effect of conversion, which could be quickly undermined. It would be instructive to watch the old man's reaction. Perhaps it would be worthy of verse.

Beevers had greeted Tattersfield with a silent nod, and sat in one of the pews. As he gazed at the cross on the altar, he relished the cool interior. It was more than shelter from the sun and rain, but offered a calming effect on the mind. Beevers had been mulling on an accident reported on the news, with several lives lost in the carnage. He bowed his head beneath the sombre roof, and began a silent prayer.

Poynter's eyes darted from the list of services to a brighter poster nearby. The poster advertised a springtime fair, to be held on Easter Monday. It would be a time of jollity and fun, the poster implied, with a list of planned activities. It was the kind of thing Poynter dreaded, and would pay not to attend.

Poynter smiled. He had another idea, which struck an immediate chord. The fair would not exert a jolly influence on him. He would exert a darkening influence on the fair. Faith could flow both ways, thought Poynter. He turned away from the church.

Watching Poynter, unknown to him, was another pair of eyes. They had seen the furtive poet framed by the grey lattice of a leaded window. The loitering figure had turned away, and walked towards the coast.

Reverend Newton had been struck by something about the man's bearing. He had been in search of devotion. Newton had an excellent memory, from his years of service as a general practitioner. He had transferred the technique to this new vocation, judging each individual by the symptoms they displayed. Not of illness, but rapture or uncertainty.

There had been an intensity about the man, thought Newton. He was sure to see him again. Storing the impression in his meticulous mind, Newton lifted his pen. He was soon engrossed in his work.

The lounge of the guesthouse was cramped and cosy, with a TV burbling in the corner. Mr. Hargreaves struggled with a jigsaw at a table, while his wife enjoyed a quiz show. Poynter lingered with

the air of a surly teenage son, with nowhere to go for the evening. The other guest was out for the night, while another was due to arrive.

Then Poynter noticed something on the sideboard, among a range of feeble ornaments. It was a sailing ship in a bottle, braving the cotton wool waves. "Where might I buy...such an ornament?" he asked.

Mr. Hargreaves glanced up from his jigsaw, and opened his mouth in reply.

The beach became industrious beneath the sandstone wall of East Hill, which loomed above the fishing quarter. A church had been converted to a poignant museum, housing one of the boats in perpetual dryness.

Poynter wandered between the unusual huts, which clustered at the edge of the shingle. Each was made of wood, and covered in tar. They rose tall and dark against the sky. Poynter's figure was also tall and dark, for he had returned to his sombre suit. As he had done within the woodland, Poynter fell into a repose. He allowed the scene to sink deep into his acute sensibilities. To Poynter, this was a kind of toil.

After crossing the tracks of a miniature railway, Poynter continued onto the beach. There were low, dark huts upon the shingle, amongst the clutter of a working beach. Straggles of netting resembled the dregs of beached sea creatures, and gearwheels lay rusting on the pebbles. They had been removed from one of the winches. Weather-beaten bulldozers faced the sea, ready

to move the shingle, although these lay dormant and still. Fishing boats dotted the beach like oversized toys, high and dry against the horizon.

So distracted was Poynter's mental state that he nearly tripped over the fisherman. The man was sitting by a hut, knotting a length of rope, as Poynter collided with his legs. The lack of momentum saved the poet from a fall.

"May I be...of assistance?" asked the fisherman.

Poynter scratched his head. "I believe so," he said. "I would like to buy a ship."

The fisherman glanced at the boats a short way off. There was money in the air.

"A ship...and a bottle," blurted Poynter. "That's what I'd like to buy."

The fisherman lowered his coil of rope, and regarded Poynter with curiosity. "Would the one...be inside the other?" he asked.

Poynter nodded.

"Never have a bottle aboard," said the fisherman. "A drinking captain's a drunken captain!" He studied Poynter's bemused reaction, and broke into a wheezing cackle.

Chapter Fourteen

*Frequent Attention*

THE EASTER FAIR had been opened with the attendance of a minor Hastings celebrity. Quite what he did was open to question. Apparently, he had some small part in a TV drama, or had been glimpsed in a coffee advertisement. Despite the dubious nature of his renown, the man had beamed in an endearing manner. He had tried on an Easter bonnet, for fun, as the event started to swing.

Whether the celebrity remained through the afternoon was no more obvious. The patch of green beside the church hall was busy enough, with stalls and activities in the sun. There was a variety of music from a jazz band and a couple of folk singers, while other attractions lurked in the shade of the hall. Either they preferred to spurn the sunlight, or were wise to impending rainfall.

Even so, the weather could not have been better. The sun was bright, but without the heat of high summer, so the day could be enjoyed in comfort. Beevers patrolled the affair with a jovial demeanour, encouraging the various stallholders in their enterprises, offering hope and encouragement.

Beevers was impressed by the flood of colour, which blended to a collage of bustle and enjoyment: the green of the grass, the blue of the sky, broken by the ripple of banners, costumes and amusements. There was always movement to catch the eye, details to hold the attention.

Unknown to Beevers, there was another set of eyes taking an equal scrutiny. The eyes of Laurence Poynter, behind their spectacle lenses. The lids had descended to narrow his vision, as if shielding the poet from excessive exposure. Poynter lingered at the edge of the fair, static, watchful, before stepping into the bustle.

It was of interest, he thought. A random selection of quirky arrangements, assembled with an amateurish charm. There was a danger he might respond to the lightness around him, rather than remain a shadow in its midst. Poynter experienced a brief moment of uncertainty - a sensory bewilderment - as the images blurred before him.

Poynter searched for an element of stability among the passing textures of T-shirts and cotton dresses. A cooler patch of colour appealed to him, and Poynter's diverted attention was matched by his physical approach. As the image became sharper, Poynter beheld an unusual sight. He seemed to be hovering above a tropical island, surrounded by a swirling ocean.

"Good fellow!" came a chummy voice. Poynter jumped a little, and glanced to one side. There was a familiar, jowled face looking over a cardigan-clad shoulder. The man edged round the barrier of pinkish wool, and offered Poynter his hand. "Good to see you," he added. "What a wonderful day!"

It was the man from the cliff-top. The retired clergyman.

Poynter shook the man's hand in a restrained manner, and returned his greeting with a nod. "I find this...very curious,"

said Poynter, indicating the painted island. It was neither an enthusiastic verdict, nor an outright rebuttal. Poynter's curiosity was uncomfortably close to enjoyment, although he could only deny the fact.

"There's a great variety," said Beevers, sweeping a glance over the scene. In truth, it was a small occasion - but the tight locale created a sense of density, which would have been diluted by a larger venue. Beevers knew sincerity, not size, mattered most.

"Would you like a go?" came a young girl's voice. Poynter turned towards her. She was about fourteen, perhaps minding the stall for a parent. Her hair fell below the level of the island, which was painted on a board before her. Her cheeks had been painted with flowers.

"Ten pence a go," said Beevers. "I'll pay for it." Beevers took a coin from his pocket, and gave it to the girl.

"Pick a hole," she said. "Poke it with a matchstick." They watched as Poynter followed the instructions. He took a used matchstick from a small tray, and studied the map with care. The map had been drilled with numerous holes, each filled by a curl of paper.

Remaining solemn, as if performing some vital duty, Poynter selected a hole near the shore. Then he probed it with his matchstick. A curl of paper dropped through the map, and rolled into the chute below.

"There you are," said Beevers, retrieving the scroll. He sensed the poet's feeble grasp of the principle. Beevers unfurled the miniature scroll, and informed Poynter of his fortune. "It says... 'Sorry. Nothing but sand.' Oh well. You can't win every time."

"It would be an unrealistic expectation," said Poynter. "A most...diverting installation."

Beevers chuckled. "I enjoyed the suspense," he said. "Won a little bag of chocolate coins. I put them back in the pile."

"Very generous."

"Let me show you around," smiled Beevers. He tugged Poynter on a tour of the cramped amusements. "That's the W.I. with a grand tombola. Miss Wilton is a real stalwart. She makes all the chutney herself!"

"A tremendous service," said Poynter. He was considerably impressed by the range of prizes, including wine, chocolates and crockery. "I may return," he added. "I'd love a Hastings teapot."

Beevers urged the poet onward. "Scout troupe. Jumble. A lot of good stuff. They were fighting for bargains at twelve."

"Really?" murmured Poynter. "Perhaps it was...designer gear." The pair continued on their tour.

"Pop guns. Non-violent, I assure you," said Beevers. "The hand-cranked roundabout. Marvellous. Strictly for kids, of course. You must try the Dougal sisters, they make the most marvellous cakes. Over by the tea marquee. Ah...Paula!"

Beevers had encountered a display of glittering jewellery, with a familiar female face behind it. He gestured between the face and Poynter, endeavouring to boost the social interaction.

"This is my niece, Paula," said Beevers. Then a point struck him as he opened his mouth. The mystery of the poet's name. Beevers could only mouth silence, like a goldfish gulping in a bowl.

Poynter enjoyed his moment, as the old man faltered. But he could not appear surly or dumbstruck. "Laurence Poynter," said the poet.

Paula was innocent of these strange manoeuvres. "I make it all myself," she smiled. A beady construction jingled round her neck, something between a necklace and a pendant.

"I can see," replied Poynter, with grey neutrality. Paula's pasty trinkets were hardly precious - there were no diamonds or emeralds here - yet Poynter could see how the beads and wire had been assembled with a degree of taste and care. Paula, though an amateur, had a sense of style.

"I know a girl," said Poynter. "She has a butterfly. A blue one. It sits, here, on her breast."

"A brooch?" asked Paula. "I haven't done many brooches."

"I wish I could buy...something," said Poynter, grasping for the right reaction. He had no wish to clutter his life with surplus craftwork, of no use to himself. Madeleine would be far too discerning to receive such a decoration. Yet he was here to perceive the workings of this coastal town, and the varied lives

it contained. Maybe an item could serve as a relic. Or maybe there was someone else.

"Perhaps...one of the bangles," said Poynter, stooping to peer at Paula's display.

Paula watched the poet with sympathy. She had encountered all sorts at her stalls. Once, a lady had hovered for a good half hour before daring to make a purchase. Glimpsed in the middle distance, she had appeared to be a presentable woman with a smart jacket, skirt and straight blonde hair. But on questioning Paula in a mild, husky voice, and loitering with indecision, Paula had discerned the angular face behind the artificial tresses, the rough skin beneath the foundation.

Even so, it was only her proximity as the seller that had enabled such revelation. Paula had been in a privileged position. She had concerned herself with other matters, and concealed any visible reaction. The artificial lady had purchased several items, making Paula more than ten pounds the richer. Paula had been pleased at the custom, whatever the biological state of her customer.

Perhaps Poynter, in his heart, wished to wear these glittering bangles. Perhaps he wished to don a long, flowing gown and cavort before a full-length mirror. He had suppressed any sense of flamboyance, thought Paula. His clothing was sombre, even a little anachronistic. Yet the cut of his jacket, the fit of his waistcoat...all spoke of an intense, almost fetishistic attention to detail. Paula knew of the dandies of eighteenth-century fame,

who had spurned the excesses of wild fashion to focus intensively on detail and cut. It was the recognition of subtleties that set them apart.

"...will be fine," came a voice through a mist of distraction. "I'd like to buy a bangle. This is the one I want."

Paula snapped to attention. She had not realized, in her ruminations, that Poynter had made his selection. Whatever his motive for the purchase, Poynter had a fiver in his hand.

"Thanks," smiled Paula. She twisted the bangle into a square of tissue.

Poynter glanced at Beevers. "Polly," he murmured. "My housekeeper."

"You live a comfortable life," nodded Beevers.

"In some respects," replied Poynter.

Beevers pointed across the lawn to another stall, just by the church hall. "I know you're a man of letters," he said. "There's a load of second-hand books."

"Thank you. I shall browse," said the poet. He turned away from the jewellery.

Paula glanced at Beevers, curiously. "Is he the one?" she whispered.

"Who?" queried Beevers.

"The one you told me about."

Beevers rolled his tongue in a thoughtful manner. "I should not have mentioned it, Paula."

"He is not a parishioner," said Paula. "You're a priest no more, James. You never stop!"

"One never really stops," said Beevers. "A vocation is a matter of faith. When the stipend vanishes, the faith remains."

"The man on the cliff-top," sighed Paula. "How romantic!" She watched Poynter move amongst the throng. The black of his jacket was an obvious marker as he sidled between brighter garments. Poynter soon arrived at the bookstall, and became immersed in its offerings.

However, Poynter was not alone in wearing a costume of gravity. A figure sipped tea at a plastic table, near the Dougal sisters and their supply of cakes. He was part of the fair, yet aloof in his manner. The Reverend Trevor Newton had completed his run of Easter services, from Preaching the Passion on Good Friday to Sunday's Choral Evensong.

Newton was watching a figure, who - if not quite familiar - he had surely seen before. It took him a moment or so to identify the time and place. It was the figure he had glimpsed through his latticed window a few days before Easter. Newton had recognized the figure's latest manifestation. He was currently examining the books.

The Reverend Newton sipped his tea, and formed a few mental connections. He never saw logic and faith as enemies, unlike other more emotional clerics. Indeed, a certain ex-Reverend sprang to mind. Newton had studied as a clergyman, but he had trained as a doctor. The balance was never lost.

The sombre figure had glanced at the church notice-board, but had not been drawn to the services. He must have read about the Easter fair, unless his appearance was a remarkable chance. Had the man been considering the Christian faith, but felt unable to make the commitment?

The Reverend Newton chewed his tangy lemon cake. It was the pride of the Dougal sisters. He reasoned it would be worth keeping tabs on the stranger, should he need some form of counsel. The Reverend was not one to grasp at potential converts, like an evangelical minister. But he was bound by duty to aid a drifting soul, once an encounter had been made.

Beevers and Paula kept an eye on the studious poet, who was flipping through a reference tome. There was a small group gathered around the stall, including children with picture books. Beevers smiled. Perhaps the poet was becoming attuned to his surroundings, allowing a sense of involvement to develop. This involvement might connect him to a wider humanity, and soften his austere pose.

"I think...I may have worried over nothing," said Beevers. "We all have our bad days, Paula. I think this young fellow is fitting in. He's part of the community."

Paula wasn't so sure. She looked quizzical - even skeptical - yet softened the effect with a bobbing of the head. Paula's necklace-cum-pendant jingled round her neck. She greeted another customer.

Poynter replaced the heavy volume on the stack before him. It was part of an incomplete set of reference books, with dated - though not antiquated - content.

"All six for a fiver," said the stall's attendant. He was a nervous man of around forty, with short fair hair and a V-necked jumper.

"I'm sure that's a bargain," said Poynter. "But they wouldn't be any use." Poynter found his eye caught by another pile, and busied himself by delving. There were recipe books, hard-backed novels and a book about astronomy. None of these interested the poet. Then a smaller volume came to hand, as if the object of his random search.

It was a guidebook to Bexhill and District, costing 7/6 in the year of publication. Poynter flipped through the enticing pages, with their line drawings of local landmarks. There was plenty of information, including a section on Beachy Head. Poynter had experienced the emotional hit of that expansive landscape. It would not hurt to know the geology.

"How much?" asked Poynter. It was a redundant question. The price was unlikely to be huge, and Poynter was happy to pay.

"Um...I think that's a pound," said the nervous man. Poynter handed him a coin.

The fair was due to end at four o'clock, so there was another hour to go. There was a series of entertainments planned, including a kilted piper, the judging of the bonnet parade and a scene performed by a local drama group. There was also a lucky

programme draw, with a prize of fifty pounds. Then would come the inevitable clearing up, with the shifting of chairs and tables.

Paula wrapped another couple of trinkets, and asked a favour of Beevers. "James," she said. "I wonder...would you mind the stall? I'd like a quick look round. See Tom on the green stall? He looks a little lost."

"No trouble at all," said a delighted Beevers. "I shall find my new vocation. A merchant of priceless treasure."

"Priceless?" smirked Paula. "Don't give it away!" The pair exchanged places, and Paula strolled across the grass. Her blue cotton dress billowed softly in the breeze. He had such a lovely niece, thought Beevers.

Having paid for his guidebook, Poynter lingered by the stall. But he found nothing else of interest, and had no wish to clutter his life. However, Poynter turned to discover he was under observation. The figure was dressed in an equally sombre manner.

"Ah...a local history man," came the cultured voice. He had spotted the little guidebook.

Poynter regarded the bearded face. The suit was dark, the hair was dark, there was a small round cap on the head. The Star of David upon the buttoned waistcoat professed another faith.

"I'm not local," said Poynter, a little brusquely. "That's why I need a guidebook."

"One can never know enough," said the bearded man. He offered his hand. "Daniel Mortimer. Local Rabbi, and a very big reader."

Poynter shook hands with the newcomer. This was becoming a habit. "You come to an Easter fair?" he queried. "You are hardly a follower of Christ."

"And are you?" asked the Rabbi. "Are you faithful?"

"I am an agnostic," said Poynter. "Although I dabble with atheism."

Rabbi Mortimer considered this a moment. Then he laughed. It was a loud, hearty laugh that caused several heads to turn. "I like this approach," said the Rabbi. "We shall get to speak."

Poynter shrugged. "Maybe."

"You'd like a tea? I'll get you a tea," said the Rabbi. "Meet me over there." He nodded towards the tables and chairs, where beverages and cakes were served. Among several languorous consumers of refreshment, the Reverend Newton was finishing his own.

"Excuse me a moment, however," said the Rabbi. "There's an old friend I must see." He patted Poynter on the shoulder, and meandered through the crowd. Poynter was surprised to see Beevers in the place of Paula, behind the spread of colourful jewellery.

Poynter took a deep, uneasy breath. He felt a momentary sense of panic. He was not sure how to cope with this social interaction, and the frequent attention it brought. He was a point of study for Amery-Beevers, and now an insightful Jewish gentleman. How much scrutiny could his vicarious posture take? Poynter could hardly say. It was time to find a retreat, he thought, away from the madding crowd.

Paula was sitting with Tom behind the Green Earth stall, with its leaflets on wildlife and the environment. There was stuff about recycling, bypass schemes and the threats created by pollution. Despite the heavy nature of these topics, the pair engaged in a light-hearted banter.

The Revd. Newton had been extending the life of his afternoon tea, trickling minute measures from the pot. Now he rose, slowly, as Poynter moved. He followed the man to the gate.

Poynter had decided to abandon the Easter fair. The constant observation was becoming mutual, as if the town was curious about its visitor rather than the other way round. Poynter walked the short way to the church, and paused for a moment at the gate. It was time to see the interior. He continued up the path.

Rabbi Mortimer shared his news with Beevers, and offered to fetch him a tea. Beevers accepted the offer with gratitude, and was granted an additional cake. The Rabbi had been sincere in his offer to Poynter, and glanced at each of the tables. But he was met with disappointment. There was no sign of the visitor.

Such a pity, thought the Rabbi. What a threesome they would have made. But it was not for him to impose his chatter, least of all his beliefs. The Rabbi drew up a chair beside Beevers, and they discussed theology till the close of the fair. If the sale of jewellery suffered, Paula was not to know.

As Poynter entered the shade of the church, he let his inner agitation subside. The architecture kept sunlight in abeyance,

like the clouds of an autumn day. It was more suited to his outlook.

Poynter took a seat in the wooden pews, and slumped a little in his pose. He resembled a devoted convert, although his motive was far from penitent. Poynter ran the events of the past two weeks through his mind: the time he had arrived at Roland's house, the drive to the south coast, his elliptical conversation with Madeleine upon the undulating cliff-top.

More intriguing was the time he had spent here, in Hastings. The chance meeting with that ridiculous clown, the garrulous retired clergyman. The chilling moment in the castle dungeons, his clumsy encounter with the fisherman. The final touch was this afternoon, when he had eluded such curious motives. The sunlight produced these characters, with their noseey approaches and constant demands.

Poynter imagined the town swallowed by storms and rain. "Tomorrow," he whispered. "The real weather."

The Reverend Newton had entered the door of the church, and watched the young man from a distance. Although Newton had not been aware of the fact, the same bespectacled figure had lurked in the churchyard during the Sunday evening service. Poynter had been concealed by a combination of dusk, weeds and gravestones. He had listened to the singing as an outsider, at times roused by its uplifting tone yet quite unable to enter. Poynter had not come for religion. He had come to sample the faith of others, to cast his own lack of faith into relative darkness. It was a bleak and

dreary tactic, which drained the energy of the poet. In order to be inspired in his morbid work, he had to avoid any warmth or companionship.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hastings did not suffer storms on the morrow. But neither did the sunshine remain. Beevers sensed the unfortunate morning, his window shaded grey with mist. He rolled over in the soft, sagging bed, dozed another hour, yawned with an operatic weariness and slowly got himself up. Would Poynter be out there, he wondered. Would he be relishing it all? Beevers shivered, heading down to a cheery breakfast, grateful of the life he had chosen.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Did you have any luck...with the ship?" asked Mr. Hargreaves. Poynter was sipping coffee in the lounge.

"I saw a man on the beach," said the poet. "We spoke for an hour or so. He tried to sell me a trawler."

Mr. Hargreaves tutted in sympathy. He crept across the carpet in his old slippers, and lifted the coveted object. The ship in a bottle. "Of course, it was only a guess," said Mr. Hargreaves. "I thought...you'd see one down there."

"Not on this occasion," said Poynter. "I wish I could delight you with a clichéd tale, of how I ventured into one of the little

huts and saw a hoard of hand-crafted trinkets. Beautifully crafted sailing ships, each in its own bottle."

"Unfortunate," said Mr. Hargreaves. "We bought this in a jumble sale."

Poynter almost choked on his coffee.

"Look. If you'd like...it's nothing special," said Mr. Hargreaves. "I'm sorry I caused...inconvenience."

"Not at all," said Poynter. "What shall I say? Twenty pounds?"

Mr. Hargreaves tilted his head. "You can have it," he murmured.

"Please...add it to the bill," said Poynter. "I am returning to London."

Mr. Hargreaves thought little of his ship in a bottle. He would have accepted a tenth of the figure. But it was not for him to question the guests. Least of all, diminish the takings.

An hour later, Poynter stood with his minimal baggage upon Hastings promenade. The place was almost empty, and he appeared an aloof figure on the flat, almost abstract landscape. The promenade had an incredible sense of linear perspective, stretching to the east and west. It had been paved with slabs of pink and grey, like an endless diagonal chessboard. The unity was broken only by a cycle lane, running along the middle.

Poynter looked west. The modern structure of Marine Court rose in alternating layers of black and white. Its styling evoked the impossibly tall superstructure of a landlocked ocean liner.

For a second, Poynter imagined lifeboats mounted on the sides and smoke pouring from a chimney. A woman approached on her bicycle, and Poynter stepped back. She whirred past with a windblown, "Thanks."

Poynter looked east. The pedalled conveyance diminished in size against the pale distance of East Hill. Hastings Pier stretched out to sea. His black, polished shoes started tapping along the paving. Poynter was following the cyclist.

The promenade featured a series of curved extensions on its seaward side, and Poynter cut a diagonal path to reach one. Ignoring the easy option of the benches, he took hold of the cast iron railing. As Poynter leant forward, he could see no trace of the land. The waters rolled as a gush of foam, licking beneath the balcony and the seats below.

There was a small kiosk behind him, with a weather vane on top. This was surmounted by an outline of the moon. The kiosk had a thermometer and barometer, each side of the door. They indicated changeable weather.

Poynter had chosen his vantage point well. As the waves swelled, he felt a spray on his face, a slap of cool air on his cheeks. Grey clouds were gathering to the west, looming behind the tower of Marine Court. It was bleak, enticing, refreshing. Poynter would remember the feeling, all summer.

Within the rippling pool of Poynter's imagination, the first words were rising, then linking into verse. A poem...of cliff-tops, bleakness and lonely encounters. The lonelier, the better.

Poynter smiled, but it was not a happy smile. He did not specialize in happiness. He was a creator of gothic poetry. It was time to start writing again.

Chapter Fifteen

*Momentous Words*

FOR POYNTER, there was no discernible moment at which summer turned, through autumn, to the winter months. Indeed, many of the first October days were warm and summery, and only the orange-brown of the fallen leaves scattered before the gazebo served to hint at the chilling days to come. Whether the effects of global warming were guilty of this aberration, Poynter could scarcely say. All he knew was that his own internal calendar - both biological and artistic - ran along lines suggested less by meteorology as the inclemency of his own emotion. October had come, so November and December would swiftly follow. Whatever the predilections of a changing season, and the government's manoeuvres to keep daylight in step through manipulation of Greenwich time, October was the gateway to winter. As such, Poynter hardened his disposition.

The poet had written much over the summer. Indeed, he had welcomed the return of his old routine now the demands of the Circle Of Radical Verse had ceased to stake a claim on his time. It had been an interesting experience, and even the Fulcrum anthology improved in his estimation now Roland's bombastic pronouncements had faded to a recollection. Poynter had always preferred his own schedules, with just the occasional companion - such as Madeleine - to offer their differing views.

However, there had been more to this summer's productivity than escape from a lingering skepticism. A new factor had appeared on the scene, both provocative and gentle in its influence. It was none other than Mr. James Amery-Beevers, the retired vicar he had met during that extended visit to Hastings.

As Poynter sat at the writing bureau of his Hampstead home, he regarded the ship he had bought from Mr. Hargreaves. It would have been more appropriate to have purchased the object from the old fisherman, but life had not followed the most poetic course. Its origin did not lie in some vivid nautical character, but the hesitant, shambling proprietor of a seaside guesthouse.

The ship was still poised upon a bottled ocean, cutting a white wake of foam through the choppy waves. The sincerity of its craftsmanship appealed to him, with the threat of tackiness removed by the chosen materials: wood, cotton and glass. Poynter could distinguish between unpleasant, plastic cheapness and a crude but charming simplicity.

Perhaps he would have scorned the little vessel even the year before, towards the climax of the CORV episode. But the trip had touched him, as Madeleine had said it would. A few drops of sea-spray had entered his soul.

Poynter was using the bottled ship as a paperweight. Its spindly shadow fell across the wavering lines, which made up his summer poetry. The cotton flags cast tiny flickers of shadow, as it seemed - almost imperceptibly - that they waved within the bottle. Poynter peered closer, fascinated...but his head blocked

the light through the French windows. The bottle hid its vessel with his own bulbous, reflected likeness. The moment had passed. It had been a trick of perception, wrought by overwork.

The blue ink of the rippling poetry resembled the wider seas. Poynter nudged both ship and bottle idly across the page, fascinated how its shadow changed perspective as he corrected course, like an image in some exquisite animation. Winter was coming. Hastings would be bleak. It was time to return with his poetry.

As he sat on the train some days later, Poynter gazed at the scenery of fields and hedgerows beyond the side of the tracks. Quite often, they would be marred by some modern intrusion, but the general sweep brought freshness as London was left behind. Gazing in abstraction rather than study, Poynter dwelled on the note he had written to Madeleine before taking this course of action. She had become a somewhat distant figure, having discovered far more in Mr. Roland Twine than poetic appreciation. Poynter had referred to the matter, somewhat obliquely, with a lingering trace of skepticism - or perhaps a trace of jealousy. It was doubtful that Poynter, even in his private thoughts, would admit the possibility.

My Dear Madeleine,

Should you chance to call at my home from tomorrow onwards, I'm sure Polly will extend you a warm welcome and, indeed, has my

permission to entertain you. I remember that time at the gazebo, when my fixation on poetic rapture served to freeze me into position. The attentions were welcome, from both of you.

I am lucky summer lacks a similar hazard - and have been able to write in physical comfort, even while divining uncomfortable truths. I won't bother you with the details, since the occasional nature of your visits tell me your loyalties lie elsewhere. I refer to more than poetry, of course.

My project continues, Madeleine - and I have much to thank Hastings for. I have not always encountered sympathy, but any resistance or queries I have met only serve to intrigue me the more. Writing poetry is one thing, but finding an audience another. There are those who must hear my work, even if I chase them for the privilege. I envisage a recital, performed by myself. Perhaps an evening of anguish!

Your friend,

*Laurence.*

Before the sun had set, Poynter's ship in a bottle had completed its voyage, and sat once more in the Hargreaves Guest House.

Poynter had not alerted the owners to its return, however. The ship had not been replaced on the mantelpiece, for all to see in the lounge. The ship ploughed its way on the corner table, up in Poynter's room. The scene was quite the same as he had left it, apart from some slight alteration to the curtains. Poynter took a

while to fathom the exact discrepancy. He eventually realized nets had been added to the original drapes.

Poynter lay on the bed before supper, allowing the room to grow dim as evening fell. He could hear the soft hiss of the sea, the cry of gulls, and the clatter of dishes downstairs. An evening of anguish? He liked the idea. Perhaps the nemesis of The Enlightenment, which had displayed the talents of many and brought Madeleine and Roland together. Not that anguish was the peak of Poynter's ambition, only its effective communication.

Yet the line between experience and communication was a thin one. Whether Poynter had walked it wisely was another niggling trouble, which the poet - as with Madeleine - thought better to suppress. It was more easy, and amenable, to plan his future work - in this case, the promotion of poetry. As for the name of such an evening? It escaped the poet, for now.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beevers had no conception of winter darkness, beyond the regular shortening of daylight hours and the morning chill of his bedroom. He could never conceive a link between such alterations and psychological despair. For Beevers, winter held the second greatest jewel in the Christian calendar. It was the festival of Christmas, with a core of devotion within the amassing of commercial clutter.

Of course, Easter was the most glorious time. It marked that greatest of miracles, the Resurrection of Christ. But Easter had its garlands of springtime flowers, and a greater provenance of sunny days. Christmas was an illumination of the mid-winter. It brought light to the darkest part of the year.

But Easter was behind them now, and Christmas lay some way ahead. As he said Grace over supper with Paula and Duncan, Beevers was mindful of the Halloween pumpkin that gazed at him from the kitchen wall. It had been rendered in thick orange poster paint upon black card, so the black showed through as the eyes and mouth. Most of the schoolchildren had created something similar, in an afternoon class run by a wacky teacher, and Duncan's was no better or worse than many. The teacher had cut out the resulting horrors, and threaded them with string. Now, Duncan's pumpkin hung over the kitchen corkboard, obscuring its business cards and notes.

It had been an innocent way for the children to mark the forthcoming festival, although it was not a feature of the Christian calendar. The eve of All Hallows, October the 31st - known commonly as Halloween.

As a Christian, Beevers was not enticed by such fixations. He knew the Reverend Newton would be even more perturbed. However, Beevers recognized how children enjoyed such traditions, at a time of year that shortened their potential for outdoor fun.

As ever, Paula refrained from eating as Beevers murmured to himself and, she assumed, the Almighty. While she did not share

her uncle's unquestioning faith, Paula respected its manifestation. She believed in a vague afterlife, or some kind of spiritual being, although the tenets of religion were a mystery to her. Beevers, to his credit, did not seek to convert her. But he offered the path as a possible choice.

Paula always respected her uncle's ritual, if only for its sense of domestic peace. Duncan was already toying with a fork, churning the salad by his fish fingers.

Beevers emerged from his state of prayer with a gentle shift of posture. The combination of subtle moves was hard to define, yet the overall change was incisive. Beevers was back to his lively self, with rising eyebrows and a gleam in his eye. Supper could be enjoyed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Following his own stodgy meal with the Hargreaves, Poynter walked along the Hastings seafront to experience the chill night air. His path headed west towards Hastings Pier, which he regarded with a detached fascination. He felt no temptation to sample its trivial pursuits.

However, the poet admired the art deco lines of the White Rock Pavilion, on the opposite side of the road. Then he turned on his heel, and walked alongside the dark promenade railings while glancing down at the beach. The streetlamps cast a faint wash of light onto the pebbles, creating shadows of Poynter and the

railings on the cold, damp surface. The moon was broken into white reflection by the gentle ripples of the sea.

Looking east along the coast, Poynter was surprised how little illumination was displayed beyond the streetlamps, which diminished in a long, straight row. But he was startled to see the glowing orange shape of Hastings Castle, which floated in the night above the rooftops. It was floodlit with an eerie clarity, as if it had retained the last rays of the setting sun while everything else fell dark. Poynter could picture himself up there, the previous spring, photographing those Chinese girls. Of course, his shadow would be in China by now.

The half-moon hung in the sky like a cracked eggshell. Yet Poynter knew it was not a fractured fragment of the whole, but caught in the light of the hidden sun. The shadow side was there, but invisible. It was only through rational understanding - or perception - that Poynter could know the truth. His mind allowed him to see into darkness, where his eye could not see, in the way his poetry divined the emotions. With this, Poynter knew he had a name for his evening of anguish. He would call it The Perception.

\* \* \* \* \*

The birds sang in the clear morning air. There was a gentle swishing sound in the stone building. The rhythm was supplied by Tattersfield, who was sweeping the floor of the church. The verger

had reached the end of the central aisle, and moved into a side alcove.

Poynter approached his destination, in the north of the Old Town. This was a place of worship, which he had not seen since the spring. After gazing at the sturdy walls, Poynter crossed the road. The air was crisp and bracing. He was glad of his early start.

There was the board of notices next to the lychgate, which Poynter studied for a moment. It was too soon for Christmas events, but there were several others on display. Even so, there was space for his own.

However, the notices were sealed behind a sheet of glass. It could only be opened with a key. Poynter would not be able to place his poster without asking for prior permission.

Poynter cursed silently, under his breath. He should have foreseen the situation. He had wanted his poster to appear from nowhere, with no explanation. Instead, he would be forced to seek authority. But he had no option in the undertaking. He had returned to Hastings with a purpose, and had to spread that purpose. He had to shock that bumbling ex-clergyman, Mr. Amery-Beevers. Exert a darkening influence. Faith could flow both ways, thought Poynter. He turned towards the church.

Watching Poynter, unknown to him, were another pair of eyes. They had seen the furtive poet framed by the grey lattice of a leaded window. The loitering figure had turned towards him, and began to walk up the path.

It was that man again, thought the Reverend Newton. The man who had come in springtime, in search of devotion. But devotion to what, and to whom?

It was no surprise to see him again. Newton had stored the impression in his meticulous mind. The priest lowered his fountain pen. He could not work, for the moment.

There were hushed voices in the porch of the church, as Poynter spoke briefly to Tattersfield. The two manoeuvred in silhouette, against the hazy brightness of the sun. The poet opened his shoulder bag, and removed a sheet of paper. It was one of many, printed with identical words. Tattersfield took the sheet, nodded his assent, and the poet bade farewell. The verger watched the dark figure walk briskly down the path.

Having completed this initial foray, Poynter felt a thrill of exultation. While he was not so vacant as to bump into passers-by, The Perception had created a delicious mental trance. An evening of anguish had been announced. Its reality was undeniable.

Tattersfield remained in the porch for several moments, regarding the message on the printed page. A scuffle of shoes alerted him to another presence, and it was no surprise to see the Reverend Newton. The priest had emerged from his study.

"Have you seen that man before?" asked the Reverend.

Tattersfield posed in contemplation, as he tried to recall an impression. "I don't think so, Reverend."

The priest took the poster from Tattersfield. He had already slid his spectacles into place, ready to examine the words. "The

Perception. An Evening of Poetry, Spoken from the Soul.'" Newton cast his eyes lower down the page. "A man called 'Laurence Poynter'. I presume he was the visitor?"

"I didn't ask, Reverend. I said you would consider the notice."

"Consider..."

The pair remained inside the frame of the doorway, before Newton whisked away from the verger. He walked through the side door to the vestry, and closed it behind him. Tattersfield knew when to leave the priest alone.

The Reverend Newton sat at his desk, with the poster laid before him. He closed his eyes, and pictured the gaunt young man who he had glimpsed just before Easter. The same figure had appeared at the Easter fair, and now on this occasion. Each time, Newton had felt an instinctive concern for the man. It was a faith in his own judgement. The same faith had urged him from the medical path, to join the ranks of the clergy. The matter deserved scrutiny, but how was this best achieved?

Newton assumed the man would place further notices around town, and it was not his job to intrude. All who saw them would be free to attend, even his own parishioners. No promise had been made regarding the church notice-board. Only...consideration.

The priest balanced the issues in his head, and made a decision as best he could. He would attend The Perception, the following week, so the poster would not be wasted. But he would do

nothing to promote the occasion. Should there be any sickness of spirit on display, his intervention might well be necessary.

As if to confirm this path of action, the priest made an incisive move. He folded the poster, opened a drawer in his desk, and placed it with a selection of other papers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Poynter had been transformed from his customary state of lethargy. Once the first few posters had found a home, he surged on a wave of vigour. The poet was no longer content to shuffle and lurk. He had embarked on a pacy jaunt.

Poynter had a stack of posters from a local printer, and each needed a site. Poynter knew many had been printed in vain, and were doomed to be ignored. That did not matter. Each site would be chosen with care, in book shops, museums and galleries. The right clientele should find him.

Poynter stopped for a break in the late afternoon, when hot tea and croissants were welcome. It was a pleasant and popular café, with dried flowers in glass jars. After placing a poster on the wall, with others, Poynter thanked the manager and left.

Poynter found himself gazing along Trinity Street, towards a structure in a Victorian-Gothic style. He noticed the letters in gold across the front of the building - The Brassey Institute - and started to walk along the street. His interest had been aroused. The Holy Trinity Church occupied the left of the street,

with a variety of small shops opposite. The church slid aside to reveal a narrow tower, which rose above the door of the imposing Institute.

As Poynter crossed the road, he glimpsed books and browsers within the bay window. He realized it was now the municipal library. Poynter entered the porch within the arched entrance, with marble columns on either side. He noticed a frieze of the Bayeux Tapestry, which ran around the top beneath a wooden ceiling. Poynter glanced down, and saw the mosaic tiling of the floor. His black, shiny shoes were aligned on a central circle, as if trapping a nut in a nutcracker. There was an incongruous duck pictured in the centre.

Poynter ignored the bustling woman who came down the hall, allowing himself time to read the Latin motto that circled the duck. 'ARDUIS SAEPE METU NUNQUAM'. His poetry thrived on such details, which could inspire the recall of atmosphere through their slow accumulation.

Poynter allowed the woman to pass, and continued into the library. He walked along the passage, to another door. The ground floor held fiction, history and local interest. Poynter felt it was worth a look, and pushed the door open.

The opposing wall was covered in a variety of posters, promoting community groups and local events. They resembled a multicoloured patchwork, reflected in Poynter's spectacle lenses. It was an ideal place to advertise The Perception, thought

Poynter. Even so, the placing of his poster in a worthwhile site meant a little judicious shunting.

The gloved hand slid smooth and silent down the long banister of dark wood. This was supported by bars of black-painted iron. Each pair enclosed a decorative motif, resembling a series of spoked cartwheels. The banister turned at each corner, crossing to the other side of the tower, before resuming its downward progress.

The hand belonged to a man in a long, dark coat. His smart brown shoes were covered with a network of intricate stitching, declaring their bespoke status. They took the steps slowly, but without hesitation, as if probing the territory ahead. The man cast a glance down the well of the staircase, which descended past landing after landing. From below, his head appeared as a dim shadow, beneath a broad - somewhat rakish - hat. But it did not break the geometrical symmetry for long. His steps continued down the staircase, echoing with a faint, rhythmic patter upon the cold, hard floor.

As the man descended further from the top of the tower, he glimpsed books and readers in the reference library. However, he carried on down to the ground. The man paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. Then the gloved hand released its grip on the banister.

Beyond the door, there was a long, white room supported by occasional columns, with shelves of books running down its length. There were plaster mouldings in the corners, dating from the

building's original conception. Poynter paced slowly along an aisle of books, glancing up at the wall. There were sections of a religious painting, perhaps rescued from some lost church. The gilt-edged panorama displayed figures in colourful robes, against a pale blue sky.

Walking a little further, Poynter stopped by a wooden shield depicting an ancient boat. The sail had been illuminated in gold, and the shield was labelled 'UNIVERSITY SCHOOL HASTINGS'. Poynter stared at the boat for a moment, imagining a bleak seascape of centuries gone, and the marauders closing in on the shore.

Another figure had entered the library. He stood before the wall of posters. The man was familiar with its layout and the transitory notices, which came and went while others held permanent exhibition. His eyes narrowed to sharpen the image as they stared at a cream-coloured sheet.

The typography was classical, with a tasteful minimalism that somehow avoided the spartan. The words held an enticing ring. 'The Perception. An Evening of Poetry, Spoken from the Soul.' He noticed the name of the poet, the time and place. The poster had not been there the day before.

Poynter had moved back along the aisle, and had found the section of local interest books. There were the predictable Sussex travel guides, and places of interest...but more intriguing to Poynter, accounts of local characters such as Archie Norman - who had posed as a Red Indian, Grey Owl, during the 1930s.

Poynter delved among the bunched pamphlets. Several sported somewhat amateurish covers, which suggested the work of scholars more interested in content than flair. Flipping past titles on the Hastings railway, Poynter found a slim booklet sporting a stylized image of the sun rising behind the steeple of a church. The cross had been aligned with the sun, so its arms continued the radial sunbeams that flowed out in several directions. Beneath was the description, 'Beyond the Esoteric. Hastings and the Occult in Modern Times. An Appraisal by Albert Morgan.'

There were chairs by the squat radiator, which sat in the bay window. This looked straight along Trinity Street, to the shops beyond. To the left, there was a dark, bearded bust of Sir Rider Haggard, placed on a high semi-circular shelf.

These details were half-perceived by Poynter as he strolled back down the length of the library. His eyes were already scanning the text of the pamphlet. Poynter sat in the bay window, with his back to the cool, autumnal street. Then he began to read with the closest attention.

Some while later - he could not tell how long - Poynter became aware of a curious sensation. He no longer felt alone. Glancing up, Poynter saw a man standing a few paces away, gazing out of the window. Yet there was something about the man that betrayed his real interest: Laurence Poynter himself.

The day was fading now, and cast a blue pallor on the concentrated face. This was further darkened by the circular hat, which bore a brim wider than that of a city gent. His long coat

hung with a tailored cut, but with the subtle suggestion of a cloak. The face turned towards Poynter.

"I noticed my pamphlet was missing," said the man. "I always have an eye for detail." The man offered Poynter his hand. "Albert Morgan."

Poynter blinked for a second. He was unsure of the name, as if he should know it. Then he flipped the pamphlet over and glanced at the front. Of course! Poynter had not remembered the name as such, just the sense of the title.

Poynter stretched from his seated position, and shook Morgan's hand. He noticed the firmness of grip within the thick, neatly stitched gloves. "Pleased to meet you," said Poynter, without offering his own identity.

"I like this spot," said Morgan. "May I?" He indicated the chair opposite. Poynter was no guardian of the lending library, and had no power of objection. He nodded.

Morgan sat, bustling his coat into comfortable folds the way a lady might adjust a crinoline. He removed his hat, so the light picked out the relief in his face. It had a craggy yet insightful quality, and a sense of the familiar. It reminded Poynter of an ageing classical actor, although he could think of no specific likeness.

"It's a minor work," said Morgan, meeting Poynter with a steady, unbroken gaze. "It seeds...something into the public domain. Nothing too substantial, you understand. But enough to gauge a reaction."

"You published it yourself?" asked Poynter, showing Morgan the cover as if he had never seen it.

"It's the better way, for a work of this nature," said Morgan. He slapped his gloved hands onto the radiator as if grilling a batch of sausages.

"I should like to read it," said Poynter. "Maybe I can return tomorrow."

"The library is closed on Wednesday," said Morgan.

"Then, the day after," said Poynter.

"Why, take it out!" said Morgan. "Few enough do."

"I have no library card," said Poynter. "I am not a resident of the town."

Morgan removed his hands from the radiator. He cupped them together, retaining a tiny chamber of warmer air. An eyebrow raised itself with increased interest - for one who would come from another town, to seek out his pamphlet, could only have a serious interest. "I would like you to read it," said Morgan. "Indeed, I believe...I would value your opinion."

"I'm flattered," said Poynter. He took another breath, ready to tell Morgan of the Circle Of Radical Verse, and its Fulcrum anthology. Perhaps he could share his own plans, for The Book of the Gothic Heart.

Yet some reticence arrested him, and his lungs became tight. The words died on Poynter's lips. He produced a rare, but not unbecoming, smile. It masked his hesitation and uncertainty.

If Morgan had noticed the altercation of Poynter's attitude, he made no sign of having done so. Instead, he clicked open his briefcase and shuffled through a selection of papers. "I usually...I should have..." said Morgan. "Ah - here!" He produced a duplicate of the pamphlet in Poynter's hands, although in a less grubby condition. "Have this for yourself," added Morgan. "Each copy finds a reader, even if it takes a while. You seem a deserving case."

"Thank you," said Poynter, as he took the pamphlet. Morgan slid the other from his hand, as a conjuror would manipulate a playing card.

"Are you spending a while in Hastings?" asked Morgan.

"A week or so," nodded Poynter. "I have a few matters to attend to."

"You'll find my address in there," said Morgan. "Write to me. Tell me what you think." With this, Morgan stood, replaced his broad hat and offered a pleasant smile. He turned, and walked the length of the library without looking back.

Poynter had remained silent on more than the Circle of poets, and his own planned publication. He had not told Morgan of The Perception. Had this been a mistake?

Poynter considered the matter for a moment, and knew his approach had been right. He should not state his case like a salesman on his rounds, desperate to rustle up trade. The web of publicity should draw an audience towards him, and the audience would be the correct one. If Morgan was so observant, as he had

clearly stated, then he would have seen the poster on the wall. He should have realized the weight of Poynter's intention. Morgan should come on the night.

Chapter Sixteen

*An Evening of Anguish*

ALTHOUGH HE WAS NO LONGER a clergyman, Beevers had not lost interest in his previous career. Indeed, his previous vocation. The old man's perusal of his parish magazines combined a desire for nostalgic reflection, and a quest to uncover any hidden pearls he might have committed to the page. Beevers knew his approach to problems had always been pragmatic yet positive. Even so, the changing years had an effect on his personality - just as the sandstone cliffs of Hastings had altered through the erosions of time. Whether this process had created a craggier yet wiser personality, Beevers could not say for sure. But he hoped paper encounters with his younger, clerical self might give clue to both age and experience.

The soft lamplight faded by the window, where the frame stood stark upon the winter sky. The chimneys and rooftops were a frieze of deep blue cut-outs, patched by a growing number of illuminated windows. The vanishing sun had left a wash of orange-olive light, which transcended upwards to a richer blue. Clouds scudded southwards in the air like fragments of dark, shredded cloth.

It was a beautiful sky. But this was a cold beauty, at the end of a windswept day. Beevers had taken Doris out that morning, as usual, when the sky's clarity invited excursion. Alas, their trip to West Hill had been ruined by a sudden, almost spiteful

hail. Beevers had taken refuge in a café, and cut the walk short despite the dog's disappointment.

Beevers had felt cheated by the weather. The early brightness had cleared his morning lethargy, and he had joined Paula at the breakfast table as if rushing to work himself. The day's promise had quickly diminished, and it joined the catalogue of similar days that had made this week a grim one.

Yet there was God's purpose in all of it. Without this feeling of dissatisfaction, maybe Beevers would never have turned to his files and become intrigued by the minutiae of moments lost. As he looked through those copies of *The Parish Gathering*, Beevers could feel the spirit of his earlier self nodding beside him, pleased the old gentleman still found value in these stapled pages. The format had been much the same for many a year: a lead column by the Reverend, mixing parish affairs, philosophy and humour with a mystical edge...allowing a subtle religious flavour to percolate the piece. There had been other articles, of course, exploring avenues of the scripture. Mr. Chadwick had delved into historical discussion, and Penny Goodwin the local wildlife.

It was as Beevers browsed one such leader that a nagging thought turned to full realization. Despite the light, conversational tone he maintained on the page, Beevers had often touched upon very real problems. While his parish had been a rural one, embracing an adequately financed flock, it had retained its fair share of social problems. One such was referred to obliquely

here, in the issue for November 1976, when Beevers had sought to underline the advice he had given to a woman in deep distress.

'We have our villages and hills,' ran the article, 'and this is the land that God has granted us, and in which our trials and tribulations are played. It is tempting to walk up a great hill and feel all such problems are reduced to the trivial by the sheer excitement of the scene. While it is wonderful to accept nature's inspiration, we need caution with the good things in life...as in gorging on too much cake. If there are difficulties and problems beneath us, then we share the troubles of the suffering until a solution has come to pass. The hills and valleys are the wider picture, but we must not forget the lives they contain.'

Beevers felt a strange detachment from the present moment, as if he had put down his pen on writing these words and read them for the first time. Yes, that woman. Vanessa...somebody. The case seemed clear to him now. Her depression had led to a harassed view of village life and her reputation within. Beevers had offered advice as best he could, without resorting to a false jollity, but these better words had come to him while composing the magazine. It had given him a special pleasure to pop that month's *Parish Gathering* through Vanessa's door, knowing she would find a comforting read.

The precise outcome escaped him now. Beevers recalled she had moved from the village, but had been more positive in later days. He had sought no credit for this upturn, but the matter reminded him of more recent business. Beevers remembered his cliff-top

encounter of the early spring. His meeting with that troubled young man.

Poetry had been his passion. An obsession, even. There had been an emphasis on the dark and morbid, which had left an uneasy impression. But his appearance at the Easter fair had been cause for hope. The fellow had lightened his mood with the springtime weather. At least, that had been the impression.

Beevers glanced up from his stack of little magazines. He had stored them for years in a wickerwork basket, like some sort of scriptural picnic. As can often be the case at the coming of dusk, even a short break in observation produced a startling result: the sudden lack of light, the quickening fall of darkness. There was still a deep green aura behind the roofs of the old town, but the night held domain above.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beevers had still been scrutinizing his newsletters the following morning, and Paula saw little of her uncle. Her son, Duncan, was on half-term holiday, so she had other attention to give. Paula had wandered along the seafront in the afternoon, and Duncan had been glad of the exercise. The route had taken them through a subway beneath the road, featuring bas-relief designs of the Norman Conquest. These were intended to mimic the Bayeux Tapestry, although the effect was more reminiscent of the Fuzzy Felt kits that Paula remembered from childhood. She had loved

sticking the felt shapes onto fuzzy board, to create her own pictures and designs.

Paula hadn't seen a Fuzzy Felt kit for a long time. Perhaps they lived on in charity shops, even if a little battered. The subway had emerged onto a pedestrianized street, with a variety of traders. Many dealt in souvenirs and novelties, providing a fine range of quirky purchases, although there was the inevitable blight of McDonalds. The Old Town was free of such things, but the main part of Hastings catered for all. Paula liked to sneer as she passed the window, hoping the diners felt sick.

She had looked in the charity shops, although not for Fuzzy Felt. Paula fancied a new, or new-looking, jacket, and flipped through the crowded racks. Duncan was happy looking at the children's books, and had even found another Goldy the Fish adventure. Paula paid twenty pence for the colourful hardback, Goldy the Fish and the Mermaid's Kiss.

Paula bought a takeaway sandwich, with crisps and a drink for Duncan, and wandered to the main shopping precinct. This had been built on the site of the old cricket ground, which had occupied a space more prime for retail than sport - at least, in the current age.

The precinct was better than many. It had been constructed with beige brick, and had cast-iron pillars supporting a glazed canopy above the shop fronts. Paula sat on one of the benches in the paved square outside, where she and Duncan enjoyed their

snacks. Duncan soon asked for his book, which Paula gave him, although she had not yet found the correct charity shop jacket.

The coming festival of Halloween was made evident by the window of a chain bookstore. It held a display of creepy children's books, featuring wicked witches with green faces and stripy tights. Maybe I should try an outfit like that, thought Paula. If she had a daughter, it would be fine fancy dress. Even so, Paula was aware of her uncle's reaction to the festival. A painted pumpkin was one thing, an entire costume another. He was very serious when it came to the supernatural, as his investigations attested. He was equally serious about his religion.

The interior of the precinct resembled a Victorian railway station. There was a high, glass roof and coloured lamps, while the bustle of shoppers had a distinct echo. A man's figure moved with more deliberation, darkly clad and austere. He emerged through the imposing, arched entrance, and made his way across the square.

The oversized figure of a cricketer stood outside, frozen in an action pose as if trying to whack a non-existent ball. The metal statue had become a favourite climbing feature for children, with his bat swung high, although it had not been designed as such. As Paula watched a child negotiate the statue's limbs, another figure caught her eye. It was a lean-faced man with a solemn expression, and solemn clothes to match. He was a man with a purpose, thought Paula. He was walking through the crowd without

distraction, while the shoppers moved to and fro in layers of activity.

Where had she seen him before?

The man seemed interested in the statue. He stopped for a moment, allowing Paula to study him. She was not close enough to see clearly, but the general outline told her enough. She had seen him...sometime in the springtime. When? Hadn't he lingered by her jewellery, before buying one of the bangles?

On his many errands preceding his evening of poetry, Poynter had invariably wandered to places other than his usual haunts. The shopping precinct was large and central, so it could not be avoided forever. Poynter found it relatively harmonious, and could imagine it pleasurable to those who sought such pastimes.

He had no interest in sport, but had paused to examine the frozen cricketer. Poynter was fascinated by the paradox of its active pursuit, and the solid manner of its depiction.

Paula could see him, quite clearly, from her vantage point some fifty feet away. Then an old lady in a blue mac sat on the bench opposite, heaving herself down with world-weary gratitude. Paula's view was blocked for a moment, so she smiled at Duncan and concentrated on her sandwich. But it was impossible to resist another glance. Paula leaned right, clearing the view past the old lady's head. The man was turning, and walking towards her. Had he spotted her?

The man's eye line did not meet her own. But he was clearly the man she remembered. Then Duncan pointed at something in his book. "Mum - what's that?" he asked.

Paula glanced at the illustration. "A jellyfish," she replied. Goldy the Fish was weaving through its rippling fronds, as the mysterious figure moved through the crowds.

Paula looked back. The man was turning with a swish of his black coat. Then he began to walk away from her, past the Town Hall - an old, sandstone building that adjoined the square. He disappeared round a corner, and was lost from sight.

\* \* \* \* \*

The function room of the wine bar had a rich and shadowy decor, which could only lend atmosphere to the evening. Even so, Poynter knew that its fixtures and fittings would be familiar to regular customers. If he could have transported the whole interior onto a theatrical stage, it would have presented an impressive vignette. As it was, the properties of the wood and brass needed an extra touch, to lift the evening from the makeshift to *inspired*.

During his perambulations through Hastings, Poynter had found a shop selling lithographs and antique maps, reproduced as modern posters. He had purchased one of a crumbling temple, knowing it had no relevance to the poems. But it would lend an air of decadence to the proceedings. Adding to the effect he wished to achieve, Poynter had purchased several tall candles and - using a

borrowed kitchen knife at the guesthouse - cut them into diminishing lengths. His intention was to place a row of five each side of the room, with the larger candles towards the audience. While it could bear no scrutiny as an illusion, this arrangement created a sense of false perspective. A greater depth to the room.

Poynter arrived at the advertised place before the advertised time, in the early days of November. He had arranged a date between Halloween and Bonfire Night, to avoid a clash of attractions. The time was quickening now, and Poynter had an hour to prepare. He called upon the manager, Graham, to help with the physical shifting. They moved a table to one end of the room, and Poynter covered it with a velvet drape of deepest blue. This had been another item he had purchased.

Poynter had learnt some lessons from his previous performance, during The Enlightenment at Madeleine's home, and sought to control the moves of his audience. Along with Graham, he arranged several rows of chairs before the table, keeping a strategic gap so the proximity of coughs and splutters would not stall his delivery.

Poynter had never been a great follower of music. But he had also bought a compact disc of choral chanting, which he handed to Graham. The assistant manager moved to an adjoining room and inserted it into a player. The sound of the choir began drifting through the various speakers hidden in the corners, although there was no obvious source. Without wishing to mimic the evangelical, Poynter was pleased at the aura of respectful anticipation created

by the music. He took turns in several seats, and entered the room several times in order to gauge the effect.

"Is that all right?" asked Graham, popping his head round the door. "Suitably Baroque?"

"Please...a little more quiet," said Poynter. "Almost inaudible." Graham adjusted the volume accordingly.

Poynter moved to the table with its velvet drape, and placed the diminishing candlesticks on either side. They would focus the eyes of the audience on his presence. Last of all, Poynter propped the poster of the ruined temple beneath a small electric lamp, which glowed high on the ceiling behind him. It cast a faint, amber glow onto the engraved image.

Poynter had around fifteen minutes until the performance was due to start. He had no idea how large his audience might be, or whether he would have an audience at all. The Perception would continue, no matter how desperate the enterprise seemed. As long as there was a single pair of ears to listen, bar his own, then Poynter would be happy to offer his work. Graham would listen, in any case. He had to operate the compact disc.

Poynter had not yet lit the candles, as he had saved them for an opening flourish. So when Morgan came into the room, his eyes took a moment to settle on the focus of the evening. Morgan gazed at the rows of empty seats, wondering - perhaps even sensing - how many would be filled. Then he stepped forward with a heavier tread, as a prompt to the distracted poet. Everything Morgan did, even a twitch or mannerism, was a highly deliberate move.

Poynter was sitting behind the table at the front of the room, flipping through his sheets of poetry. He glanced up to see the dark figure by the doorway, with a splash of yellow light behind him. "Good evening," said Poynter, without recognition. "Please take a seat. You are a little early." His eyes returned to the poetry.

"I do not want to disturb you," said Morgan. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Poynter straightened in his chair. The voice was familiar, even if the figure was a dim silhouette. Poynter stood as Morgan took another step forward, and the bright light in the centre of the room picked out the relief in his face.

"Please excuse me," said Poynter. "My mind was on poetry."

"I can understand," said Morgan. He nodded at Poynter's simple properties. "An intriguing display," said Morgan. "Ten candles."

"I am here to offer words, not scenery," said Poynter. "Even so, the room was a touch too minimal."

"Simplicity," said Morgan. "I thought it might be you."

"I'm sorry?" asked Poynter.

"The Perception," said Morgan. "You are the one who perceives."

"I didn't mention it," said Poynter. "It slipped my mind."

"No matter," said Morgan. "I am very observant. The poster struck me when I saw it."

Poynter nodded. "I took special care."

He recalled his initial clumsiness over the matter, on calling at one unsuitable business. "I tried this grubby printer's and asked for a lithograph. Something striking and simple. He sneered, and said something I didn't quite catch. His equipment looked most inelegant. There were crude examples on the walls, local menus and business cards, that would sell me like a jobbing tradesman. We had an altercation, he said he would do what he could, so I said no, that's an end of the matter and banged the door behind me. I could see him whisper to a lurking assistant, some kind of apprentice boy." Poynter had struggled to use tact in dealing with technicians, assuming the distilled essence of his verse would transmit itself to those around him, who would do his ideal bidding.

"Not everyone would understand your motives," said Morgan. "But the result...?"

"I looked harder," said Poynter. "Asked for advice. Found a classier establishment, with decent fonts."

Morgan nodded. "So, how about that drink?"

Poynter offered a second of indecision, then his answer. "I'm not sure if I should, just yet," he said. "I don't wish to slur my words."

"A nip couldn't do any harm," smiled Morgan. "A little fortification. The winter's drawing in, I think you need it."

Realizing his silent preparation was irrevocably lost, Poynter recanted with a grateful nod. "A small brandy," he said. "But, later..."

"The post mortem," said Morgan. His manner had a faintly mocking quality, which took Poynter aback. It was hardly the kiss of confidence for his poetry evening. But Morgan was here before time, and keen to listen. Poynter could hardly take offence.

"I hope there won't be any 'mortem' about it," murmured Poynter. He was speaking to the air. Morgan had already turned with a whisk of his coat. He strode into the passage, and down the stairs.

Poynter adjusted his papers on the table, so they made a pile of geometric neatness. Perhaps he should have arrived a little earlier, he thought. He could have arranged the room at six instead of seven, and gained an extra hour. There would have been time to skim through the more difficult poems, and even try a reading. As it was, his space was already being encroached upon. He had put himself on display.

There was no need to perform a feat of memorization, as Poynter would be reading from the page. However, this was not as simple as it seemed. His previous excursion into performance had held the listeners' attention, but his mood had been tense and unconfident. His need to impress Madeleine, and the skeptics in the audience, had only served to remind him that his presence at The Enlightenment had been that of a fish out of water. Such a fish might survive unharmed for a short period, but divorced from its natural habitat. Whether the life of isolation that Poynter had followed was natural or contrived, it was the life to which he was accustomed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Reverend Trevor Newton was familiar with many corners of Hastings, from his years as a medical practitioner. So it was easy for him to cut a route through the residential streets to the north of West Hill, and descend into the centre of town. The area near the railway station was a brasher, more commercial place than the Old Town, but the classical façades rose above the bright shop fronts. Most were closed now, as it was nearly eight - but he glanced at a few displays of novelties, and mannequins in winter coats, before continuing on his way.

Several roads had been pedestrianized with a brick surface, creating a more classical sense of urban life. This had been lost with the dominance of the motor car, but a timeless quality had returned to the streets. The Reverend appreciated the atmosphere he encountered, especially as he neared the impressive church in Trinity Street, with the neo-Gothic frontage of The Brassey Institute beyond. Its tower had merged with the black winter sky, although one or two lights were on. The scene evoked the Victorian paintings of Atkinson Grimshaw, with their dark, moody buildings against opalescent skies of blue and green.

There was a shimmer of reflection on the brick paving, which caught the yellow of electric lights and blurred them into streaks of a coppery tinge. The Reverend hastened past a restaurant, knowing the rough proximity of his destination. The lights inside

the frontage caught his eye, offering the newcomer a glow of golden warmth which, inviting at any time, could only tempt the shivering walker from the street.

However, The Reverend Newton had not lost any of his misgivings concerning the young poet who Beevers had met. While he lacked the obvious charms of his elder, and often appeared detached and even caustic in his relations, there was a shrewd head on Newton's shoulders. Despite the cold, damp weather, he paused outside the wine bar and said a silent prayer. If the poet's soul was in real distress, then he would need the help of the Almighty. In addition, Newton prayed that his own sensibilities would meet any challenge tonight.

He noticed the posters in the window, advertising tickets for a Halloween Party, a jazz duo and - of course - the event he had come to witness tonight. The Perception...an evening of poetry and insight, performed by Mr. Laurence Poynter.

The Reverend pushed open the solid wooden door, which would have served a bank equally well, and stepped into the warm interior. The polished floor reflected the glow of yellow orbs, suspended from the ceiling, while the walls were tastefully painted in a deep scarlet. This was enhanced by the smaller lamps with their orange glass shades, creating a wash of amber light. Patterned tiles had been applied to the walls at careful intervals, reflecting the light in their glaze and adding to the sense of rich decoration. The place might have been here for a hundred years, although the effect was the result of careful

design. The place had been a plain and dowdy shop, just a few years before.

It was still the early evening, so the bar had a modest trade. There were small groups chatting at tables, and a couple huddled in a booth, while the more insistent barflies perched on high, precarious stools. There was a piano tinkling in the background, and Newton tried to observe the source of the music as he peeled off his woollen gloves. Although he spotted an upright piano in a corner, on a raised podium, the lid remained closed and the keys hidden. Newton smiled. He was either witnessing a phantom or, as was far more likely, a high fidelity recording.

Although he was quite unknown to Newton, Morgan was watching the cautious Reverend from his place at the bar. He could tell, by the man's reticent entrance, that he was no regular to the premises. Neither to licensed premises in general, suspected the observant historian.

Morgan had seen Newton on the other side of the window, shivering in the cold, yet patiently scrutinizing the posters. It was unlikely he had passed by chance, but had paused to confirm the venue. He must be some friend or admirer of Poynter's, thought Morgan - or one whose dedication to poetry overcame his shirking from a public house.

Morgan had a couple of friends by his side. There was a tall, raven-haired woman in a purple dress, concealed by a long black coat, and a rather twitchy man in an anorak. The woman was chatting to the man, with some enthusiasm, while the man edged

back and forth with submissive interest. Neither took any heed of the man in the duffel coat, who had come in from the rain.

Morgan was curious, however. He watched as the Reverend caught the barmaid's eye. She had barely opened her mouth to address him when Newton, in boosting his confidence, blurted his order as if a touch inebriated. "Red wine, please!"

"Sure," smiled the barmaid. She was youngish, blonde, with her hair tied back to create a look of severity. Even so, her face was pretty above the blouse and striped waistcoat, which comprised her wine bar uniform. "There's the list," she added, pointing to a chalkboard near the bar. Newton glanced at it, but he was not too partial in his choice. "The house red," he said. "The normal red. Thank you."

Newton delved into his pocket for a five-pound note as the barmaid turned away. As he pulled the corner, a crease caught a couple of pennies and propelled them into the air. The copper coins dropped onto the wooden floor - one landing in range of easy retrieval, while the other rolled off on a spiralling trajectory. It raced beneath the heels of a passing customer, and found shelter under one of the tables.

Morgan had found his moment. He stepped across the room with a lithe motion, clapping his hand over the stray coin. Morgan held it up to the Reverend, just as the woman rose with a blur of raven hair and held the other coin beside it. There was a gentle tinkling sound as her bangles rattled.

Newton blinked his eyes for a second, a coin before each. "Why...thank you," he said. "I was clumsy." Newton held out a hand, and the coins were placed on his palm like a charitable donation.

Morgan glimpsed a strip of starched white cloth behind the gentleman's sober grey scarf. "Pleased to meet you...Reverend," he said.

The barmaid placed the glass of red wine on the counter. Newton handed her the five-pound note, and she turned for the change. "You are very observant," said Newton.

The woman smiled. "Albert can be quite...astonishing."

"But you won't need tuppence to come upstairs," said Morgan. "Are you here for The Perception?"

"Again, I must concede the point," said Newton. He took a sip of his wine.

Morgan lifted a small brandy, although not to his lips. It served as a beacon as he turned away, and started across the floor. "This way," he said. "Let's settle in our seats." The woman tilted her head, indicating Newton should follow, while the other man headed for the gents.

"Poetry!" yelled Morgan, causing a moment's hush. "Up the stairs, everyone! Poetry! Food for the great enlightened!" The couple in the booth giggled as the trio continued on their way.

Chapter Seventeen

*Solitude and Fear*

WITH A SUDDEN JOLT, the wooden cubicle began its ascent to the top of West Hill. It was a close match to the other lift, on the neighbouring East Hill. The two encircled the Old Town like the claws of a crab.

Poynter sat alone at the front of the vehicle, which began its short ascent. A brick tunnel swallowed the rising chamber. It was lit only by the upward glow of electric lamps, on either side of the rails. His reflected face looked back as a spectre against the dark background of passing tracks. The lights created an effect of orange patches, which swept across the roof of the cubicle between phases of intermittent shadow.

As Poynter glanced aside at the passing brickwork, its diagonal lines suggested it was the chamber that was lurching forwards, rather than the tracks that sloped. Poynter resumed his gaze through the front window, although the experience held an uneasy terror. He could not overcome a sense of dizziness, and felt his stomach heave.

The lift was one of two, which rose as its companion descended. The two passed each other in the middle. Poynter could see a figure within the opposing chamber, moving towards him. It was veiled by effects of light and shade, similar to those pervading his own vehicle. For a second, Poynter caught a glimpse of the face. It was angular, stern and staring straight ahead.

It was Morgan!

The figure did not react to Poynter, even as he craned to see him pass the side windows. Then it was nothing but a shadow, diminishing away down the shaft. Poynter felt his heart beating fast, although he knew his mood to be irrational. He had not seen a ghost, but a physical man. A man he had expected to see. Yet there had been something strangely intrusive about the encounter, at an unexpected moment. Poynter had felt vulnerable within the chamber, and had been glad of his privacy. His solitude had been broken, resulting in a sensation of anxiety. Even fear.

The sensation did not lapse until the chamber slowed a few moments later. The custodian of the upper station opened the doors to both shaft and chamber, allowing Poynter to emerge from the confining space. He stepped through the station onto the breezy grass, struck by an overwhelming relief.

Poynter should have been grateful for his suffering. The frisson of fear within the lift could only help his poetry. But he had suffered enough during his evening of anguish. For once, Poynter relished the feeling of elation and health an open space could bring. The bumbling, retired clergyman came to mind, who he had met here back in the spring. What had he said? "God's air is my confectionery, sir." While Poynter had no faith in a personal deity, he agreed with the general sentiment.

Poynter walked to the sandstone brink of West Hill, and gazed over the rooftops of the Old Town. He was more familiar with the town now, and was able to trace his many meanderings within the

panorama. The buildings made a patchwork of shades, both subdued and colourful, while East Hill rose with its own lift. This might have been less frightening, for it did not include a tunnel.

The sky was grey, with a smear of charcoal black that threatened a burst of rain. Whether this would be heavy or transient, Poynter could hardly tell. No doubt the sea dogs of the fishing fleet would be calculating the odds, divining the meteorological outlook from the colour of the seaweed, the screech of a forlorn seagull.

Such an attitude typified Poynter's early approach. Inwardly, he admonished himself. Despite his ponderous ambulation through the town, had he really become any the wiser? Why should the fishermen be a superstitious bunch, or prone to archaic methods? Perhaps they adhered to worthy traditions, handed from father to son. They might equally use almanacs and the weather bureau.

A sense of folly overwhelmed Laurence Poynter. Had his poetic undertaking been a sham? For whatever reason, he had felt it his duty to impart a feeling of mortal dread into the inhabitants of those cottages. Of course, only the smallest proportion could have attended The Perception - a fact borne out on the night. The quality of that attendance had been more important: the listeners should appreciate his poetry, and allow its sensibility to enter their lives.

The rooftops became paler behind a veil of insubstantial rain. Poynter continued to gaze across the town, as if maintaining

a personal vigil. Perhaps it was a vigil to find himself, like a man lost at sea.

The scene in the wine bar had been a pretentious charade, compared to the grand sweep of reality. Why should anyone who had the coast and cliff-tops seek an artificial atmosphere, imparted through selective words by a biased observer? Poynter knew poetry and literature were valuable, but there had been something vain and portentous about his public appearance.

The Perception? It had been nothing of the kind. Only in retrospect, and at some physical distance, could Poynter perceive the value of his evening. It had been an evening of anguish, indeed, and the emotion was his own. But the anguish within the poems was less important than his personal anguish while reading them.

As with the CORV anthology of the previous year, Poynter had fallen into the trap of believing a dramatic or weighty presentation would underline the value of his message. The truth had been the opposite, in both cases. Roland's anthology had eventually sold at a remaindered price, as a gift item for the export market, while Poynter's evening had forced him to endure an embarrassing torture. He had combined the duties of a nervous host, desperate interpreter and flushed organizer of an advertised event.

Madeleine had been far more fortunate and, in her way, perceptive. She had offered The Enlightenment in a domestic setting, with faces she knew around her, and other artistic

talents to broaden the appeal. Poynter had sought to be his own presenter, performer and promoter. The poet had been lost in this jostle of priorities, leaving him open to critical baiting and unable to respond.

As he looked at the rooftops below, Poynter thought of the people inside the buildings. Why should his poetry be important to them? Why should it matter, any more than that tacky ship in a bottle from his previous visit? This was a seaside town, with salt in the air. A place of chips, arcade games, flotsam and jetsam. The sea was a masterpiece of abstract forces, rolling through the influence of lunar motion while its mood changed with the weather. The clouds were great sculptures, floating aloof above the land. Why would those who nestled in this landscape care about a stream of miserable rhymes? Words Poynter had honed to perfection, yet only on his own terms. The poems expressed his introverted reactions to time and place, or provided a gazetteer of winter chills. His version of the coast, so far, had mentioned little but fatal effects. A sudden fall from a cliff-top, or the engulfing effects of water. He was drowning in his own metaphors.

There was a paradox in Poynter's approach to the coast. He found these places attractive, but only to create a literature that sought to repel. The town could see the funny side. It was laughing at him.

At that moment, something extraordinary happened. Poynter began to laugh. It began as a slight vibration in his stomach, which he initially associated with queasiness. Had the altitude of

the cliff affected his brain? It was surely not a case of oxygen starvation, for he was barely a hundred feet up. More a case of vertigo, perhaps.

The idea broke any sense of restraint. Poynter's stomach quaked before a full-bodied chuckle, and he allowed its release into the cool autumn air. "Solitude and fear!" he gasped, mocking the very ideas. Poynter put a hand across his mouth, attempting to stifle this ludicrous outburst.

It must be a neurotic reaction, he thought. All the restrained emotions, rushing up at once. Even so, he felt a lot better. Solitude and fear were concepts, rather than states of mind. He had become too close to his subject, with no sense of distance. He had felt alone in front of that audience, and the fact had brought him fear. Hence, the stilted performance.

Poynter was laughing at himself, for once. As he did so, he was laughing with the town. Suddenly, he felt no longer an intruder, but part of the place. His home was in London, but he had connected with Hastings. The sense of disturbance and detachment had vanished. Did he wish to continue with these poems? Poynter was no longer sure.

Unbeknown to Poynter, a hat, brow, face and shoulders were rising above the grass. They quickly became a full-bodied figure, with a long coat flapping in the air.

Morgan paced towards the other, leaner figure that stood upon the hill. There was urgency to his motion, although the casual greeting belied the fact. "Laurence! The man at the top!"

Poynter turned. He felt a tingle of his earlier dread on seeing Morgan, despite the man's friendly and open manner. There was nothing tense or forbidding in those craggy features. At least, not on this occasion. As the rosiest sunset brings darkness in its wake, Poynter knew his new train of optimistic thought would be diverted by this companion. Poynter would try to maintain their courteous relationship, but with an extra element of wariness.

"So we are," said Poynter, in answer to Morgan's comment. There had only been a second's pause between the two, but it had been filled with many inferences.

"I was afraid you had not received my message," said Morgan. "I spoke to a Mrs. Hargreaves, on the telephone. She said she would give you a note."

"As she did," said Poynter. "I'm sorry, Mr. Morgan. I was a little behind."

"As I noticed," replied Morgan.

"I wasn't so well yesterday," added Poynter. "Mrs. Hargreaves gave me aspirin, for a headache. I went back to bed. She handed me the note at six o'clock, when I came down for a light supper."

"I understand," said Morgan. "She told me you were feeling poorly, after the night before. I said there was no urgency, as long as you got the note. My chief worry was missing you altogether. I thought you might pack your bags before we'd had a chance to talk."

"I will be leaving tomorrow," said Poynter. "I've done what I came to do. I am not a poor man, but I do not have an inexhaustible supply of money. It's silly to stay at the guesthouse when I have a home in London. I've learnt a lot from The Perception, and I need to take stock. I have reversed my earlier situation, when I came to Hastings to escape the stress of London. I have created a new stress, in Hastings, which I need to escape."

Morgan snorted with amusement. "Escape you shall," he said. "But do not write off our fair town, just yet. I'm sure it has other things to offer."

"I know it has," said Poynter. "That is just the problem, to a receptive mind. I came here with my own blinkers, determined to see the place in a certain way. A dark and sinister way. I did not allow the senses to educate me, at their own pace."

"It is possible to change," said Morgan.

"I think he was right," added Poynter. "The old man."

"The...who?" murmured Morgan.

"We met when I came, in the springtime," said Poynter. "I was too arrogant to listen to him. I could have saved a lot of trouble."

A look of concern flickered across Morgan's features. He knew most of the local characters, whether he liked them or not. It was useful to know who to speak to, and who to be wary of. Without wishing to create suspicion, Morgan tried to learn more from the younger man.

"Have you mentioned this before?" asked Morgan. Of course, he knew Poynter had never done so - but feigning ignorance was the best way to learn. "I might know the fellow," he added, with a jocular touch.

Poynter scratched his head. "Oh, what was his name...?"

Morgan waited.

"He had a little dog," said Poynter. "He was a vicar, once. James, somebody..."

Morgan nodded. He knew exactly whom Poynter meant, although he did not communicate the fact. "Shall we go for a coffee?" asked Morgan. "The altitude is bracing, but one can have too much of a good thing. I'd like to talk with you some more, about the other night. Put a few things straight."

Poynter nodded. "Join me in the lift," he said. "I have a return ticket, and so do..."

Morgan regarded the poet, quizzically, as he began to flounder. The man was confused about something.

Poynter had been struck by a curious circumstance, and sought to clarify the matter. "Of course, you will need another ticket," he said. "You have been up and down already."

"I beg your pardon?" frowned Morgan.

"We passed a little earlier," said Poynter, glancing towards the lift. "You didn't seem to notice me. It struck me as odd, but then...you must have been wondering where I was."

"I knew where to find you," said Morgan. "My instructions were clearly worded. The top of the hill, near the castle."

Poynter felt an uneasy chill, although he ascribed it to the autumnal air. "I was sure it was you..."

"You must have been mistaken," replied Morgan. "I was most specific, and knew you would not be late."

"Although I was, by a few minutes," said Poynter.

"And I, by a similar amount," said Morgan, "for which, I apologize. There was some thought in the delay. I could see you, up on the hill, as I walked along the road. Your figure is a distinctive one, and I am gifted by exceptional eyesight. I decided to allow you a moment's solace. So I didn't take the lift, but made my own way up. A few minutes later, I appeared." Morgan spread his arms like a jester, so the coat flapped darkly against the pale vista.

"Perhaps...I was mistaken," said Poynter, although he was by no means certain.

"I think we need that coffee," smiled Morgan, slapping a hand on Poynter's shoulder. "I'll buy a ticket for the trip down, if you still wish to use the lift."

"You may use mine," said Poynter, handing Morgan his return ticket. "Perhaps I will benefit from the exercise."

Morgan took the ticket with a satisfied grin. "Descent is always easier," said Morgan, as he turned away. Morgan strolled across the grass, towards the upper station. It was a little below the level of the top. Poynter watched Morgan disappear, and took a deep breath of hilltop air.

It had been Morgan in the lift. He knew it. So what was the explanation? Morgan had either been telling a lie, or had an exceptionally close double - even down to the costume. Had Poynter been hallucinating, with the stress of The Perception?

There was, perhaps, a fourth possibility. It was chilling in its implications. Could Morgan have some kind of doppelganger? A spiritual entity at work in the town, matching his form exactly. In which case...was it wise to linger with Morgan, or turn away? Should he pack his bags and go?

For the moment, Poynter did not have many options. Morgan was taking the lift, while Poynter still had to return to ground level. There was probably a way to avoid Morgan, even if it involved a prolonged detour. Poynter could reach the guesthouse without encountering the man, settle the bill and depart. This would have to be done quickly, as Morgan knew the name of the guesthouse. He could discover its whereabouts by telephoning the owners, and call round on some pretext. However, Poynter had never told Morgan his London address, so the connection would be broken.

Unless...Morgan really did have a doppelganger, which had latched onto the poet. One that could wait for him, watch him, follow him. In which case, escape would be impossible. Morgan would see everywhere. Poynter snatched his head this way and that, but there was no-one around. He sighed at his own gullibility.

As Poynter walked down along the path, he realized he had made another mistake. Why had he not asked the ticket seller at the upper station if Morgan had been there before? That might have

disproved the ridiculous doppelganger theory, which could only prey on his mind. It was too late now. The cliff lift was already running, and Morgan would expect to meet him at the bottom.

Poynter had no choice but to continue.

The lightness that Poynter had felt at the top of West Hill had now been dispelled by Morgan. He was not a man who could be argued with, although his manner was entirely affable. There was a purpose beneath that easygoing style. A possessive, even sinister, one.

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Morgan had led Poynter to a bookshop in the Old Town, tucked away down a side street. There was a great store of musty volumes, ranging from the antiquarian to the modern paperback, while a kettle, teabags and coffee jar allowed customers to sit for a contemplative beverage while glancing at the world outside.

There was another shop opposite, with picture frames on the pavement. Some were empty, while others held originals and prints of varied provenance. A few pedestrians ambled past, while a couple browsed through the pictures. Raindrops spattered the glass, as the clouds finally ruptured. The street was a cold grey-blue compared to the cosy bookshop. Its loaded shelves and colourful spines were reflected in the glass, along with the seated customers.

Morgan was closer to the window than Poynter. He glanced outside on occasions, craning his neck a little as if he could see the end of the street. Had anything caught his interest, or was he unable to lapse from his habit of scrutiny? Poynter could hardly tell. It was of no importance. What mattered now were the words conveyed between them, and their implications for the future.

"Everything we do and say," said Morgan, "is an interaction between the man who lies within, and the man who is on the surface...who presents himself to the world."

Poynter was startled by such a statement, and found his attention quickening. Had Morgan prepared a monologue, or was he able to conjure wisdom on a whim?

"It is good to look deeper," added Morgan, "unless one cannot bear to see the turmoil within. The turmoil can seep from the innards, and affect the outer man. So the outer man is no longer the normal man, in the view of a normal world. He is a figure of instability, eccentricity...even danger."

Poynter was impressed by the mood of this speech. Had Morgan delivered it before, or was it an original, inspired moment? Either way, Morgan had a serious message to convey.

"We make an important choice, when we are sick with society," said Morgan. "When we begin to create a circle of our own, to protect us from its influence, or to influence society in turn. One man's rebellion, in a world of conformity, can seem trivial if there is no effect. Rebellion is no less real to the one who makes it. He is true to his inner feelings. The mundane becomes a

surface, with deeper truths below. As he sees himself, so he sees the world. The world has changed for one, if no-one else, but the change is no less real. Your project is not a failure, Laurence."

Poynter was grateful for the final line, even if he felt lost by the expansive scope of Morgan's words. He had spoken with a measured power, producing an aura of calm resonance. "I thank you for saying so," nodded Poynter. "I...don't know what I expected from the evening. More formality, perhaps, like a church service. That was the impression I tried to give, although there was no worship intended."

Morgan shuffled in his chair. "The business with the candles? Go on..."

"Think of the poster," said Poynter. "It was very simple. It said what I would do. I didn't want to stand up and talk about myself. I was annoyed when that fellow asked me, after the first poem. It was an intrusive question, when no questions had been called for."

Morgan sipped his coffee, alert to every nuance.

"I had made a confident start," added Poynter. "One of the poems from an...earlier event. I knew I could read it well."

"It was quite impressive," said Morgan. "The white horse, melting into snowflakes. I can see that horse, those snowflakes."

Poynter was touched by Morgan's accurate recall. "My friend Madeleine wrote nature poems, but I twisted the subject round. These images are powerful, like heraldic animals. There is a kind of frozen energy."

"You conveyed the essence," said Morgan. "It was good to start with a poem, before an introduction. It gripped us to our seats. At least, those who were in the seats."

"Late arrivals," murmured Poynter. "They didn't distract me, too much. How many were there? Twenty?"

"I counted twenty-two heads," replied Morgan. "In addition to the poet, of course."

"There were forty seats," said Poynter. "I didn't fill them all."

"What did you expect?" asked Morgan. "Forty was an arbitrary figure. You could have placed ten chairs, and needed more. Not everyone seeks perception."

"I realize."

"And if you lost seven before the end, so be it. You were charging no fee, there was nothing to bind them. No-one had a wasted evening."

"I appreciate what you say."

Morgan smiled, as a pleasantry before his critical words. "I didn't care for the next poem," he said. "It was too personal, in an obvious way. Had you planned the order precisely?"

"Pretty much," said Poynter. "I could extend or compress the evening, depending on the audience reaction. In the end, I read everything I had, although quicker than planned."

"You appeared thrown by that fellow's question. You said the next poem had an answer."

"I was being a little mischievous," said Poynter.

"The poem was about your father?"

"There was a father in the poem," said Poynter, "but not my father exactly."

"An anecdotal equivalent?"

"It was...like my father," said Poynter. "The personality."

"You thought his remembrance would satisfy the man?"

"Perhaps."

"Your father was a distant figure."

"That was...fairly accurate," said Poynter.

"You created a mood," said Morgan, "although it was not very subtle. You painted your father as a mystery, and the children as wraiths. There was nothing of substance for the listener. The poem would satisfy those seeking melodrama, but The Perception demanded more."

Poynter felt cornered for a moment. Morgan's tone was friendly, but he was probing him too. Poynter sipped his coffee as a refuge rather than refreshment. He was able to avert Morgan's eyes.

Morgan did not push the point. He was quick to reassure Poynter. "The winter poems were excellent," he said. "You gave the cold a tangible reality, like a new element. I felt I could bathe myself in its vapours."

Poynter lowered his cup, in gratitude. "That was the work of last winter, before I came to Hastings. I have changed a little since then. I have...a more objective approach."

"The extremes were good," said Morgan. "You have made a retrograde move."

Again, Poynter felt awkward in Morgan's presence. He tried to shift the bias of their conversation. "That other man, who kept getting up. I found him very distracting."

"He came with me," said Morgan. "Russell Saunders. I apologize for his manoeuvres. Russell has a bladder problem, and made several trips to the lavatory. He should not have had that beer."

"I needed my brandy, at the end."

"I thought you would," said Morgan. "Russell was most impressed by your poetry, although literature is not his field. It was not the composition that interested him, but the underlying themes. He admired the second poem. The references to your father."

"Yes..."

"He wondered about your mother, too, although I had no answer to give. Perhaps you could have a chat, one day."

"Perhaps we could," said Poynter, although he did not relish the prospect. "The poems stand on their own. I do not wish to provide reams of explanation."

"Jacqueline is more artistic," said Morgan. "She could see what you were doing. You never spoke to Jacqueline?"

"The tall woman with the dark hair?"

Morgan nodded.

"I had to retrieve my candles," explained Poynter. "There was a compact disc, in the other room."

"Jacqueline was struck by the music," said Morgan. "Again, I felt you were edging on melodrama. Ritual is a powerful force, which should not be treated lightly. The man who stood up was not interested in poetry. He was interested in you."

"Yes," said Poynter. "The thin man, with glasses."

"A priest," said Morgan. "We met in the bar. He didn't stay for another drink. I was sorry you left so soon."

"I needed the air," said Poynter. He had finished his coffee now, and sat fiddling with an empty sugar sachet. Morgan fancied a second cup, but broached an important matter first.

"Laurence. You say you are returning to London?"

"Yes. Tonight, or tomorrow morning."

"Could I prevail on you - to extend your stay? Just for a day or two?"

Poynter was not surprised by such a request. Morgan had been granting him an uncommon degree of interest. Poynter did not wish to appear enthused or scornful. He responded with a simple, "Why?"

"My friends," said Morgan. "I shall speak to them. We often gather of an evening, so if I can arrange a suitable time...?"

"You would like me to come along?" asked Poynter.

Morgan nodded. "You will find our circle to your liking, with no disrespect to your previous endeavour. If your lodgings are insufficient, I would be happy to accommodate you."

This was a step too far. Poynter knew he must retain his independence, but was intrigued by Morgan's invitation. "Very well," he said. "I'll extend my stay for another week. If I haven't heard by then..."

"You will have heard," said Morgan. "I shall telephone tomorrow evening with a provisional date, and confirm as soon as I can."

"I look forward to it," said Poynter. "Shall we have..."

"...another coffee?" added Morgan. "Let me fetch them, Laurence. In gratitude."

\* \* \* \* \*

As Poynter lay in the guesthouse that night, the conversation with Morgan drifted through his mind. He could not remember every word, but the overall flavour remained. Poynter was still puzzled by that moment of panic, within the rising chamber. Dinner and a bath had dulled the worry, so he could dismiss his more extreme theory. A doppelganger? Of course not. It must have been a likeness, a trick of the light.

As Morgan lay in his own bed, he felt pleased with the day's developments. Poynter had not vanished after The Perception, although he was still a little unnerved. Morgan had reassured the young poet, and turned him around.

Morgan was proud of his inspiration, that morning high upon West Hill. He had arrived half an hour early to ready himself, so

Poynter would not be missed. A terrible fear had struck Morgan when the poet was late, and he had descended in the lift to find him. Morgan had planned to walk towards the guesthouse, as he had already discovered the address. He might encounter Poynter, by chance.

In the end, it had not mattered. The shadowed face of Poynter had risen towards him, as his own chamber descended. Morgan had not lied about his exceptional eyesight, and could identify the figure at once. He could not resist a manipulative trick, and maintained a stony gaze ahead. What wild theories would the poet concoct? At what stage would he panic?

It was Morgan who had the commanding presence, and Poynter had fallen under his influence. Morgan fell asleep with dreams, not of sweetness, but the primal darkness he loved.

Chapter Eighteen

*A Promise of Devotion*

BY MORNING, THE DRIZZLY WEATHER had brightened considerably. Not enough to wake Beevers like a bugle call, but it matched a playful melody on a tin whistle in its powers of revival. The retired priest rose at an hour that suggested he welcomed the day. After all, each day was a gift from God, in his own estimation. But the same might be said of a cosy bed, comforting and close of a morning.

The first heave to escape the blankets was always the worst. Once he was up, Beevers was both active and relaxed. He had things to do, but time to do them - the perfect combination. After dressing, washing and shaving, he met Paula as she came in through the front door. She had just returned from taking Duncan to school, and had bought a morning paper. They shared a little chat over current affairs, although Paula had another trip in mind.

"Did I mention that shop in Eastbourne?" she asked. "The one that wants to take my jewellery?"

"You mentioned something..." said Beevers.

Paula took a sip of her coffee. "They saw that photo in the Artist's Newsletter. They want some bangles, maybe other stuff. I'm going there today."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Beevers.

"Haven't sold enough on the stalls," said Paula, "and with Christmas coming up..."

"As the high street stores tell us," nodded Beevers. "They do a better job than the church. One would think Christmas is a celebration of bearded men, rather than the birth of Our Lord."

Paula frowned for a second, sensing a source of amusement but unable to define it. "But wasn't...Jesus a bearded man?"

Beevers smiled. "So he was, Paula. But not when he was born."

"And he didn't have a white, fluffy beard," said Paula. "Or a red coat and a sack of presents."

"Few snowmen in Palestine, either," murmured Beevers.

"If we ever get any snow," said Paula.

"Global warming?" queried Beevers. He was becoming used to his grandniece's concerns.

"Mmm." Paula mused on her plans. "I'll be back in Hastings by three. Fetch Duncan from school..."

"I could do that," said Beevers, raising a tufty eyebrow.

"It's no problem," said Paula.

"You could give me a ring." Beevers let his words hang in the air. He had no desire to rush Paula.

"Depends how it goes," said Paula. "Mind you, there are things I can do in Eastbourne..."

"I'll be pottering around," said Beevers. He glanced at the kitchen clock. It was nearly ten. "Let's go up the road together," he added. "I can walk the dog, get back by eleven. Then I'm here if you ring."

"Okay," said Paula.

"No need to hurry," smiled Beevers. "Enjoy the day."

However much she loved Duncan, the wily uncle knew his niece thrived on a little freedom. Following a refreshing walk through the Old Town, Beevers said goodbye as Paula headed for the railway station.

As usual, he followed the pathways onto the grassy plain on West Hill, with the ruins of Hastings Castle in sight. There was no brooding poet to be seen, although never a visit passed by without Beevers considering his cliff-top encounter. The poet had alarmed him on that occasion. But his manifestation at the Easter Fete had suggested those fears were unfounded.

Today's visit passed with no encounter of any kind. It was not long before Beevers turned on his way, along with the lively dog, and found himself at home. After muffins toasted under the grill, and another look through the paper, Beevers opened the back door and stepped into the garden.

There were a variety of minor jobs, which he had been meaning to tackle. While they lacked any great difficulty taken one by one, the sum total provided a challenge. The easiest task would have the most immediate impact. There were leaves to be raked from beneath a neighbour's tree, which overhung the fence.

The tools were kept in the wooden shed, at the far end of the garden. The distance could be walked in a few strides, as the garden was a tiny patch of land. Beevers enjoyed this miniature journey, and moved at a slow, observant pace. Avoiding a snail on the pathway, he reached the small wooden building.

The shed had been constructed by Paula's late husband, and had remained largely unchanged. As Beevers opened the door, he was overcome as ever by the sweet, inviting smell of timber. There was also the dormant potential of the tools, which were bunched in the corners. The workbench held a jumble of earthenware pots, seed packets, tins and other miscellanea.

Beevers sat on the stool for a moment, regarding the pitched roof as he might that of a church or cathedral. Whatever the dimension, there was the same sense of overhanging shadow. A comforting sense of enclosure.

After dwelling on nothing in particular, Beevers found a rake in the corner. He stepped outside and began pulling the fallen leaves across the grass, into a pile by the side of the path. Some had already turned slick and slimy on the concrete, where they had been trodden down in yesterday's rain. Beevers knew he should have started the job earlier.

At some point - almost subconsciously - he became aware that the doorbell was ringing. It had sounded like distant music or birdsong. Beevers turned, in reaction to the sound. He had not been mistaken. Beevers lowered the rake, entered the kitchen, and made his way through to the hall. He opened the door to a familiar figure. The Reverend Trevor Newton.

Beevers was most surprised. It was a rare thing for the Reverend to trouble him, for they had never been on the best of terms despite the faith they shared. "Mr. Amery-Beevers," said Newton. "I had to come. There is an important matter to discuss."

There was a look of gravity and distance in Newton's eyes, which told Beevers this was no triviality. He recognized it from others who had come to him for counsel, in times of spiritual turmoil. The Reverend had such a purpose, and counsel would be duly offered. There were matters in which Beevers was the more experienced, and they touched on unearthly matters. The leaves would stay unraked, for a while.

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Half an hour later, Beevers' face was a picture of deep concern. He had listened to Newton patiently, then with growing alarm, till the man's face became the only subject of his eyes. The living-room had grown vague beyond the balding head, so the walls and furniture resembled a charcoal sketch. Beevers could even see Newton's aura as a veil of misty light, softening the air round his head.

Newton had given an account of the poetry evening, how he had learnt of the event, and the manner of verse it included. The priest explained how he had lingered as the audience departed. He had taken time to fiddle with his coat, and look out of the window at the street below. Anything to delay his departure, so he might hear the words spoken between the poet and one particular man.

"I waited there," said Newton. "I wanted to speak to Laurence Poynter, because I found the nature of his work...unhealthy. But this other man, who I had encountered in the bar, seemed to block

my way. He was muttering something about devotion, and how Mr. Poynter should listen to his advice. I think Mr. Poynter was disappointed by the occasion, and had taken an instant dislike to me. I wanted to apologize for my question after the first poem, which I had phrased in a clumsy manner. He was even more irritated by this other man, who kept visiting the lavatory. Mr. Poynter fumbled his reading, all because of him."

Beevers brushed this matter aside. It was far too trivial.

"I was finding the wait embarrassing," said Newton, "so I dropped some money on the floor. This was a repeat of my performance in the bar, and the same woman - Jacqueline - helped me. The man looked round, as if mocking me, although Jacqueline was amiable enough. As we fumbled under the seats, I looked and saw the man write Mr. Poynter's telephone number in a pocket notebook. It was clear they meant to keep in touch - or at least, the man wanted to keep in touch with Mr. Poynter."

"Either way," murmured Beevers.

"I did not want to miss the moment," added Newton. "I stood and made some casual remark. 'I hope we'll have more of these evenings.' Mr. Poynter was a little taken aback, but the older man looked me in the eye. 'Maybe...something similar,' he said. I offered him my hand. 'We have not been properly introduced,' I said. 'The Reverend Trevor Newton.' He shook my hand, then told me his name. It was a name I had heard. 'Albert Morgan.'"

Beevers shook his head, slowly. "Why didn't you tell me about this...poetry evening?"

Newton slumped a little in his chair. "I'm sorry, James. I made a mistake." It was a rare admission between them.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the evening, Paula joined her uncle in the living-room, where he was sitting alone in silence. Beevers usually saved his introspection for elsewhere, but had lapsed into quiet with Paula in her bath and Duncan playing in his bedroom. The Beevers who joined mother and son was a jolly one. It was rare for him to bring solemnity to the shared spaces.

"Is everything all right?" asked Paula. She placed a hand on her uncle's shoulder and sat on the sofa beside him.

"I'm...not sure," murmured Beevers. "Do you remember a man called Morgan?"

"I should think so," said Paula, with a trace of worry.

"He's been quiet for a long time," said Beevers. "There was a suggestion of trouble from another quarter, back in the spring. Another man. A poet. I believe you met him."

Paula tried to picture the face.

"He came to the fete," added Beevers. "I told you I'd met him before."

Paula gasped. "Ah! Yes! I saw him the other day. He was strolling through the shopping centre."

Beevers stood. He stared out at the garden, remembering the unexpected arrival of Newton. Paula had delivered a new shock,

underlined by the distant crackle of a firework. Bonfire Night was over, but the pyrotechnics lingered over several nights.

The old man turned to glare at Paula, who sat like a child on the sofa. Her legs were a little spread apart, angled in towards the knees. "And you didn't tell me?" snapped Beevers. "Do you know how important this could be?"

Paula's face was a picture of astonished pain. "I'm sorry, James. I made a mistake."

Then Beevers' face softened, and he sat beside Paula once more. He took her hand gently in his, for she had suffered enough pain in her life. "No. I'm the one who should be sorry," said Beevers. "That was an unworthy lapse, God forgive me. But there have been too many mistakes. If you see anything else, Paula - anything at all - you must keep me informed. Understand?"

Paula nodded. "I do."

Although it was not obvious, there was a tear at the corner of her eye. She had not been upset by the tension, but moved by the humble apology.

"It may be nothing," said Beevers, "or it may be everything. Morgan has...seen the power of this young poet. He is a master of manipulation. A twister of minds..."

Beevers' voice tailed off in a more calculated introspection. Then the old man rose with certainty, and climbed the stairs to his bedroom. He would find his own counsel in prayer.

Poynter climbed the steps of the tall, terraced house, which bore the address in Morgan's pamphlet. The moment was reminiscent of his first call on Mr. Roland Twine, along with Madeleine Quinn, which had led to so much more. They had started the Circle Of Radical Verse, published the anthology, and arranged that trip to the coast. What lay ahead on this occasion, once Poynter had made himself known?

Morgan lived in the western side of Hastings, in the area known as Bohemia, and Poynter suspected the name had influenced his choice of residence. Even so, the Victorian street had looked normal enough, and there was little in the surly frontage before him to suggest a stray peculiarity. Nevertheless, the curtains glowed with an inner light, and Poynter knew he was expected. His hand moved towards the button of an electric bell, installed in the shadows to one side, but on a whim became directed towards the heavy cast-iron knocker. He rapped it in a brief, stately rhythm.

It was Morgan himself who answered, which came as a mild surprise to Poynter. He had expected an encounter with a surly domestic, such was the authority of his host. "You arrive with confidence," smiled Morgan, stepping back to reveal a tiled hallway. This led through a region of indistinct dimness, until a chip of light betrayed activity in the kitchen.

Morgan was dressed in a long velvet jacket and matching cravat. His face retained the strange, weather-beaten familiarity that Poynter had noticed before. "Thank you," said Poynter,

unbuttoning his coat. It was whisked away with the deftness of a professional conjuror.

For some reason, Poynter found Morgan's Christian name - Albert - a slightly awkward one, with an incongruous comical tone. Perhaps it reminded him of the Albert Memorial, or some sordid joke about a 'Prince Albert'. Poynter did not wish to be cold in his attitude, and refer to his host as Mr. Morgan. If he could avoid any usage of the Christian name, he would do so as best he could.

The door closed heavily behind them as Morgan led Poynter through the dim region, then sharply to the right. Poynter noticed his coat and scarf were now on a hook, although his observation had failed to register Morgan's action in placing them there. He would need to watch more carefully.

The scene brightened as they entered the lounge. It was a large room with surprisingly modern furniture, given the bygone aura of the house. The impression lingered, despite a few stylistic discrepancies. There were three others in the room, spread amongst the easy chairs and two-seater sofa.

Morgan glanced across the trio as he introduced the newcomer. "Friends - this is Laurence, the poet." Morgan turned his gaze on Poynter. "We take an alternative view here, Laurence, so forget your London brigade!" Morgan smiled warmly, as if sharing a private joke that extended far longer than their brief acquaintance.

Poynter sat himself on an upright chair, a little above the level of the soft furnishing, and was met with nods and smiles from the others. "This is Jacqueline," Morgan added, indicating a raven-haired woman in beads and bangles.

"Hello," said Jacqueline. "I was at the performance."

Morgan nodded to the others. "David Lester and Russell Saunders."

"Good evening," replied Poynter.

"I was at the performance, too," murmured Saunders. He leant forward in the manner of an astute medic. "A combination of the rational and instinctive. You take a didactic approach, from what I heard."

Poynter now recognized the man who had crept in and out during his poetic renditions. What snippets of poetry had Saunders heard, between his awkward lavatory expeditions?

"Now, Russell," said Morgan, still looming over the group. "Mr. Poynter has a deep insight into the moods of the heart - which is why I find him attractive." Morgan patted a powerful hand on Poynter's shoulder, although the poet did not flinch at the approach. He found the atmosphere sympathetic.

"You have a project," Morgan added, "and we have a project too. It is because you persevere in your work, Laurence, that you have made a strong impression. It is one thing to compose some grim schoolboy sonnet, art from a mild disaffection. But to cultivate that mood in a body of work! This is the mark of the serious advocate."

Jacqueline nodded. "We each have a different interest, Laurence. I am gifted with spiritual powers, while David has a marvellous knowledge of science. Russell has...hinted at his interest."

"I'm a psychologist," said Saunders, tugging the lapels of his brown, knitted waistcoat. "Although I find the strictures of the profession to be a grave limitation. It's good to go nuts in a while...academically speaking, I assure you." These last words were mildly apologetic, as if Saunders felt he had said too much in front of the newcomer, however much he trusted Morgan's instincts.

"We can speak freely here," said Morgan, although with no trace of arrogance. Sensing how his lofty position was dominating the group, Morgan slid a stool to close the circle and lowered himself upon it. He nodded towards the fascinated Poynter.

"Laurence has been frank enough in our discussions," said Morgan. "I am satisfied he has much to offer the group, and I'd like to think the value will be reciprocated. You would search hard to find friends like these, Laurence. If I've understood you correctly, you have been searching - even without knowing it - and your path has finished here."

"Yes. I sense it," said Jacqueline.

All eyes were upon Poynter. He felt some great pronouncement was expected or, even worse, a poem. However, Poynter was no performing monkey, and had left his sheaf of summer writings safely back at the guesthouse. Besides, he wanted information.

"What does he do?" asked Poynter, looking at David Lester, who had remained silent so far. Even more pertinent, thought Poynter...what do you do together? He would save that question, for now.

David Lester was a thin, somewhat pale man who bore a faint gloss of sweat with the permanence of a facial fixture. He wore a high-buttoned white shirt, with dark braces to support his fawn-coloured trousers. A silk handkerchief in his top pocket suggested a degree of smartness was intended, but the general look was of one who had raced to Morgan's house in clothes more suited to the workshop.

"Jacqueline flatters me with her description," said Lester. "I work at the Hastings Museum. I'm a part-time curator, and I restore some of the objects there. My degree is a science one, and I have worked for some leading corporations. I'm afraid professional secrecy must silence me there, although the secrets are more commercial than esoteric."

This produced a mild ripple of laughter from Jacqueline and Saunders, although Morgan and Poynter shared a restrained disposition. It was the quality that had brought them together, so they contented themselves with crooked smiles. These were initiated by Morgan, and duplicated by Poynter. It was best to merge with the crowd.

"We each have a different skill to contribute," said Morgan. "Of course, we have our specialist occupations, and wish to

maintain independence. Yet I can see an area of overlapping interest, which is where a project can focus us all."

Poynter wondered how much knowledge Morgan had revealed, even to the others. Was the project in the planning stage, or at a more advanced level?

Jacqueline sensed his uncertainty, either through insight or spiritual means. "Bertie keeps us all a little in the dark," she said. "But if you need a glimmer of light...he can provide it."

"You seem very confident," chuckled Morgan.

Poynter's eyes had shifted to the shelves behind the grey, benevolent head. They held a number of expensive books on monuments, architecture and the decorative arts, plus a small display of sculpture in metal and stone.

Morgan noticed Poynter's interest. "My wife's influence," he explained. "Popular works, but colourful. And the novelties lighten the room. Not my area of study, but peripheral vision..."

"So...what is your area?" asked Poynter.

"You've read the pamphlet?" asked Morgan.

"Some of it," said Poynter. "As I said, my thoughts were on The Perception and its immediate aftermath. Your pamphlet deserves my full attention. I would ask no less of you. Indeed, I didn't," added Poynter, with a sly glance at Russell Saunders. Alas, the fidgeting psychologist was staring at his knees. Poynter had not forgiven his indelicate manoeuvres.

However, Morgan was not too concerned about Poynter's lack of study. "As I said, it is merely a primer," he explained. "Five years old in any case. It's time for a new edition."

"I help Albert with his research," said Jacqueline. "We've a wealth of material on file."

"There are theories in every branch of study," added Morgan. "One needs a reflective state of mind for a theory to evolve. One finds insight in an unusual locale, which can urge an unusual state of mind."

Poynter considered this for a moment, and felt a hint of affinity. Did he not have his gazebo, to retreat from the house? Had he not come to Hastings, to retreat from London?

Morgan seemed to have lost his concerns over dominating the group. He stood before the display shelves, so they formed a backdrop for his speech. It reminded Poynter of his own efforts at the wine bar, where he would have been proud to strike such a powerful figure. Alas, he knew he had not.

"There is complexity within simplicity," said Morgan, "while simplicity can mask complexity. I believe what we see and perceive in our everyday lives can prompt a specialized thought. It is often through the recollection of those places that the thoughts, themselves, are restored. Consider a visit to a childhood haunt. Not only is the place rediscovered, but one's own sensations and emotions."

"The two reinforce each other," said Jacqueline.

Morgan glanced at her in silent acknowledgement. "When we are trying to solve...some conundrum, we speak of clearing one's head with a brisk walk or needing the fresh air. In truth, it is the linkage of place and psychology - indeed, psychogeography - which becomes the principle here. Places, objects, voices...we can associate all these with our recollections, so they might trigger a revelation."

Saunders placed his hands together in a steeple formation. While he did not speak as such, his drawn-out "Hmmm..." suggested a passive sympathy.

"Our group is trying to see the world more clearly," added Morgan. "To do so, we need a similar burst of insight. This will cement the intentions of the present into our collective psyche, and allow that psyche to see through the mists of reality. The dawn of a new belief! If we look at mankind, Laurence, we can see how the different cultures have initiated religion and ritual. Even the modern day Christian church has its trappings and properties. They hold ceremonies to link with the greater forces, or the forces they see as great. I am no advocate of Christianity, but the model of a church is a good one in creating loyalty, bonding and focus. All in this room have a focus."

Morgan resumed his seat, not to shed authority, but to lean closer to the young poet. Poynter did not flinch, for the host was a mesmerizing man. "I have said this much, Laurence," said Morgan, "because you made an impression. Not everyone can do that, I

assure you. I hope you will share our sincerity, and follow the golden path."

In addition to Morgan's closer proximity, Poynter has sensed a shift in the mood of the room. What had seemed an informal gathering in a private home had become a kind of assessment committee. Each of the other guests regarded him with studious eyes...not least, the laconic Lester. The more suspicious part of Poynter's mind suggested the true explanation: this had never been an informal occasion. Morgan had assembled the web, and led him there. Who was the bigger spider?

As to Morgan's plan, it was impossible to judge. Morgan was a very charismatic man whose easy manner combined both warmth and authority, as on the first meeting. Poynter knew he must be wary of manipulation, yet sensed he had been invited through trust. Even if Morgan had some dubious tendency, it offered a converse intrigue for the poet.

In addition, his references to the church were fascinating. Poynter thought of the old priest again: James Amery-Beevers and his intrusive, do-gooder motives. It would be fun to learn of Morgan's doings, and offer Beevers a hint or two. If the situation became a troublesome one, Poynter could always withdraw. He had the room in the guesthouse, the house in Hampstead, even the garden gazebo.

"You need some sort of commitment?" asked Poynter.

"A promise of devotion," murmured Morgan.

"I know little. I could not make a promise."

"I was about to say...I would not ask for one, just yet," said Morgan. "But I would need your undertaking to remain impartial, open, and to keep our words confidential. If so, you can learn more of the Order and judge its value for yourself. Only then, Laurence, would I need a formal agreement."

Poynter nodded slowly to buy some time. "A belief system...on approval?"

Jacqueline smiled. "I like that. You have a wit, young Laurence. I would go along with Bertie if I were you. Both David and I were skeptical, but he won us round. Russell is the biggest advocate."

Poynter glanced at the relaxed psychiatrist. He had taken an instant dislike to the man. Not only had he spoilt The Perception, but maintained a flow of cocky yet clever utterances.

"Albert and I work closely on the detail," explained Saunders. "But the sweep of the plan belongs to Albert."

"Russell has been invaluable," added Morgan. "It is the balance of talents which brings us order, and makes us worthy of the name. Whether technical, psychological, spiritual or...poetic, the group is a wonderful whole."

Poynter took the inclusion of his own talent as a confirmation of acceptance - at least, unless he made an objection. There was nothing, so far, to object to. Morgan had presented himself as an erudite and intelligent man, who was curious about the world and able to impart his curiosity.

Just then, Poynter's own curiosity came up with a question he felt unable to ask. Why this particular blend of talents? He could understand why Morgan would consult Jacqueline, perhaps even Saunders with his psychological jargon. But what was David Lester doing here? Why was a scientist involved?

Despite such misgivings, none overwhelmed Poynter's desire for knowledge. Morgan had spoken to him at considerable length, warning of Beevers and his easy morals. The old buffer had dealt too well with his dark ruminations, and Poynter had lost his way. If he wanted to continue his poetry, he needed to raise the stakes. Besides - there might be value in this Order of Morgan's, even if his own role was a little unclear.

"Why do you need a poet?" asked Poynter, seeking to settle his doubts. At least, a doubt he felt able to raise.

It was a question that Morgan answered only with a deep, rumbling laugh. This plucky acolyte amused him.

Chapter Nineteen

*Seeing from Afar*

DESPITE A MOSTLY BRICK construction, the top of the building possessed a castellated form. Its long windows were encased in pale stone, while a curving drive led across the green from the road. The overall impression was of a squat grandiosity, although there was an unusual wing to the east. Here, a cube of brick was surmounted by a smaller castellated structure, as if one box had been placed upon another. It suggested a tiny penthouse, ready to defy attack by means of rooftop archers.

The figure of Morgan followed the drive, his long coat resembling a rippling cloak. He knew fully what lay within the building and its most unusual extension. Certainly, its battlements were decorative conceits. It was no defensive edifice but a fine mansion, known as Johns Place. This had become the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, along Bohemia Road.

Old relics lay on the ground outside the building: a coat of arms carved in stone, a length of heavy marine chain embedded in a lump of harbour wall. Morgan pushed open the heavy wooden door, then entered. After nodding to a lady at reception, he passed a temporary exhibition of artistic works at a brisk, disinterested pace. He was there for a reason.

However, Morgan paused in an area he always enjoyed. Indeed, it was most relevant to his current enterprise. The Museum had a

display of television sets from the early twentieth century, enclosed in glass cases. Boxes within boxes.

When compared to modern technology, the sets had a most antique appearance. Their cabinets were of dark brown wood or Bakelite, while the screens were eternally blank. The more bulky examples were displayed in the initial case. They were imposing, vertical units suggesting cocktail cabinets or writing bureaux more than any communications device. Apparently, each had also functioned as a radiogram.

Two of the sets had a notably eccentric arrangement: their screens were on top of the units, pointing upwards, while a mirrored flap opened to forty-five degrees. This allowed the reflected pictures to be seen by a seated viewer. Morgan had not studied the instruments in detail, but reasoned that the length of these early tubes must occupy the entire height of the cabinet. This would have created difficulty in a domestic setting, should it have been mounted in a horizontal way. One such had been made by G. Marconi, and featured his name in white script over a simple logo: the world, with blue seas and red continents.

Arranged in alternation with these cathode ray monsters, two slimmer examples offered something nearer to contemporary technology. One displayed a long-forgotten trade-name, 'ULTRA'.

Most of the screens had a greenish-grey colour, dull and unenticing. However, a model from 1949 had a pleasantly lilac tinge. Below this was a portrait of its maker, John Logie Baird, in the form of a round metal badge. He had become the trademark of

his own creation, although could not have seen this particular model. Baird had died in 1945.

Another screen appeared to be an acrid yellow, distorted through a liquid magnifier. This had been bolted to the front of the set, and resembled half a goldfish bowl. Morgan gazed into the bulbous glass, which might equally have focused clairvoyant visions. Despite such archaic design, the set had been made around 1950. Its neighbour, a Bush model of Bakelite in an art deco style - retro even for 1950 - seemed a paragon of progress by comparison.

Morgan strolled to a freestanding glass case, which had more recent examples. Baird's company had made one in 1960, again unknown to its creator. While its cabinet was of wood, the front had metallic inlay, controls and sans serif text in a strikingly modern style. It was incredible to see the sudden advance. The screen was large, just like a contemporary TV. It would have looked perfect in any home, even of the early twenty-first century. Even so, the staining of the metal added a patina of age, less flattering to such a clean device. It rather lacked the magic of the pioneering days, when a set really was a 'wireless with pictures'. Even so, the 'BAIRD' name in spaced capitals provided a link with the past.

Moving round the display case, Morgan was fascinated by the wording on the back. 'WARNING' was prominent above 'HIGH VOLTAGE'. Morgan learnt, 'This back must not be removed under any circumstances whilst the set is connected to the mains'. He

doubted such advice would be heeded by his colleague, the inventive maestro David Lester.

The set below was a 'REDIFFUSION', housed in a cabinet of varied wooden shades. It was a hybrid between the earlier models and the 'BAIRD' example above. It actually dated from 1955, when technology was beginning to advance towards something akin to modern.

A clunk from an earlier device startled Morgan. It was one of several grandfather clocks, ticking nearby. One was grandiose but conventional, while another featured extra dials to indicate the solar movements: at least, as viewed from a rotating earth. It was topped by a cylindrical glass enclosure, in which a small ball represented the moon. This was arranged to turn slowly round a small globe of the world.

Time was moving on, so Morgan drifted to the furthest case. This held the most archaic items, which he found the most impressive and vital. They dated from 1900 to 1930, and had little in common with any recognisable television. Along with texts and photographs of the good Mr. Baird, at work in his two Hastings premises, there was a circular disc of around eighteen inches wide from 1925. Apparently, Baird had used this to demonstrate his principle of mechanical scanning to the Royal Society. The case also held a clownish puppet head known as Stookey Bill. It had been used as a subject for Baird's early experiments, making it a prototype television star.

Between these items was an example of the first ever commercial television receiving set. This had been made by the Baird Company in 1928, to be sold at twenty-eight guineas. Morgan studied the chipped metal box on stubby legs, which resembled a small gas oven more than a provider of entertainment. There was a central tuning knob, and a portal to the right. This was barely distinguishable as a screen.

The most fascinating part, to Morgan, was the wonderfully arcane logo placed above the tuning knob. It depicted a circular moon, partially concealed by an almond-shaped cloud: only one eye of the moon was visible. Beneath ran the legend, 'THE EYE OF THE WORLD'.

Morgan gazed at the eye, fixedly, as if attempting spiritual communication. His motive was founded both in the archaic and progressive. Morgan wanted to take the former, and tailor it to new heights.

Still, the clock was ticking. Incrementally, its tiny moon circled the globe.

Morgan passed beneath a wide arch, and a few steps took him down into a picture gallery. It was long and windowless, leading to the strange extension affixed to the east of the building. There were many skilful scenes of Hastings by local artists, although these were of no concern to Morgan.

Next lay an archway of dark wood, carved in ornate patterns, with deep purple curtains on either side. Morgan passed through onto a small balcony, overlooking a large chamber. It was a hall

from another time, another place, transplanted to a foreign land - although nowhere more fancy than an English seaside resort.

As Morgan's eyes grew accustomed to the low levels of light, he could admire the many details. Effusions of petals and leaves had been carved in the dark wood, while stained glass windows on the far side suggested an exotic land beyond. The ceiling was white, with geometrical mouldings. Its middle was a dark, square void.

Morgan stepped down onto the polished floor, crossing diagonally to a curved staircase. The initial steps creaked with his weight, before they rose to the floor above. This was a chamber of similar construction, with illuminated display cases around the edge: these held items of tribal origin. Wooden columns supported the overhanging ceiling, before its inner portion rose to the enclosure above. Smaller windows rimmed this, their patterned glass pale with a cool winter sky.

Morgan was beneath the castellated box upon a box, as seen from outside the building. He stepped forward to a banister, which enclosed a square hole in the middle of the chamber. This had appeared to be a void, from below. A complex lantern hung heavily on chains, but provided no illumination.

Placing his gloved hands on the banister, Morgan leant forward with an enjoyable lurch of dizziness. The polished floorboards were spread below, and he had a good view of the balcony that led into the hall. A figure moved into the doorway, framed as if standing on a stage. The curtains emphasized the

impression. To Morgan, it was clearly David Lester - although the murky light would veil his own position.

Before Lester could catch his eye, Morgan stepped back from the banister. He would now be almost invisible. Morgan watched the scientist repeat his own entrance, walking diagonally across the expansive floor.

Morgan gazed at an exhibit, with his back to the wooden staircase. At the sound of footsteps, he turned with a whisk of his long coat. Morgan's eyes locked onto those of David Lester, from beneath his broad-brimmed hat. Lester could not conceal his startled reaction.

"I didn't see you," said Lester. "I don't know why..."

"A trick of perception," smiled Morgan. "A dark figure in a dark room. Your eyes had not adjusted to the gloom."

Lester nodded. "I should know, as a scientist." Even so, he resented the little prank.

Morgan breathed deeply, relishing the aroma of polished wood that permeated the chambers. There were few visitors on this cold weekday, an hour till closing time, so he moved unhindered to a bright display case. Between aboriginal boomerangs and wooden clubs, obtained in Tonga and Samoa, stood a carved figure from Papua New Guinea. It wore bone bracelets, with beaded dreadlocks and a fearsome mask. The eyes were of diminishing circles, and the mouth had pointed teeth. The zigzag style of carving, painted black and red, had a graphic boldness that Morgan admired.

"If this could be our Stookey Bill..." he mused.

"It would be most effective," nodded Lester. "But I cannot remove the object from its display case. At least, not for such a function."

"Pity," murmured Morgan. "A primal visage. Far better than a clownish dummy."

"A clown that had a purpose," said Lester. "Still, we shall have something better."

Morgan glanced back at Lester, more incisively. "Of course. We have already discussed the idea."

"Come to the workshop," said Lester. "I'll bring you up to date."

It was nearly four o'clock, and the chamber had become darker still. The upper features were lost in the opacity of black. Most light came from lamps in flame-like shades, fixed to the overhanging ceiling. Morgan stood below one for a second, striking a thoughtful pose. Lester felt Morgan was elsewhere, picturing his great occasion. The glass flame hung above him, like a sliver of ectoplasm.

Suddenly, Morgan snapped out of his reverie. He smiled brightly at Lester, and spoke in a friendly tone. "Let's see it, David. Hope there's coffee in the pot?"

Lester's hum was confirmation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Both Morgan and Jacqueline had missions of the night. Just as Morgan sought advice from his scientific colleague, Jacqueline sought the help of a poet. Her arrival at the Hargreaves' Guest House had no sense of suspense, unlike the poet's arrival at Morgan's. The doorway was not imposing, and the window had been conceived to welcome visitors: cosy drapes, ornaments, and now an early display of fairy lights. The first harbingers of Christmas.

The lights brought no pleasure to Jacqueline, for her loyalty of spirit lay elsewhere. However, she pressed the bell as if attracted to the residence. Certainly, she had reason to call.

"A good choice tonight!" beamed Mr. Hargreaves. "One guest in residence, quiet too! Would you kindly sign the book?"

"I do not require a room," said Jacqueline. "It is the guest I wish to visit."

The smile on Mr. Hargreaves' face lapsed very slightly. "I will call the gentleman," he said. "Even so, I would prefer you to sign the book."

Jacqueline did so with no objection, as the man started up the stairs. "The parlour's in there," he added, glancing back.

Jacqueline stood her ground. "I would rather see your guest in private, Mr. Hargreaves. May I come up?"

Mr. Hargreaves faltered a little, unused to such a situation. Guests were usually in or out, with no business to transact that required unsolicited callers. "I'd better see," he murmured. "You understand...?"

There was movement on the upstairs landing. Jacqueline smiled at the figure of Laurence Poynter, edged by light emanating from his open door. Poynter settled the situation. "I could hear...please come up," he said, quickly. "Quite all right, Mr. Hargreaves."

The man remained for a moment, caught between these two visitors - one of whom he knew. He felt suddenly old and irrelevant, confused by motives he could not understand.

Despite any personal insecurity, Mr. Hargreaves gave a diplomatic nod. He returned downstairs, eyeing the caller with a quizzical look. Could she move out of his way? The woman did not move, so Mr. Hargreaves edged past with an air of wary respect. His cardigan rubbed against her coat. Somewhat embarrassed, Mr. Hargreaves headed to the kitchen, where tea would offer consolation.

Poynter had already turned away, so Jacqueline's face became steely. She began her ascent, with intent. The room was far more modest than she had expected. This did not explain Poynter's hesitation in confirming Morgan's offer: indeed, it grew more inexplicable. Poynter was in the process of sorting papers, which added to the untidy impression. He continued to undertake this task, while Jacqueline found a small chair.

"Albert was serious," said Jacqueline. "He can provide a more...sympathetic lodging."

"I don't know," said Poynter. "I found this place by chance, but it has become familiar. I'm usually left alone. Then the packing..."

"Pack! We can pack!" snapped Jacqueline, grabbing Poynter's empty case and flicking it open. She tossed in a couple of shirts by way of demonstration, although Poynter's frown suggested she take more care.

"Please," said Poynter. "I am...considering. Certainly, I will be leaving this guest house."

Jacqueline settled herself, ashamed of her outburst. The matter was delicately poised, and one false move could blow it. "Is there something troubling you?" she asked. "Something about Bertie or the group? If I can set your mind at rest...?"

"You made a very good impression," said Poynter. "I was glad to find like-minded souls."

"I am glad we found the Perception," said Jacqueline. "So, if there is no trouble...?"

"Only from the past," murmured Poynter, ceasing in his shuffling of papers. "The poetry led me a certain way, on a certain train of thought. Has it been of benefit?"

Jacqueline leant forward, in a subtle prompt to Poynter.

"The work I write - does not revel in darkness," he added. "But it deals with the subject. I have to retain a focus. Madeleine, this girl, had a focus. She is a poet, too. Poetry is meant to find the truth, and poetry brought us together. Our love of poetry, our immersion in verse...composing, tweaking to

perfection. Only, the focus of our poetry was different. So there was always a chasm between us. I felt this necessary, for a long, long time. Now I have had time to think. If I could have closed that chasm..."

Jacqueline moved to sit on the edge of the bed, with Poynter at the far end. She had closed a smaller chasm, between the bed and chair, although the motive was not dissimilar.

"There was an incident," said Poynter, "on the cliff-top. It was...back in the spring. I've thought about it since, quite often. Madeleine was there. She had a sudden insight, as if she had seen the truth. Found...the elusive revelation. We understood each other, but said little. It was like the chasm had closed, at last. It was far too late. She had another man, this Roland. I tried to write a poem, but could not."

"If it wasn't meant to be," whispered Jacqueline, ruffling her hand through Poynter's hair. She pulled him down onto the narrow bed, bringing her long legs up onto the duvet.

"*Do as thou wilt,*" she whispered, almost inaudibly.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sky was dark, so the museum had become a silhouette. It closely resembled the archetypal castle of its inspiration. Only the window of an office hinted at modern activity. An amber spotlight illuminated the stray objects, as if lit by a beacon of flame.

Morgan knew, or could have imagined, that Lester's activity within the museum extended to his domestic realm. The clutter of his workshop, reached through a private door, matched that of a spare bedroom of similar size. Various items floated between them, depending on the ruse or requirement.

While Lester poured the anticipated coffee, Morgan glanced across the workbenches that occupied most of the floor. This was no laboratory, but a more pragmatic domain. As a museum technician, it was Lester's job to prepare and maintain exhibits - and the collection had some scope. A stuffed seagull was undergoing repairs in the corner, with metal braces added to a drooping wing. A flat, painted tepee leant against the wall - a surplus item from the Native American displays. Mostly, the room contained electrical components of a solid, elderly specification: electrical meters and valve arrays, transformers and modulators. The interconnecting wires were surprisingly neat, as befit modern health and safety rules. Lester would have been happy to festoon the place with complex wiring, given no such restriction.

"Here, sit," said Lester bluntly, playing the host for once. He removed a box of screws from a battered swivel chair, sprinkled with fine sawdust. Timing his actions tactfully, Morgan blew away the cloud as Lester's back was turned, not wishing to appear fussy.

"Everything's here...?" asked Morgan, with a skeptical note. He observed the spread of electrical wares. Although certainly no

expert, Morgan realized they were insufficient. There were mechanical aspects, too.

"Don't be too disappointed," said Lester, returning with two black coffees. "You can see the basic chassis over there. It's only a prototype."

"Which means, we can't use it?" asked Morgan.

"We will not need to use it," said Lester. "Now I have the measurements right, I can make a solid version. I machined the fittings at home on my personal lathe, and am working on the major components."

"At home?" queried Morgan.

"Spare bedroom," smiled Lester, as if confiding a family secret. He had no family of which to confess, at least under the same roof.

"So you have not tried everything together?" asked Morgan. "You don't know if the device works?"

"In the spirit of invention," added Lester, "although we are *not* the inventors. Each component has been tried separately, and every component works. No reason why they can't work together. Whatever happened in the past, I am thinking back to a previous era when these principles were fresh. I cannot have the mind of a specialist, eighty years ago, and ignore more recent knowledge. There's a knack to forgetting the 'now', and it's a very difficult knack."

Morgan's face loomed behind the steam of his black coffee. Lester had mentioned none of these issues when he had first been

approached. Why should it be so hard to construct an antiquated item, the principles of which were known? The original inventor and his helpers had managed the task, without prize or precedent.

"You think too much of the science," said Morgan, "not the effect we wish to achieve. The effect is all that matters. I do not expect a true replica."

Lester smiled. A low, hanging bulb emphasized the gloss of sweat perpetually upon his brow. "We have our own history," he remarked. "A history, within the project. Initially, I promised you a lot."

"You were overjoyed at the concept - and my funding," said Morgan.

"That has never changed," replied Lester. "Perhaps I gave too much time to the research. The desire to reconstruct, not imitate. From the museum's point of view..."

"A museum is a staid institution," said Morgan. "I seek to utilize. The device will be yours to keep, and the glory. But I make the first presentation."

Lester nodded. In the corner lay a collection of notepads and magazines, all relating to the field in question. To amass them had occupied much of his time, stalling the practical side. To really *know* a subject was to live it, to breathe it, and Lester felt at one with his machine.

Lester moved to the seagull, amongst a collection of armatures: metal skeletons with grips and joints, used to support displays. "The girl is mending this," he said. "She's part-time,

does the natural stuff. Used my soldering iron, mind you, for the bracing. Had him hanging up, as if flying. A bird before a painted sea..."

"Descent is always easier," uttered Morgan.

"I told her about the commission. Her own commission. She was quite excited." Lester regarded the seagull eye-to-eye before turning back to Morgan. "I could not explain it, however. She asked if it was for the museum, but I had to say no."

Morgan cracked a wry smile. "The subject is a little alarming?"

"Notorious, even," said Lester. "'A private commission,' I said, 'for a friend.' I didn't connect you with any of this." Lester nodded towards the mass of electrical gadgets.

"Keep it that way," said Morgan.

"'Some local author'," mused Lester. "'He's written a little book...'"

"Gratified," said Morgan. "Copies in the foyer."

"I bought her one, from the museum shop," added Lester. "She knows you're an outsider."

"An *observant* outsider," replied Morgan. "Seeing from afar."

Lester drew up a tall wooden stool, and sat at the corner of a workbench so he loomed a little above Morgan. However, Lester's spindly frame remained the less impressive. "So you see, we'll have our Stookey Bill."

Morgan blinked, as he tried to make the connection. Then he remembered their remarks by the ethnographic displays. "Something

far, far better," he intoned, seeking to change the subject. "Time is tight, Dr. Lester, tight. I see progress, but not results. When will the wires fit the chassis? Where are those major components?"

"The end, when it comes, will be quick," explained Lester. "It is to make the final operation simple that I have crafted the device so carefully. More care, I suspect, than for a true experiment."

"A true experiment has the factor of chaos," said Morgan. "An edge of danger, too."

Lester raised his eyebrows, and shifted to territory where he felt more comfortable. "There were bangs and flashes with Baird!" he smiled. "I mean, the early days - in Queens Arcade. Chap nearly killed himself!"

"Bangs and flashes are not what we want," said Morgan, "unless we engineer them."

"Anything to make a show!" quipped Lester.

Suddenly, in a whisk of shadow, the heavier man was next to Lester's face. Lester tried to lean back, but the precarious stool did not allow it. He gripped the workbench, tightly.

"What the girl needs to know, she can know," said Morgan. "The same applies to you, David Lester. If expertise lies in holding all the cards, that is my provenance alone."

"Of course," whispered Lester. "I've always understood..."

"There is no show. No levity. I need the items requested, for my own purposes, and discretion is part of the task. Have I not

been discreet with you, Dr. Lester? Have I asked why a talented research physicist lurks in this kooky hole?"

"The museum's a wonderful resource..." began Lester.

"I don't mean the museum," began Morgan, backing off a touch. "This room. Say what you like, it's no laboratory."

"Cruel, but granted," agreed Lester. "Neither is my spare bedroom."

"Over-qualified, aren't we?" said Morgan, hardly after a response. "So over-qualified, we must sub-contract the renovation of dead birds."

Lester gasped. He had no answer.

"Let the quest be mine!" said Morgan in his hearty, familiar tones. "The device will be used for an experimental purpose, but is *not* an experiment in itself. Can you not see the subtlety? The reconstruction of an outmoded technique, to create a tremendous effect!"

"Yes. I can see it," said Lester.

"Things *unknown* do not concern you. Concentrate on the apparatus. Make it spin for me, hum for me, glow for me. After one night, it will be yours to keep - and I have paid the entire cost!"

Understanding finally dawned upon Lester. "Perhaps as a scientist...I have been tinkering a bit. Seeing other ways the science could have gone, even in Baird's time. Once one starts to work with practical things, a straight reconstruction can be...a restraint. If I start to follow those paths..."

"...the device would not be ready!" concluded Morgan. "So, leave those paths. Know of them, but leave them. Perhaps, in time, you may hold your own experiments. Your reputation will be enhanced, Dr. Lester. A pioneer of the archaic!"

Lester gazed down at his knees. Those grey trousers were getting thin about the knees, but he had no great industry to impress. When he looked up, Morgan was by the door - although Lester made him halt.

"Wait, Mr. Morgan," he stated, with an unexpected firmness. He had the ring of authority from a physics career that rumours had snatched away.

Morgan listened.

"Science is complex," said Lester, "but there's history too - and more than just the occult. There's a copy of my notes, in the blue binder. Please, borrow them and read."

Morgan looked at the pile of papers, which included vintage electrical magazines. Uppermost lay a clip file, containing about twenty sheets of paper. Without further comment, Morgan swept it under his coat.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. Hargreaves regarded the younger man with a wry, distant glance. He saved it for these rare occasions. After their usual breakfast, Poynter had confirmed his departure. Now this peculiar

story. "No, Mr. Poynter," said Mr. Hargreaves. "We were not disturbed."

Poynter nodded. "The lady called...unexpectedly. Time slipped by. When I looked, it was three o'clock."

"We all have our moments," said Mr. Hargreaves.

"I asked her to leave quietly, once she had woken up. Here - perhaps we can forget the incident?" Poynter fumbled in his pocket, and offered a five-pound note.

Mr. Hargreaves was grateful for the tip, and slipped it into his cardigan. Have a quiet pint later, he thought. Leave his wife with the telly, and her pick of the shows. Poynter finally vanished from sight.

Mr. Hargreaves felt something else in his cardigan: maybe a receipt or ticket. It was so easy to amass rubbish. He took the scrap of paper and examined it idly, not sure where he had obtained it. Not a ticket, clearly.

The young man must have passed it by mistake, entangled with his five-pound note. It was neatly folded, so Mr. Hargreaves opened it out. A strange drawing of a triangle, with an eye inside. An eye in a pyramid!

Mr. Hargreaves snorted with mild amusement. It might give his wife a giggle. Then a breeze whipped the paper from his hand, so it fluttered down the road. Mr. Hargreaves moved to catch it, stiffly, then froze. The paper had merged with other litter, and drifted beyond reach.

Perhaps it was best. The lone guest had been strange, for all his money - and as for that visitor! Mr. Hargreaves closed the door of the guesthouse, grateful at least for his fiver.

Chapter Twenty

*A False Sincerity*

IT HAD BEEN A WHILE since the old cinema had been a place of grandeur and entertainment. True, it had given local residents both fun and a thrill, in relatively recent times. Equally, it had known the throng of a sociable crowd, enjoying evenings of music and dance. Sadly, the combination of grandeur and entertainment - at one and the same time - had lapsed with its original closure. The duty of upkeep and service had passed from manager to manager, like some kind of ancestral truth. The tradition had now been broken. Once the screen had gone dark, the dust settled. It had never fully been cleared.

Most of the original fixtures had been left intact, such as the sweeping balcony and velvet seats. Decorative plasterwork loomed overhead, its design echoed in the panelled walls. A deep blue carpet still spread across the foyer, and flowed upstairs like the torrents of a geometric waterfall. Yet all was tatty, stained and faded in an almost subliminal way. The lights had not shone clearly, but with an aura of blotchy diffusion. The corners of walls showed flecks of white, where paint and plaster had been cracked. The carpet possessed a subtle wrinkle, with patches of threadbare tonality. Between phases of re-opening and closure, the cinema had offered much entertainment. But this had never combined with its original virtue, as a palace of escapist grandeur.

There were shadows behind the windows now, and the narrow cracks that admitted light from the street. Boards had been fixed across the doors of the main entrance, blocking them to a near opacity.

The limitations of joinery had left vertical slits, which appeared as needle-thin lines within the gloom. Shapes blocked the light from outside, shortening and lengthening the cracks with rapid alternation - as if the single line of a television scan, offering a minimalist view of the world. Then there were sounds - rattlings and clunkings, as a couple of padlocks were removed. Finally, the blocked doors swung aside to admit a brilliant glare.

Even so, this brilliance was exaggerated by contrast to the shady interior. The brilliance was merely a brightness, or a greyness of the morning sky. It quickly disgorged the source of motion beyond the barricaded doors.

There was a woman. Two women, and two men close behind. As they stepped into the foyer, the first woman closed the door. Quickly, their eyes adjusted to the relative gloom, and the details became clearer.

She was dressed in a lilac pencil skirt, with black tights and kitten-heeled shoes: cute enough for flirting, flat enough for work. She held a plastic wallet, with business papers and plans. Her hair was in a ponytail, to be released at six o'clock. The other woman had raven-black hair, worn loose in sheer abandon. Her skirt was longer, in tiers of dark velvet, worn with chunky boots. The two men were less distinctive, as the qualms of male clothing

attested. The first - in his forties - wore a grey jacket, topped by an anorak. The other wore a long brown coat, concealing his shirt and braces.

The first woman, a Miss Emily Lucas, took a perceptive glance around. She had not visited this property before, but had studied the details in the office. Reality was never quite the image conjured by the mind's eye. It was always a little rougher, a little more complex. This was the fascination of her job.

"Do you know the way around?" asked the second woman, she of the tiered skirt. It was Jacqueline.

Miss Lucas studied her dossier for a professional interlude, then turned with a professional smile. "It's the surveyor's report, not a road map. The place is structurally sound. But I can't say how to get around. We'll have to explore together."

Jacqueline smiled. "Just the way I would like it. May I take the lead...?"

Miss Lucas looked quizzical.

"...in the spirit of adventure," added Jacqueline, "not professional rivalry."

"It would be at your own risk," explained Miss Lucas. "I have third party insurance, if I cause an accident myself. You asked for a tour of the building..."

"...which you barely comprehend," said a man. It was the second man to have entered: David Lester, of a more scientific persuasion. He had idled slightly behind his colleague, Russell Saunders, whose curiosity at the building lay somewhere behind his

own. Any delay that Lester displayed had a purely rational explanation. He had been examining the cinema's frontage to divine its inner potential. The tour would be more than a novelty to him. It would be a confirmation of his insight.

Saunders felt he should offer mediation for, as a trained psychologist, he could understand conflicting interests. "I believe Miss Lucas should do her job," he mused. "We can give directions. Say where we wish her to lead."

"I am agreed to that," said Lester, half-listening. He was gazing at the ceiling, divining how the internal layout might relate to the exterior. Saunders knew Lester had made no concession, and would surely wander off at the slightest whim. He must be mindful.

"Come on," smiled Jacqueline. She inclined her head to the dark entrance beyond the foyer. Miss Lucas stepped forward, Jacqueline matching her pace. In truth, it was hard to say who was leading: officially, Miss Lucas, but in effect steered by the taller woman.

A disc of light sprang up ahead of them, hovering upon the plaster. "A spiritual orb," whispered Jacqueline, with irony. The disc was Lester's welcome contribution. He brandished a powerful little torch, as used in his technical work. Its light had a sharp purity.

Just a few steps later, the foyer seemed a very distant prospect. The sun did not penetrate the deeper corridors - so the circle of light glowed before them, revealing a variety of

details. Decorative carvings were caught in the hovering light, edged with pulsating shadow. There was even the occasional poster of decades past, a memorial to classic movies. Each in turn were framed by the torch as a circular vignette, like images in a magic lantern show.

Lester explored the depths of the passage, leaving the others in the dark. A series of fuse boxes became illuminated by the circle of light, cast in sharp relief. Then a dark, vertical line became revealed as an alcove, leading off to the left. It housed two strong metal doors with heavy locks, each stencilled with the word 'EXIT'. This was surely where the film cans had been wheeled inside, and the projection equipment delivered.

Lester clocked it. This would be very useful.

Edging to a tiny window, barred by rusty strips, Lester could see down most of the alley to a gate at the far end. This must adjoin the rear of the building, where it backed onto the railway line. The detail suggested a secluded drive for delivery vans, unless the film cans had been tossed from a passing train. Maybe there was even space for the manager's car, or any limo that Morgan might require.

"Everything all right...?" called Miss Lucas.

Lester made no response. He merely returned along the passage, so the others could see the approaching glare of his torch. Lester flashed its beam onto a set of banisters, so they shimmered with a lively gleam. The staircase angled off to one side of the main passage, curving up into the gloom. "That's the

way to the balcony," said Miss Lucas, remembering the details she had read. "Oh, some other things too..."

"Going up?" asked Lester, to no-one in particular. He had already made up his mind, so Miss Lucas could only follow.

"David loves the technical stuff," said Jacqueline. "Let him prowl around, I want to press on..."

Saunders glanced up the staircase, into the shadows above. He could hear the shuffle of feet on concrete as Lester and Miss Lucas reached the floor above. Perhaps they had ventured behind the scenes, into a place the public never saw.

"Let's stick to the main passage," said Jacqueline. "If David's going up to the projection box, he can flash the torch to guide us.

Saunders was glad to concur, for he was unwilling to leave Jacqueline alone. "I don't fancy those stairs *just now*," he murmured, with a trace of levity.

"Stick together. You and I," said Jacqueline, pressing Saunders' hand more tightly than mere guidance would oblige. Together, they turned away from the staircase and proceeded down the carpeted passage. Lost and invisible in this cinematic darkness, the pair moved with curious trepidation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lester had arrived on the first floor before Miss Lucas, and searched the area with purpose. He swept the torch beam to a door

marked 'PRIVATE' in tarnished paint. Lester tried the handle, but the door was locked.

Miss Lucas jingled the keys in her pocket. "Shall I...?"

Lester grunted his assent.

The inner passage was uncarpeted, and housed several more doors on its opposite side. The first was some kind of kitchen area, perhaps used by the usherettes. Most of the appliances had been removed, but a rusty electric kettle was telling enough.

Next door, they found a far plusher room - if mostly stripped of its treasures. The flock wallpaper gave an aura of grandeur, for one of the impresario kind. A number of framed pictures had been removed, leaving lighter patches on the wall. An old desk remained solid but unused.

"The manager's office," said Miss Lucas, entering with delight.

"Intriguing," said Lester, leaning close to the wall. One frame had been left in place, deliberately, as a kind of personal legacy. It held a simple certificate, made out to a 'Christopher McCann'. He had been approved by a guild of cinema managers, to administer the picture house.

"He's out of a job," observed Lester. He glanced round the office, assessing the use it might have. "I'm sure Albert would like it here. A place to make...an impression."

"He can do what he likes, within reason," Miss Lucas replied, "as long as the freeholders are consulted."

"Not my concern..." mused Lester, moving to the window. There, he rubbed the dirty glass to create a little peephole. This allowed him to see the street below, with its bustling shoppers, and the shops directly opposite: a café and some kitsch emporium. Lester's breath cast pale white condensation upon the cold glass, obscuring it all the more. "How does one slip in the back, without paying?" he joked. The attempt at humour hung dry in the air, hardly suiting his lips.

Miss Lucas kept her professional buzz, oblivious to any strangeness of tone. "Another entrance...where the films were brought in? Maybe there's something in my file." She moved to the window, to benefit from the pearly light that fell through its grime-smeared glass. Miss Lucas consulted her plastic wallet, in search of the building's specification.

"I'd like to go upstairs," said Lester, ignoring the pages that the woman offered him. "Must be more stairs, to the projection booth." Returning to the passage, Lester brandished his powerful torch and made his way along the bare concrete.

The clicking of kitten heels indicated Miss Lucas was complying. "Maybe I should take the torch?" she asked. Lester paid no attention.

Lester paused. Miss Lucas appeared by his shoulder, making an innocent 'o' of her pink-painted lips as she beheld the narrow steps. They rose at a tight incline, like those of a castle turret, before turning back on themselves.

Enthused by the thought of technical matters, Lester made a sprightly assault on the steps. He vanished quickly round the corner, flashing the torch after him so Miss Lucas could follow along. She had only just reached the corner when Lester dashed ahead. More steps led him towards the front of the cinema, as viewed from outside, or the rear of the auditorium within.

Lester cackled with devoted glee. His figure appeared as a spindly stick-man against the distant wall, before leaping nimbly out of sight. He had opened a secure metal door, with a small glass panel at eye-level. This allowed a glimpse of operations within, when the projection booth had been used. Kitten heels continued to click upon the concrete steps, echoing at a safe but tentative rate.

Lester found himself in a windowless room, of a closed and stifling atmosphere. The walls had been rendered a matt black, which resisted the glow of his torch. The only perceived light was reflected by incidental details: heavy-duty electrical cables, secured by ageing brackets, and dusty film cans in the corner. Holes in the floor told of heavy devices, once bolted into place. The cables snaked across the concrete to meet them, truncated in severed ends. At least the switching panel was intact, with controls to open the curtains and dim the lights.

Sadly, Lester was unable to test these operations without a power supply. He turned to acknowledge Miss Lucas as she made her entrance, having ascended the narrow staircase. Lester spotlighted her face like a movie star, suddenly realizing how pretty she was. The

clear, white light obliterated subtlety, and emphasized the basic colours. Her ginger hair sparkled with an orange luminosity, while her make-up displayed the flat, appealing features of an animated cartoon.

The blinking of those eyelids indicated the dazzling power of the beam, so Lester flicked it upright. The beam caught the scientist's face in relief, casting a shadow on the ceiling. Lester's chin and nostrils shone in contrast to his shaded cheeks, arched by skeletal cheekbones. Breath curled out in an ectoplasmic cloud. Miss Lucas experienced a quiver of fright, as if beholding a harbinger of death. The sensation quickly subsided as the phantom spoke, lapsing into human nature.

"Just what I need!" gasped Lester. "I can build the device in here. Assemble it, I should say."

Miss Lucas merely nodded, for Lester's scheme was not her concern.

While it was true that the booth had no true window, there were two openings in the wall. The scientist moved to one of these small, square panes. Beyond lay darkness, as if the night.

"Two projectors, you see?" he murmured, beckoning the young woman to join him. She stepped carefully past the holes in the floor, where the machines had once been bolted, and reached the other pane.

"Two projectors," resumed David Lester, as if lecturing a privileged student. "Twenty minutes of film on one reel, another projector on standby. There's a spot at the top of the screen,

then - clunk! - the guy switches them over. So it's time to rewind the first reel for the next show, and replace it with number three."

Miss Lucas smiled. "They might keep the place as a cinema. It's a real asset to Bexhill. A chain pub wanted to buy the place, and turn it into an outlet. The deal's fallen through, for now."

"There's justice in that," said Lester, with an air of destiny in his voice.

"There's a Trust," she added. "They have to preserve the building, as a piece of modern heritage. British Film Institute, or the Arts Board. Might be getting a grant."

Lester was no longer listening. He had inclined his head to the small glass pane, fascinated by the darkness beyond. The glass misted with the closeness of his breath, as it had in the office below. Business was the domain of his colleagues, and did not trouble the scientist. As for the young woman, prattling on? She was merely an estate agent.

\* \* \* \* \*

Little had been clarified beyond the indistinct space of the darkened corridor. While it was not particularly narrow, the question of obstacles on either side presented an unseen hazard. Whether hidden columns, display boards or other features, neither Jacqueline nor Saunders could guarantee a lack of obstruction. So the pair moved slowly, ponderously, along what they judged to be

the centre of the passage. Jacqueline had been touching Saunders' arm for a while, but this grew to a positive clutch. Saunders gripped her coat in some acknowledgement, but did not emphasize this physical interaction.

In time, their perceptual awareness shifted - away from a scenario in which the pair moved from a brighter world, into conditions of daunting shadow, to a new sense of belonging. The bodies of Saunders and Jacqueline had been absorbed, as equally as the ceiling, walls and floor, so all visual stimulus was lost. They moved as a pair of conscious entities, through surroundings of black opacity, suggesting how the first minds of a nascent cosmos might have enjoyed an elemental peace.

However difficult to detect, the faintest trace of light still filtered from the cinema foyer. Throughout their creeping progress, the eyes of Jacqueline and her companion had become adjusted to these strange conditions. Saunders, the more rational of the two, discerned the most subtle variations between black and near-black. A light fixture lurked in the overhead gloom, like a castle lost in fog. A drape hung in curvaceous folds like some ancient, fossilized tree. They had reached a point of enlightenment, and a newfound clarity.

Jacqueline stiffened. She had sensed something. Saunders knew it too. Before them lay a square of such impenetrable darkness that it made the passage resemble a quaint conservatory. The air ahead was heavier, as if weighed down by this dearth of illumination. The longer they stood rooted to the spot, the more

this atmosphere rolled towards them, engulfing them in a kind of exploratory submergence.

"Come on," whispered Jacqueline, with an audible smile - closer to Saunders' ear than her motion had suggested. The psychologist had little choice. With a trace of gallantry, Saunders took the first step forward. His suede shoes were more able to cope with any surprise drop than Jacqueline's chunky boots.

This fear was unfounded. Apart from a mild inclination of the carpet, they moved ahead with no awkward consequence. Indeed, the downward slope made the vast, cool space overwhelm them all the quicker. Within seconds, Jacqueline and Saunders had left the corridor, and stood in the very heart of the cinema. The centre of the auditorium.

"A Palace of Dreams," gasped Jacqueline.

Saunders nodded, unseen. "We could do with an usherette..."

"Albert shall light the way," came her curt response, as if a specially prepared mantra. Despite her current proximity to Saunders, Jacqueline disliked this touch of humour. It was an occasion for gravitas. "There are no films here," she added, "but our visions can take their place. Here...I've found the seats."

Jacqueline tugged Saunders to the right, across the invisible aisle, to a point facing the middle of the screen. With much fumbling, the pair tipped down the velvet-covered seats. Bunching her skirt, Jacqueline sat with her knees together. Saunders slid

in next to her. Then they waited in silence, as if part of an experiment in sensory deprivation.

A Palace of Dreams, she had called it. That was the nature of cinema, and the echoes lingered almost tangibly. Saunders could imagine that the lights had just gone down, leaving the audience in a moment of suspense. The curtains should open seconds later, revealing a bold announcement before the feature began.

Saunders did not know all that Morgan was up to. It was clearly a refined artistic presentation, before a carefully selected audience. He had been happy to help with the arrangements, by finding this unusual venue. Morgan had also questioned him on points of psychology, such as the effects of ritual, the use of colour and optical perception. Saunders had welcomed the excuse to research such topics, and talk with Morgan at length.

The project had lifted Saunders from a downward patch, following his break-up with a girlfriend of seven years. She had not cared for those books he read, about secret rulers of the world. Saunders had never believed all of it, but wanted to sift the theories. Could there really be hidden powers behind politics and news, manipulating affairs?

Morgan had made contact through a patient, and interested Saunders from the start. Here was someone with an open mind, and even knowledge to share. Morgan was quite an expert on occult matters, and had even compiled a booklet. He had given Saunders a copy, which had been eagerly read. Encouraged by this positive

reception, Morgan had offered more detailed literature. Some of it was pretty extreme. Saunders had been intrigued by the concepts, but mostly the psychology involved. One book had been written by a notorious figure, who had once been a Hastings resident. Saunders should never have brought it to the flat. His girlfriend had read a few snippets, questioned him, and come to the wrong conclusions.

The flat in Eastbourne was hers, and she had the right to request his departure. Saunders had resisted a little, then complied. A cooling off period had been necessary, but the cooling had turned cold. Saunders had moved to Hastings to maintain a respectable distance. The towns were only ten miles apart, so he was able to keep his job with the health authority.

While troubled teenagers were a challenge, they could not match the intrigue of Morgan's project. Slowly but surely, over the past two years, the wily historian had commanded more of the psychologist's time - so much in the last few months, any chance of a social life was out. Luckily, the damping of romantic chances was compensated for by the resultant fascination.

The date was growing closer now, and excitement in the group quickening. Saunders could sense it, sitting in his velvet seat, and so could Jacqueline. He heard a gasp from her, as if enraptured by sudden visions.

Was it imagination, or had a flicker of light passed across the auditorium? Saunders looked back, glimpsing tiny squares glowing high in the darkness. There was pinkish movement, a

brilliant pinpoint. Of course! Lester and Miss Lucas had reached the projection box.

If only I had a lighter, thought Saunders. A cigarette lighter. He had packed in the habit through the aid of a hypnotist colleague, but might have signalled Lester. Then Saunders let out a sudden, involuntary grunt. Something had slapped him in the dark.

It had been a hand. Jacqueline's. Her arm stretched to enclose him in a sinuous cuddle. Chunky boots kicked at the seats in front. The woman thrashed her head wildly, bumping Saunders, while emitting a cat-like hiss. This rose to a high-pitched whine - then a piercing, animalistic scream.

Saunders jerked back, pulling away from the arm. Its fingers writhed in the air, claw-like. Jacqueline's scream had subsided now, to a gurgling noise of pleasure.

Saunders glanced back at the projection box, in order to gain his bearings. A face could be seen in one of the distant windows, lit by the clear white torch. It was Miss Lucas. Her expression was rigid, and her eyes bulged open. It was not a look of curiosity, but terrified panic. The torchlight flashed aside so the windows vanished. Saunders was left to grope his way to the aisle.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the telephone rang, Morgan's left hand was already tapping the corner of his desk. The phone was just inches away, moulded from dark plastic, and Morgan's hand awaited like a zoo animal keen for feeding time. His other faculties were well occupied in the small study, on the first floor of the Bohemia house.

Morgan was attempting to compile a running order for the occasion he was planning, juggling various contributors into their respective timeslots. Gradually, as the event progressed, the tone would become more dramatic until - in the early hours of a winter's morning - the fantastic climax was reached. Morgan had shuffled the names for an hour or so, listing them in longhand each time. Perhaps such meticulous care might allow a more truthful insight. There were now five small sheets of paper before him, torn from the notebook in turn, offering a range of alternatives.

These were the details that Morgan would discuss with his artistic advisor, whose taste in such matters was impeccable. He manoeuvred the sheets into a different order, changing the criteria of his preferred option. Then his left hand pounced at the anticipated ring, now the hour had just gone eight.

"Jacqueline," said Morgan, knowing the identity of the caller. "How did the morning go?"

She almost purred down the phone. "Splendidly...dark. Russell had to hold my hand. We couldn't find the way out."

Morgan leant back, chuckling. He rotated his stool away from the desk, allowing his gaze to fall upon a map on the wall. It

showed Hastings and Bexhill some decades past, but was accurate enough for his purpose. Morgan had affixed little labels with tiny script, telling of his adventures. A couple referred to Poynter, while several dotted the countryside around the towns. Bexhill had a few, including one relating to Baird's former residency. Another had a snide remark concerning Ouija boards and an old priest's meddling. A third, near the railway line, was more speculative. It read, 'Cinema: a place for the elegant deceased?'

"Agreed, then?" murmured Morgan, regarding this miniature scroll. He intended to update it, now events were quickening.

"We all agreed," replied Jacqueline. "Russell fixed a two-month lease. He had to help that girl, Miss Lucas. I don't know what David said to her, she became a little freaked."

Morgan chuckled. Briefly moving the receiver away from his ear, he took the scroll between thumb and forefinger - then neatly tore the question mark away with his right hand. It fluttered down to the carpet, like the wing of a dead moth. "Your opinion is final on aesthetics," he resumed, "for I have not seen the venue. If your eyes have approved it, my visit is unimportant. Indeed, it would be an insult to your own judgement."

"How kind you are, Bertie," cooed Jacqueline. "I am already playing with design ideas. I am constructing a little Marquette." It was near to her, in the compact flat she owned in a seafront block. Jacqueline had assembled a box-like structure of black card, with tracing paper to represent a screen. Just the size of a shoebox, this impromptu model already suggested a cinema

auditorium. Jagged strips of paper indicated seats, although not all had been glued into place. The presence of scissors, adhesive and marker pens - gigantic in relative scale - told of hours ahead on this project.

"Don't have the programme yet," said Morgan, swivelling back to his desk. "Music to start, I think. That will cover any late arrivals. I would like Russell to give a talk, about shadows of the mind..."

"You think his bladder will take it?" she joked.

"Ha, ha," mocked Morgan. "Then your theatrical bunch..."

"How's your poet?" asked Jacqueline, huskily. "I look forward to our next encounter."

"Laurence is working in his room," explained Morgan. "He had dinner here with Claudia and myself. She gave him coffee before going out."

"The good Mrs. Morgan..." sighed Jacqueline, perhaps jealously.

"Maybe I'll talk to him later, maybe not. The quality of his material is paramount. There's not much time, Jacqueline. I don't want to interfere."

She mused on the phone, humming inaudibly. "I know. But I would like to...encourage. Unless that counts as interference?"

Morgan raised his eyebrows with a simple verdict. "That is surely an aesthetic matter," he smiled. "Your opinion is final, Jacqueline."



## Chapter Twenty-One

*Vision or Vice*

MORGAN HELD LESTER'S NOTES in some degree of contempt, disliking for one the scruffy informality of their presentation. An account should be written in a hard-backed book, thought Morgan - preferably one of a fine binding with acid-free paper, that could linger as a souvenir, heirloom or archive for decades, even centuries, to come. Eternity, thought Morgan. That was what he craved, even if his own publication had been a modest affair. That tawdry file of Lester's hardly deserved its presence in his study, where it clashed with a library of carefully acquired tomes. Yet Morgan had absorbed the content of those twenty pages in a long, uninterrupted read.

It was a potted biography of John Logie-Baird, compiled from various sources, with a few words circled in ink. These referred to unusual aspects, although with little clarification. Lester referred to 'the tape' a couple of times, as if he had held some kind of interview. If a transcript existed, it had been removed from the file.

Morgan poured a large brandy and settled back in a deep, almost distracted trance. The notes merged with the knowledge he already had, either remembered or within easy retrieval. His mind was racing into the past - not his own, but that which preceded his life. It would be instructive to merge the biographies of two most notable men.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aleister Crowley was some years the senior of John Logie-Baird. He had been born in 1875, in Leamington, England, with Baird in Helensburgh, Scotland, in 1888. An occult society named the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was founded that very decade, with the British order beginning in 1888 - some five months before Baird was born. Crowley entered the Order through a ritual held in London in November 1898, and had become Master of the Temple by 1909. Meanwhile, Baird learnt his own trade of electrical engineering, along with time working in the Clyde shipyards. Perhaps the riveted hulks of those great steamers had tempted him to travel one day.

Morgan glanced at the map on his wall, with the land printed green against the pale blue of sea. He had marked it with his flags, of course, and the place was not unknown to tourists. However, it was not the conurbation of Hastings and Bexhill upon which the Satanist gazed. No, here was somewhere far more exotic, as befit the scenes that had transpired there. Lester had mentioned it once, in an early conversation, and Morgan had purchased the map. It was the island of Trinidad, where the hero of television had been a most unlikely visitor in 1919. He had come to make, of all things, jam.

Knowing of his Crowley's adventures in the mountains of the world, Morgan let his eyes wander across the map, imagining

himself striding, then running, through its geographic obstacles. The aroma from Baird's cauldron had attracted insects with its sweet allure, just as tales of his inventive genius attracted those of influence and curiosity. For Baird's technical work had not ceased, despite this tropical interlude. Morgan was moving closer to the man, beyond the Santa Cruz Valley, where a cocoa plantation had granted him refuge. Colourful in the day to be sure, especially in a world used to black and white photographs and etchings of unknown lands. There would be greens of tropical lushness that would fade with the coming of night. Then, the forest would be a backdrop of stark black and white, evoking the horror films of a decade on.

However, Crowley had not lacked an island refuge. He had founded an abbey at Cefalù, in Sicily, in the spring of 1920. It became known as the Abbey of Thelema - of *will*. Crowley's ambition had differed markedly from Baird's, as he used drugs - not electricity and light - to manifest unearthly visions.

Scenes no less inexplicable were occurring on that other island, where the native population regarded Baird with wariness and fear despite his mild manner and pleasant disposition. The Scotsman would tinker in the night with wires and flashing lights, up to his own brand of magic - *black magic*, they thought. Indeed, an image was sent down wires from the house of the plantation's owner to the bungalow where Baird was staying. The images had hardly spanned the globe, just a few hundred feet, but they had existed for a moment as a mere signal, incorporeal and fragmented.

If glimpsed through a window of the bungalow, the effect could have been powerful.

In his mind, Morgan crouched beside a native against the *film noir* trees of his imagination, peeking in the window to where Baird beheld his experiment. With spectacles and shirtsleeves, the Scotsman looked like a computer geek born out of his time.

A rickety disc spun in the room, powered by a whining electric motor: and there on the wall, projected, was a crude but discernible image. Something bold and simple, as could be conveyed by such primitive means. A face would be the most striking possibility. *Who*, thought Morgan. The silhouette of the plantation owner, perhaps, or an object from the locality? Why not a carved wooden mask, like those in Hastings Museum, so the native would squeal at the sight of its shadowy features and scamper into the dark. A glimpse of a demigod or an ancestor, conjured by the gentle Scotsman.

Morgan reacted to this imagined scenario, laughing as the native fled. The sound had been transmitted somehow, through space and time, catching the ear of Baird. The inventor paused for a second, puzzled, as Morgan grinned near the window. My astral body, thought Morgan. I am punching myself through the ether, and making a connection eighty years ago. As he considered this, the image of the great inventor faded into strips of black and white: the vertical lines of ancient television, striping him to abstraction.

Of course, Baird's experiments had been preliminary to his ultimate achievements, although vital to the overall plan. The inventor was candid with his true collaborators, but misdirected those he wished to confuse like any good conjuror - whether through alterations to equipment on public show or the running of striking but elementary demonstrations, inferior to his actual progress. He returned from Trinidad in the late autumn of 1920, along with large tins of unsold jam.

Not long after, Crowley took a jaunt from his own refuge in early 1921, visiting Paris while others ran the Abbey. His ideas were rooted in archaic traditions, filtered through the Victorian construct of the Golden Dawn, but even Crowley noticed the changing of the times: the new freedoms after the First World War as the 1920s kicked in. Modern art was flourishing, with new styles of architecture and dress. As Baird tried to build the future, Crowley preserved the occult knowledge of the past. Crowley retreated to his Abbey, gaining inspiration to write and paint in these natural, even primitive surroundings.

Baird had switched his commercial attentions to soap, but merged with a rival in 1922. As Captain Oliver George Hutchinson was an old friend, the arrangement was mutually beneficial. However, Baird fell ill the next day and moved to Hastings at the suggestion of a school friend who was already there. Other bohemians joined Crowley in Cefalù whilst Baird gathered helpers in the seaside town. The Abbey became mired in controversy, with a shock story in a Sunday paper. However, Baird proceeded with his

television work, improving on the Trinidad experiment before an *electric* shock nearly killed him. As for Crowley, the regime of Mussolini had arrived and he was ordered out of Italy. He lived for a while in North Africa with his Scarlet Woman of the time, Leah Hirsig.

Crowley dictated his memoirs while a keen acolyte, Norman Mudd, tried to salvage his reputation in the eyes of the British Press. Perhaps television would have scorned him too if the medium had been up and running, or given scope for an incisive documentary. As it was, Baird moved to London in August 1924 to establish a more spacious laboratory. By then, those in high places were taking an interest in his work. Television, or its applications, might be a useful asset to the military. Crowley's possessions were sent from the Abbey to London after its effective dissolution, only to be destroyed by the Customs. By then, Crowley had a new woman - Dorothy Olsen, with whom he returned to Paris.

\* \* \* \* \*

There had been a moment when the public could glimpse the future, without creeping through the forests of a tropical retreat. The venue would be a deliberate one, inviting the curious with no need for bubbling preserves. The site was no circus, theatre or music hall. Neither was it a seaside peepshow on Hastings Pier. The chosen place was the capital, London, and a most respectable venue: the department store of Selfridges in Oxford Street.

Even a Satanist must acquire the necessities of life, smiled Morgan, at the somewhat mundane concept of Aleister Crowley moving through the halls of that great establishment. He would have presented a striking figure amongst the clerks and bureaucrats, purchasing their office suits and cuff links, keen to impress the flapper girls with bobbed hair and dangling beads. While his manner or attire might not be typical of the time, Crowley would stroll through the gaiety with a focused momentum that would not be questioned or hindered. His interest lay not with haberdashery, but in a strange attraction that the Oxford Street store was hosting in that spring of 1925. It was the transmission of images through wire, using a system of electrical apparatus that had been developed by that upcoming inventor, Mr. John Logie Baird.

Crowley might have hovered amiably behind an astonished group, kindly allowing those smaller than he - the women and children - to see the flickering images unhindered, with predictable gasps and giggles. There might have been a smile of acknowledgement as one master to another, noting the crudity of the results but understanding their absolute importance as extant, tangible manifestations. The effect was that of a magical trick, for Mr. Baird had boxed-in his devices in the manner of a Victorian showman. Crowley would have been unable to see the precise method, but understand the marvel of achievement. For his own mastery had been achieved through many years, and Baird was younger than he. Crowley was a Magus - no, *Ipsissimus* - of the highest magickal kind, while Baird was becoming its technical

equivalent. How a power or ability could grow under sustained and wilful application!

The scene had probably never happened. Crowley might have popped over to London from Paris, but had soon been off on his travels again. The magician had spent much time in Europe and Africa during the 1920s, although he had often been in London while Baird was away. The two had hardly pursued parallel careers, but the entwining of their lives made a fascinating comparison.

Despite their differences, Crowley and his followers travelled to Germany in June 1925, where a Convocation of Magi was to be held: a gathering of those with knowledge of magic, and belonged to Europe's occult societies. The man who had asked them, Heinrich Traenker, had been less familiar with Crowley than one would have supposed. He was so shocked by Crowley's heretical writings that he put a curse on his guest. However, a more reasoning follower became convinced by Crowley's message and backed him financially for many years. His name was Karl Johannes Germer. However, both Leah Hirsig and Norman Mudd were soon estranged from their guru.

Baird transmitted the first face of a living person in the autumn of that year, although he might have concealed earlier success to divert both detractors and rivals. Television was launched as a public service in January 1926, although the earliest transmissions were by wire and often without sound. Meanwhile, Crowley was dodging debts in Paris and Tunis, heedless of the experimental imagery that was beginning to invade the

ether. Baird's work led to radar, for which he never took credit, through a device called the Noctovisor. It could see in the dark via infrared light, and then reflected radio waves. By 1928, he was a wealthy man who could cast images across the Atlantic.

Crowley was still seeking recognition for his own philosophy, with its call of "Do What Thou Wilt." A Cambridge graduate, Gerald Yorke, offered both support and money, while the stream of Scarlet Women continued. Baird became a wealthy figure as he tweaked his new technologies: both colour and three-dimensional pictures, in early television form. Crowley was thrown out of France in 1929 under suspicion of espionage, with his occult activity seen as a cover. He had German contacts, after all, and might have been spying for that country - according to the French authorities, at least.

Baird visited Germany in the same year, making a test broadcast to London from the German Broadcasting House. The power of television as a propaganda tool was easily apparent. BBC television began officially on September 30<sup>th</sup> 1929, initially by landline, but true broadcasts were established by March 1930. Baird met his wife Margaret around this time, after holding auditions for pianists to play for the cameras.

Crowley tried to propagate his own imagery, using far more conventional media: oil on canvas or pencil on paper, albeit of *far* less conventional subjects. His pictures could find no gallery in London, so shocking or strange was their style, so Crowley tried Germany instead. Imagine if he had placed them before

Baird's television cameras, thought Morgan. What a fright it would have conveyed through the complacent drawing rooms of inter-war Britain! The exhibition took place in October 1931, although none of the pictures sold. Germer, Crowley's backer, was left out of pocket.

Baird returned to Germany in the same year, and briefly encountered Hitler. The Fuehrer was frequently to be seen in the bars and beer cellars, boasting of his plans for a Third Reich to brown-shirt followers of fashion. Baird's know-how was seen as a growing threat, so he was ordered out of the country. What would Hitler's reaction to Crowley's paintings have been, given his early career as an artist?

What a fool Hitler was, thought Morgan. Given all his musings on occult lore, which had fuelled a burgeoning empire, the Fuhrer had spurned the greatest inventor of the age *and* the greatest magician too. What a team Baird and Crowley would have made, if the two had been put together! Images of power, projected across Europe through powerful electric means. Yet Baird's curiosity was a threat to German secrets, while Crowley's occult network rivalled Hitler's own. Equally, the two would not have made easy collaborators: the polite, meticulous Baird alongside the wild, hedonistic Crowley. They hardly shared the same aesthetics, or the same ideals for the world.

While Crowley lingered in Germany through 1931, Baird travelled to New York in September to launch an American television service. Crowley had spent some years there, from 1914

till 1919, when he had met Leah Hersig - a now departed Scarlet Woman. Any travel premonitions Baird may have had on the Clyde were beautifully confirmed, for he had once helped to build the Aquitania. Margaret joined him on the Olympic, and they were married on Coney Island in November. Crowley had a little less luck the following month when his latest Scarlet Woman, Bertha Busch, stabbed him with a carving knife. Luckily, the injury was not severe.

Despite his sterling efforts, Baird failed to secure a transatlantic deal. The appeal of television was spreading fast, and American companies wished to gain.

Crowley was evicted from his Berlin flat and returned to London, where he sold his manuscripts to Yorke for £50. Bertha Busch drifted away, as others had done before. The sight of a previous Crowley partner in a mental hospital had suggested a grim future. Even so, Crowley was a successful speaker at a Foyle's Literary Luncheon in September 1932.

Mr. and Mrs. Baird had moved to Hampstead, with a daughter born in the same month as Crowley's talk. They moved to Sydenham in 1933, so Baird could use the South Tower of Crystal Palace for experiments with ultra short-wave radio signals. It became a kind of retreat for the brilliant Scotsman, for he had effectively parted from the company that bore his name. Television had its own momentum, and an electronic future with no place for spinning discs and old bobbins. Baird had always followed his inventive

genius, and honed the skills it demanded. The 1930s, and a coming war, would bring new challenges.

Again, Morgan dwelt on lost possibilities. If only Crowley had wandered to the Crystal Palace and chanced upon Baird's work. They could have transmitted demons via radio waves, and scared an enemy to death. Neither man should have cared for Germany by then, given the Nazis' view of their respective activities. They could have combined to aid the British government in the build-up to war: both had visited Germany and been asked, so to speak, to leave.

Indeed, the Nazis banned all occult orders in 1935, such as the Order of the Oriental Templars: this had been Crowley's host in the country. His ally, Martha Küntzel, had her papers seized despite having supported Hitler. The Fuhrer would never join Crowley in a 'new world order', despite Martha's expectation. Hitler banned television the same year, declaring it a state secret. He saw its military use, to be sure.

However, the new medium spread through Britain during 1936: gone were the thirty flickering lines, replaced by high definition images - at least, by the standards of the day. Perhaps Hitler's power extended to Sydenham, South London, when the Crystal Palace burnt to the ground. The doodlebugs were yet to fly, and bombs still to drop from the sky. But a secret agent, as in Conrad's tale, might well have attempted the job. Accident or sabotage, mishap or crime, it had taken most of Baird's equipment.

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Crowley was no ideal tenant, perhaps. His name was attractive to thrill-seekers, but repulsed those of a calmer mind. There were few thrill-seekers amongst landladies. He moved between furnished lodgings during the mid-1930s, depending on domestic whims. If Crowley had chanced by the Dominion Cinema in 1937, he could have seen a true flourish of wizardry. Baird had created a way to project large television images, perfect for a public venue - and in colour!

Crowley found an upper class ally in Lady Frieda Harris, who would soon help his own visions. Alas, war cast its shadow over Baird. Television was banned for the duration of the war, with the BBC stopping transmission on September 1<sup>st</sup> 1939. The loss was hardly felt by Crowley's London women, who were kept busy enough before he dodged the Blitz. Crowley moved to Torquay in the west of England in September 1940, just as Baird's family had moved to Cornwall. However, the inventor had important war work to do, and braved it out in London.

After losing his Torquay flat in the manner of his London homes, Crowley secured a house out of town to establish, it was hoped, a new abbey. He could hardly hope to match the freedoms of a Mediterranean island in a prim English setting. It would be no substitute for Cefalù, even if his tenancy had continued. Crowley was ordered to vacate by May 1941, and subsequently returned to London. Baird was still busy there in his home laboratory, doing

secret work as bombs fell around him. He suffered a heart attack, but carried on.

In April 1944, towards the end of the war, Crowley moved to the Bell Inn in Buckinghamshire, just north of London. It was there that a friend told him of his final lodgings: a guest house called Netherwood, on the Ridge in Hastings, down on the south coast. Crowley moved there in January 1945.

Equally, Baird left London for the sake of his health. A house in Bexhill was rented after the war, just by the railway station, where the inventor found peace for a while. His inventions for the military had helped win the war, while even Crowley believed Hitler was insane. Television celebrated Britain's conquest of that madness, but its pioneer would miss its future. John Logie Baird died in his sleep on June 14<sup>th</sup> 1946.

Crowley continued to live at Netherwood, where he received many visitors - including one who became his biographer. Aleister Crowley's own demise came on December 1<sup>st</sup> 1947.

Both had lived in the area simultaneously, albeit for a short while. Crowley had moved to Netherwood before Baird's arrival, and dwelt there for almost three years. Baird dwelt in Bexhill for perhaps a year, within the period of Crowley's residence. Given their global travel, the pair had been virtual neighbours.

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The intensity of Morgan's concentration lessened as he settled back in the present. The level of brandy in the glass was far lower, whilst its effects had been enhanced by the long cigar that smouldered in an ashtray. The details of Mr. Crowley and Mr. Baird had become indistinguishable, merged together like strands of DNA twisting ever round each other. Morgan saw their lives as a single timeline, a wonderful thread, leading to their final proximity.

A stunning thought pounded through Morgan's brain. Had they ever met or known of each other? Had Baird been summoned to see Crowley at Netherwood, or Crowley wandered to meet Baird in Bexhill? It was a tantalizing idea, if unlikely. Crowley was an old Satanist with dirty habits, and Baird a moral family man. What would they have in common?

Some said Crowley had worked for the secret service in the capacity of propaganda, spreading lies to the enemy. One of Baird's secret inventions had been facsimile television, which could send many words a minute. So *who* had written the words?

Their lives had ended within a few miles, and a few months, of each other. Had there been a closer connection? Alas, there was little more to be gleaned. Lester's notes ended at Baird's death in 1946. At least, those he allowed Morgan to see.

Morgan knew he had not been told *everything*. Lester had circled words like 'wizardry', 'Noctovisor' and 'secret' as if they held a particular relevance. There were also jotted references to 'the tape'. Lester was trying to tease Morgan, who had no technical knowledge to object.

Yet the scientist was not as clever as he seemed. That ugly clip file was a thing of utility, and had pockets on the inside cover. Morgan grinned slyly to himself, then felt for a bump. Yes, there were business cards tucked within. Morgan slid them out and shuffled them like a Tarot pack. Two were irrelevant, Lester's and his own. Another bore the name of an Indian restaurant where they had eaten a meal with Jacqueline.

The last was a lot more promising. It came from a local nursing home, with an address in Bexhill. What business was that of Lester's? A place for the elderly he could have visited, perhaps speaking to...a *resident*. Someone in their eighties or nineties, with memories of the war - or even, two most remarkable men.

Morgan copied the details into a pocket notebook before secreting the cards again. Nothing was amiss with the file, so Lester would not be suspicious. A *magician* must know his tricks.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*In Pursuit of a Poet*

WORSHIP WAS NOT on Beevers' mind as he passed through the lychgate, and strode the path to the church. He would usually take time on such a visit - allowing his glance to appreciate the gentle slope of the churchyard, the restful expanse of graves, and the wilder intercessions of nature. However, the mood was very different today. Both nature and the stonemasons' art were ignored, in favour of dogged progress.

There was only one matter in question, although comprised of several threads. While he had little evidence, Beevers felt a sense in his gut that he recognized all too well. It was a sense he had not experienced for years, although there had been the tiniest tinge some two weeks before. A sense of wariness, with no specific cause, which throbbed within him like a latent headache. He had felt it on the occasion of Newton's visit, and the difficult conversation with Paula that had followed. Both had brought fresh tidings that day, trivial in themselves. Only Beevers had been able to correlate the facts, and detect the faintest hint of a pattern. If his hunch had any grounds, then unease would turn to a powerful dread.

Repressing any such tendency for the moment, Beevers grasped the handle of the church door. It was of cast iron, heavy and reassuring. Such a handle moved with an easy solidity, sliding the mechanism to allow access while implying its closure would ensure

sanctuary. Such would have been the case had the door not failed to open. Beevers twisted the handle several times, like a frustrated tourist tackling an arcade game. The handle rotated slightly, but failed to shift the mechanism inside.

Beevers puffed with indignation. Then he moved to the side of the church and approached the small, latticed window. There was something moving inside - a pinkish, balding head - so Beevers knocked gently on the glass. He had already stepped to a narrow door as the man inside glanced up, although the knock had been familiar.

"So God has closed his residence?" scowled Beevers, as he stumbled into the vestry with an unusually clumsy motion. Newton was confused for a second, until Beevers clarified his remark. "The church should be open to any who need it," he said. "I can knock at your window and gain admittance, but what of the outcast, the traveller, the passing stranger? Are they excluded with lock and key?"

Newton closed the narrow door, and bade his visitor to be settled. Beevers slumped onto a chair, near the desk where Newton had been studying. "I exclude no-one," said Newton. "There is the question of security..."

Beevers snorted.

"I am working here alone, there is no scheduled service and Tattersfield is off this week. A building this size is too much for a single man, when it comes to practical matters."

"Its very practice is one of ministry," said Beevers. "That is the sole purpose, to be open and available. Why study the scriptures when our true mission is ignored...?"

"I do not ignore it," snapped Newton. "Really, James...there is a wildness in your voice. If I had wished for the gusts of winter, I would have thrown the windows open too."

"I apologize if I speak out of turn," sighed Beevers. "It is...since your visit, a couple of weeks ago. My grandniece confirmed your story, of how Mr. Poynter had returned to Hastings. She knew him briefly from the spring, and spotted him near the shopping arcade. She did not think to tell me, alas, and I regret my harsh response."

"We all have regrets," murmured Newton.

"Paula could hardly conceive of the importance," added Beevers. "Knowing Mr. Poynter's frame of mind from our conversations, he is the sort of talented person who Morgan could utilize. I remember Richard Coulter from the Ouija business, who *no-one* thought had been duped. We only saved him at the last minute, through Edgar's brilliance..."

Newton appreciated mention of that scholarly mind, and his love of the cathedral city some forty miles away. While he and Beevers might bicker, Newton held Edgar in the deepest respect. They had met barely a dozen times, but maintained rapport through written correspondence.

"Since then, I have been walking the town as usual," resumed Beevers, "and taking our dog to West Hill. I have yet to see Mr.

Poynter, or learn more of his poetry. What you do not understand, Reverend, is the implication of the phrase. The words you quoted in connection with Mr. Morgan. The mention of 'something similar'. Similar, indeed, to *what*? Another poetry evening, perhaps...yet the word implies a *difference*. Why would Morgan become involved with a poetry evening? He might attend one, to be sure, but he has never bothered with the arts. At least, not that *kind* of art."

The sentence hung in the air, as both felt the implication of the term. The burden was on Newton to break the spell, which he did - not with speech, but action. Sliding open a drawer of his desk, the priest took out the poster that had remained there since Poynter's visit. He did not regret his decision to hide the item, despite following its directions: 'The Perception. An Evening of Poetry, Spoken from the Soul.'

"I did not display the poster," said Newton, "although I know...I should have told you. Morgan learnt of the Perception elsewhere. The church cannot be blamed for that. There must have been other posters."

Beevers scrutinized the lettering, as if divining facts from the very typeface and tone of paper used. "A description, a venue, a date and time. No phone number to call. Mr. Poynter wanted an audience but not, it would seem, inquiry. He assumed they would appear, and appear they did."

"Given the gravitas of his approach," remarked Newton, "the young man would have spoken those poems to an empty room." Indeed, he felt an absence - a change of habit - that added to the air of

tension. "I forget! With Tattersfield away, I have no-one to brew the tea. Let me go to the kettle..."

As Newton popped into an anteroom, Beevers reared back from the poster. He observed it at arm's length, as if fixing it on a notice-board. This was how the public would have seen it, amongst other posters. The effect was intriguing, if hardly communicative. There had been no way to contact the poet, prior to the event. He tried to think of Edgar, all those miles away, and the incisive line of logic he might have applied. If only Edgar had been here, in Hastings, rather than his beloved Canterbury. Perhaps he would be able to help sometime, but Beevers would do his best for now.

"You said...Morgan wanted Mr. Poynter's number?" asked Beevers.

"After the Perception," replied Newton, as he returned from placing teabags in an old, chipped teapot.

"After..." murmured Beevers. "So I presume they had not spoken much before...at least, not to the point where details were exchanged. We must assume Morgan has contacted Mr. Poynter subsequently, although we have not seen them together since."

"If Mr. Poynter is still in Hastings," agreed Newton, "they are presumably working together."

"Working or planning," added Beevers. "It would be Mr. Poynter's *skills* that Morgan could use. Why entice him otherwise? I must find Laurence Poynter, speak to him, but where?"

"A hotel, a guest house...if *only* I had that number!" sighed Newton. "Unless he's staying with a friend..."

"What *kind* of friend?" groaned Beevers, with a hint of fateful unease. He had kept an eye on Morgan for years, and was well aware of his address. It was printed in the back of that damned little book, which viewed the occult through rose-tinted glasses. The text was so anodyne and deceptive in style, even the public library loaned a copy. Might the author have granted his acolyte a spare, hoping the address would serve as invitation? It was a big jump of reasoning to make, and such jumps - as Edgar had warned him, once - could lead to premature conclusions. It would be far better to unravel the matter from an earlier stage.

"I believe we have quite earned our tea," said Beevers, prompted by a tinkling of spoons that cut through his introspection. "Refreshment, then a walk into town. Seeing this poster, it is obvious."

\* \* \* \* \*

The posters in the window had altered over the last two weeks. Their arrangement was geometrical yet imprecise, like parts of a medieval window with ancient, sagging panes. From inside, they appeared as shadowed interruptions to the cool streetscape - the text invisible or barely hinted by pale, reversed impressions. With the lunchtime trade over, Sally knew she was in for a quiet patch until her shift ended at six. She liked to work evenings usually, when the bar was a hive of bustle and music. Apart from a lone coffee drinker in the corner, the place was empty for now.

Soon he would be gone, and she might have a half-hour to turn up the music and dance to a favourite track. She could hardly inflict this on her solo customer, and anyhow - Sally was not the manager.

Already, the daylight was acquiring a tinge of amber-green. With December almost upon them, Sally was looking forward to the vibrant events the wine bar would host: the group bookings for food, live performers and a New Year's Eve party. It was a little soon to advertise - but as the calendar page was turned for the final time, the posters would be ready.

Apparently, someone was keen to study the coming attractions. There was a man outside who she did not recognize, his face glimpsed in vertical slices beyond the printed material. Sally gave the bar an unnecessary wipe, as the heavy door was swung open and the stranger stepped into the bar. He seemed rather hesitant, she thought, and a lot older than the usual customers. This place focused on a younger, trendy crowd. While few were turned away, Sally felt the newcomer to be an unlikely customer. Still - give the old guy what he wants, she thought. Probably tea and biscuits, plus a chat about the war. Wasn't the community centre up the road?

"Hello, there," smiled Sally. The welcome was warm enough, if with a slight hint of condescension. "Can I get you anything, sir?"

Sally's barmaid instincts had not been entirely wrong about the stranger. Beevers was not much of a drinker and, like Newton, was seldom in licensed premises. He liked a glass of sherry with

Paula, but it was better taken at home when Duncan was adrift in childhood dreams. This place had the aura of a gentleman's club, despite the Christmas lights added since Poynter's event. They were white, tasteful and emotionless. Beevers was a stranger in such a venue, unsure of its prices or protocol. Thinking swiftly, he decided to play on this fact. It was the kind of discerning tactic that Edgar had applied, and often to good effect.

"I'd like...maybe a lemonade," said Beevers. "No, it's far too cold for that. Tell me, I'm a little confused. What time does the evening start?"

"We're on winter time now," smiled the barmaid. She was youngish, blonde, and wore a blouse with a striped waistcoat. The clothes had been chosen by the manager to make a jazzy impression, even with nothing jazzy going on. "Evening starts when it's dark, I guess. Sure you don't want a nightcap?"

Beevers glanced around, exaggerating his elderly confusion. "The *recital*, I mean. The evening of poetry. Wasn't there a poster in the window...?"

"Always changing the posters," she replied. "That was three weeks ago, I reckon. It's been taken down, recycled..."

Beevers rubbed his brow with simulated woe. "Oh, *my*...then I missed it. I get the dates wrong, you see. Must have mixed it up with that organ recital..."

The organ recital was fictitious.

"Why don't I get you a tea?" asked Sally. "We do a nice pot, I'll have one myself. No events tonight, love. There's plenty in December."

"Any more *poetry*?" asked Beevers, barely masking the incisive nature of his question. Sally shrugged her shoulders, so Beevers pushed the point. "I've heard he is brilliant, that Mr. Poynter. I do so admire poetry, really *good* poetry. If I could speak to him, ask him..."

"He isn't here," smiled Sally, as if humouring a patient. "What's he called...Poynter? I could check the book, if he's doing any more..."

The barmaid bobbed behind a pillar, where she slid out a hardback volume labelled '*Graham*' on the front. As she flipped through the pages, Beevers craned his neck to glimpse what lay inside. There were ruled pages with jotted notes, by several different hands. The text was illegible from a distance, as Sally ran her finger through the December pages. They were packed with advance bookings, but not the one Beevers sought.

Sally made a noncommittal hum, then flipped back to the start of November. "I was here that night, lots of old men...no more poetry coming up, I'm afraid, but we've got a few details. 'Function Room - one night, six to eleven.' That's fifty pounds at ten an hour, sir, if you want to make a booking. Fee paid in advance by Mr. Poynter, care of...yes, the number of a guest house. Don't bet he's there anymore."

Which was just what Beevers was trying to discover! He had to be tactful, or the information would be lost. "They *must* know more," he said, curiously. "I want to encourage the poet. Inspire him! I mean, he might rent the room again."

Sally sighed. The manager, Graham, would not be back till five. She was unable to ask for advice. Still, it was not a private number - just a guest house, where the old man might wish to stay. Taking one of the bar's business cards, Sally jotted the number on the back with a ballpoint. "Here. We used to have a payphone," she said, "but everyone's got a mobile now."

She had guessed correctly that Beevers was not amongst 'everyone'. "A great help, my dear," nodded Beevers, as he slipped the card into his coat. "Perhaps, that tea...another time? You'll be busy, soon."

"No problem," Sally reassured him.

The old man fumbled with the door, then stepped into the coolness of the street. He was quickly lost behind the posters, then other pedestrians bustling in the winter air. Unlikely to return, thought Sally. He was hardly the *usual* clientele.

\* \* \* \* \*

Restraint in the use of colour was hardly apparent within the walls of the Hargreaves Guest House. True, the decorations were hardly expansive - but the tinsel, fairy lights and paper streamers that enlivened various corners of the lower floor were

decidedly unfashionable in their rainbow shades. They had entwined with seaside ornaments like tendrils of seaweed, or topped maritime pictures like luminous barnacles. Mr. Hargreaves was no follower of fashion in this regard. Such lights evoked the Christmas of his childhood, in the late 1950s, when the concept of design had yet to tame festive aesthetics. Winters were better then too, he thought. Snowy and white, like the top of a Christmas cake. Joyce was icing hers at the weekend, and Mr. Hargreaves looked forward to a large, nostalgic slice.

While the morning chores were over, Mr. Hargreaves prowled the guest house with a proprietorial air in excess of any real duties. There were leaflets from the tourist office, with summer attractions advertised at this most unseasonable time. Perhaps he could sort them over a cup of tea, unless he tackled that jigsaw puzzle. It looked a challenging one...

However, the hall phone rang nearby with a chance of business. Yes, he would sort the leaflets after tea and a biscuit or two. Shaking a Hastings snowstorm into swirling life, Mr. Hargreaves lifted the receiver. "Guest house," he said. "Hargreaves speaking."

There was a rushing noise in the background, maybe the sound of wind. The voice was a little tinny, but audible enough as it spoke in a rich yet incisive tone. "Good afternoon. I have an inquiry," it said. "Is there a man staying there, a poet? His name would be Mr. Poynter."

Mr. Hargreaves sucked through his teeth, briefly. "No-one like that," he replied. "Just a lady at the moment, though we've got bookings through to the New Year. Are you after a single...?"

"I'm after this *man*," said the voice. "I'd be very grateful, if you had an address..."

"Can I ask who you are, sir?"

"Amery-Beevers, a poetry buff. I admire Mr. Poynter's work."

"All right, Mr. *Ammy-Bevis*? There's a lot of noise..."

Mr. Hargreaves was already glancing at the register, which lay beside the hall telephone. "Booked in a couple of times round Easter, then just the other month. I can't give addresses, Mr. *Bevis*...? I know Joyce had another call, before Mr. Poynter left. Some guy wanted to meet him, so she made a note."

There was the suggestion of a sigh at the end of the line, although it partially blended with the wind. "This man...what was his name?"

"Don't think he gave a name," mused Mr. Hargreaves, watching the snowflakes within the clear, moulded dome. "Joyce said...let me think, yes, she wrote it down. They had to meet somewhere. I think it was over by the fishing boats, after that poetry thing. We put a poster on the notice-board, but I don't think anyone *here*..."

"Did Mr. Poynter go to the meeting?" asked the voice, more urgently.

"How should I know?" shrugged Mr. Hargreaves. "This is a guest house, not a boarding school. I guess the lad went out that

day, so he probably met the guy. All I know is, he soon checked out."

"That's...helpful," said the voice. "I can ask around." Indeed, the caller rightly suspected the gentleman's name.

Mr. Hargreaves offered a dry chuckle, hardly justified by the stilted conversation. "One other thing before you go," he said, realizing the call might issue from a phone box. "He *did* have a visitor - not the guy, you know, but a rather elegant lady. She popped by before he left, and he let her into his room. We run a seaside guest house, Mr. *Bevan*? I don't want to encourage saucy behaviour, but I'm a father myself, I know what goes on." Mr. Hargreaves cleared his throat, awkwardly. "Or maybe she's another poet...?"

"Or interested in poetry," added the voice. "My money's running down, that's very helpful..."

"Hargreaves Guest House, open all year," intoned its proprietor. "Do pop by, Mr. *Bevis*? Or is that, *Ali-Bovis*?" But the line had already gone dead. Mr. Hargreaves observed the plastic snowflakes as they slowed in their gentle tumbling, around a crude model of Hastings Pier. It was from near the prototype, had he known, that the call had emanated from a windswept, barren phone box.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tired by his efforts at detection, Beevers returned home in the evening dusk for a lie down in his room. After joining Paula for an evening meal, Beevers settled by the telephone where he dialled a very important number: that of his old friend Edgar, some miles to the east in the city of Canterbury.

Beevers had never seen Edgar's current home, which was outside the walls of the city in a more suburban area. He had once had a room near the centre, where limited space and shared facilities were compensated for by the proximity of history. His window had even afforded a narrow glimpse of the Cathedral Church of Christ, the city's defining landmark, and he had enjoyed easy access to other churches and museums. Perhaps the greatest joy had merely been the presence of the city: the bustling streets, so evocative of medieval times despite the modern fashions and motor cars. Edgar had been no reactionary, and had always taken part in contemporary matters while studying past history and theology. These had never been his profession, for Edgar had worked for many years as a shop assistant. The wages had provided for his modest lodgings, which demanded little time in upkeep, but had sufficient space for his books and the radio.

Once retirement had come upon him, the stairs to the room proved difficult. Edgar had applied for a flat in a modern block, run by a housing association. It would be sad to leave the city centre, he thought. Yet his lodgings had a largely transient population amongst whom he had been an exception. The new block would allow his neighbours to become familiar, and give him a base

in later years from which to complete his personal studies. The city centre was an easy bus ride, or a walk on a good day - and if Edgar was no longer within those Roman walls, he remained within their realm.

It was from a considerably greater distance that the call to his attention came that night, as Edgar lay on the sofa listening to a babbling radio show. The volume was turned low so the voices were subliminal, as if emanating from beyond the walls. These bore pictures of the city he could no longer see so easily, although the growing piles of literature and journals partially obscured the framed images.

Edgar had resolved not to lift the phone that night: the box of tissues on the coffee table, plus a tub of aspirin and bottle of inhalant, attested to the reason why. The old man had survived some devilish attacks in the past, but another kind of entity had manifested itself in the form of influenza. Let it ring, thought Edgar, although he was not scornful of the caller. The message could come like a greetings card, wishing him well but with no need of instant reaction.

Even so, Edgar's attention intensified as he realized the identity of the caller. The warm yet concerned voice of a long-standing friend, a few years younger but no real junior. "Hullo, Edgar - this is James in Hastings. I was hoping to catch you, it's not your usual night at the club. Listen, I need to discuss something urgently. If you're back before eleven, please call me.

I'll stay by the phone, it won't disturb Paula. There's been a kind of indication..."

"Edgar here," said the man on the sofa. Edgar had propped himself up slightly, and reached to grab the phone. The night's resolution was broken, but James was no ordinary caller.

"Thank God," replied Beevers. "It's hard to explain, in a message..."

"I can listen," said Edgar, "but my throat's a bit croaky. There's a cold going round, it knocked me out. You sound...in some kind of trouble?"

"I'm sorry you're ill," said Beevers, somewhat masking his disappointment. He had hoped to ask his friend to come over, but that was clearly impossible. Beevers decided not to create any stress by making the suggestion, for Edgar would have wished to comply. Instead, he realized Edgar's advice would have to be enough.

"Don't want to alarm you," continued Beevers. "I've been assembling a few facts today, after a situation came to light. You know, of course, what I mean by a *situation*?"

"We are speaking of the arcane?" murmured Edgar.

"Possibly so. I sense that Morgan could be up to his tricks again. Nothing confirmed so far, but he is definitely courting the attentions of a young poet. It was that type of collusion, as you know, which led to the trouble last time. Not to mention the Ouija board episode."

"Mmm," mused Edgar, recalling both their previous encounters with the dubious historian. "He is a recidivist, it seems. Developing a pattern, although the outcome is different each time. Have you had any...sorry, I'm *sniffing*...any direct contact with...?"

At this point, Edgar's voice exploded in a powerful sneeze. He could imagine Beevers edging back from his own receiver at the sudden burst of noise. "Most sorry," said Edgar, reaching for a tissue. "I was meaning, of course, with Morgan?"

"No," replied Beevers. "I have not even seen the poet recently. Merely...followed his trail. With your health like this, I cannot ask you to come. What would you advise?"

Edgar took a deep breath, almost willing the cold into brief abeyance so he could speak to Beevers plainly. "Rumour is fine, and rumour may be right. But you must confirm it with your own eyes. See them together, at least once, so the poet knows of your concern. Then it may be possible to intervene."

"We know the dangers," pondered Beevers.

"Like few others," nodded Edgar. "The moment is a great tutor, to an open soul. It will spark the intuition, and suggest the best action to take. Sometimes, this can be reticence - withdrawal - although it may be appropriate to tackle the issue directly."

"Sabotage or prayer," murmured Beevers. "Quite a choice..."

"Although prayer can *bring* an answer," said Edgar. "If that, as you say, is sabotage...then we must trust that our course of action is granted correctness through faith."

"So there is *no* contradiction," said Beevers. "I'd like to thank you, Edgar, and will say a prayer for your swift recovery. I intend to watch Morgan's house for a day or two. See whoever is about. If the poet is there, I should know it."

"And if not...?" asked Edgar, his head beginning to grow dizzy once more.

"Then I may have worried over nothing," replied Beevers, without conviction. "Look - you take rest, I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"Our work could never be a bother," said Edgar, lapsing into a yawn. "I shall pray for you tomorrow, at midday...so begin your watch after that. A sick man can still bring a little guidance."

"He has already done so," smiled Beevers.

Chapter Twenty-Three

*The Elegant Deceased*

AT THE VERY END of November, the sun's dominion over daylight hours had been diminished considerably by the shortening days. Past three o'clock, a low amber light struck the coastal towns - their buildings painted a pale, warmish tone in one direction, while the opposite sides fell into a purple shade. The sharpness of the light, with an exaggerated contrast lent by its narrow angle, made the houses, shops and offices resemble miniature models in the cold, clear air. A dusting of frost pervaded the rooftops, enhancing the illusion.

One particular beholder watched from his study window, observing these effects. The shade of a lamp kept its light from the windowpanes, so a clear view was visible outside. Even so, his own reflection began to impinge upon the scene as the sky darkened. Before long, a reversed image of the study appeared to hover outside with holographic clarity. It was time to leave the house.

Not wanting to alarm Paula, Beevers had largely stopped short of concocting a lie. She knew of Morgan through his tales, and Poynter through her own encounters, while Beevers had explained his telephone call to Edgar. However, his current action was the outcome of that particular call: an idea discussed with Edgar, if not suggested by him, which both had agreed would be useful. A trip to Morgan's home in Bohemia might confirm the presence of

Laurence Poynter, if it could never entirely dispel it. A sighting of the man would be proof, while the lack of one might be the result of evasiveness or absence. Beevers knew he would intercede in the first instance, but the second - should it arise - would test his power of judgement. He might have to think quickly, even spontaneously, as to whether the truth was being hidden from him, or if there was no truth to conceal.

As for his own explanation, Beevers had told Paula that he was visiting a parishioner of Newton's who had been recently bereaved. Although there was such a parishioner, Beevers had already paid the visit some days before. He had not mentioned this to Paula, since it comprised part of his habitual walk, so there was plenty to tell should she question him. The ruse allowed Beevers to don a more solemn coat than he would usually wear: long, dark, in a formal style unlike the usual favoured duffel coat. Beevers also took an old, felt hat of the type favoured in the 1940s, although he only donned this some way from the house. The overall effect was a little excessive, verging on disguise, which was just what Beevers intended.

The figure stepped onto the curving slope of a darkened road, the sun having conceded to the great eclipse of dusk. Lights were appearing now, amongst the porticos and gables that peppered these perpendicular homes. Pale yellow windows dabbed the darkness here and there, with orange daubs from the street lamps. The highest windows hovered in black above this illuminated level, where the slates merged with the night sky. They had yet to suffer the

blight of Christmas lights, according to this beholder, and the fact pleased him the more.

There had been less building on the eastern side, where the outlines of trees predominated. Not yet denuded of every leaf, they formed shaggy black outlines against a deepening blue-grey. Occasionally, a gust of wind would blow a crackling batch of leaves down the slope. They rustled on the asphalt in the chill air, as the figure began to move.

Beevers had timed his trip to Bohemia for late afternoon, when he assumed there might be greater movement in and out of the house. If Poynter had remained all day, he might conceivably leave for a stroll. His tastes in the gothic suggested this, before sunset. Equally, should he already be about town, then dusk would bring an end to the day's activity and a return to his lodgings. A sighting of Poynter might not be necessary: should another visitor call or answer the door, Beevers intended to intervene with some innocent question in order to learn more. What he really wished to avoid was direct contact with Morgan.

The figure had turned the corner now, away from the tall houses, and headed down a slope. The lights of a shopping district shone below, adjoining the residential streets. Despite the resolution of its purpose, the figure took care while pacing the frost that glazed the pavement, along with other hazards. The spiked fronds of a thorn bush curled wildly over a wall, which surrounded a patch of waste ground. They resembled the claws of a trapped animal, and scratched the overcoat with brief resistance.

A gloved hand freed them before moving on. It brushed the railings of a small park near the bottom of the road, to prevent any sudden slip. It was an understandable precaution, even for a master of his art.

As the figure reached the lower ground, there was a station to the right: St. Leonards Warrior Square. Time for the briefest railway trip, and an important visit.

Morgan jingled his coins.

\* \* \* \* \*

Just as Poynter had sensed on his first visit, the tall, terraced house offered no clue to any dubious activity. Beevers walked north from the coastal road, where the bus had dropped him off from the centre of Hastings. The sky was a bluish-grey, and the air was cooling rapidly. The long coat was a necessity, in more ways than one. As he approached the house, Beevers turned the collar up to obscure the lower portion of his face, and tipped the hat down as far as sight would allow. There was a delicate balance between looking suspicious and becoming identified. The first was the least objectionable, given the possible dangers ahead.

Beevers decided to linger at a corner some yards from Morgan's address, where he made slow, deliberate work of checking his wristwatch while glancing frequently around. There was no-one except a woman who entered another house, hugging a fat shopping bag. Deciding on a brief walkabout, Beevers passed Morgan's house

on the other side of the road while facing continually ahead. His eyes, however, strained to their left. He caught a glimmer of light in an upper window, above the ground floor, which he believed to be Morgan's study. So the old Satanist was in residence! That might prove to be a complication. Beevers spotted another light, at the back of the house, visible as a blur through a lower window. If Morgan was at his studies upstairs, his wife or some acolyte might answer the door. Perhaps even Poynter himself?

Beevers knew the concealing nature of his outfit should allow him to pass the house several times, in reverse directions and on different sides of the road. This aspect was aided by the diminishing light, which made his face even harder to identify. However, Morgan was no fool. He had jackal-like instincts when it came to survival, and might well have set Beevers a trap by leaving the study illuminated while lurking in the shadows of the ground floor. Perhaps he was observing Beevers already, through binoculars, and cursing the old man as a naïve idiot for contriving such a feeble intrigue. Maybe this opinion was right, thought Beevers. It had been easy to suggest the plan while speaking to Edgar, and his reassuring tone had strengthened Beevers' resolve. Yet Edgar was recovering on a sofa in Canterbury, and not having to cope with the dilemma at hand.

Time was of the essence. If Poynter's body and soul were at risk, surely Beevers was obliged to show courage. Had Edgar not offered to pray for him, before Beevers' time of arrival? Surely the prayer would empower him now. There will never be a better

moment, thought Beevers. If my course of action is confused, then why not strike in the present? Go to Morgan's door, seek attention, and deal with whatever transpires.

Having passed Morgan's house, and passed again, Beevers found himself back on the corner where he had initially lingered. Just wait a minute or two, he thought, then stride direct to Morgan's door. He had the excuse of being a poetry buff, should anyone but Morgan or Poynter respond.

\* \* \* \* \*

A substantial number of lines had been inscribed on the sheets of paper, which Poynter had spread before him. They were freeform in their approach, combining words he had jotted in his pocket notebook with a flow of new ideas. The change of emphasis had inspired him somewhat: Poynter's own project, *The Book of the Gothic Heart*, had become rather forgotten after his preparation and rendering of *The Perception*, followed by his conversations with Morgan. Poynter would surely return to the project - but its planned format, as a slim volume, disallowed any great length of discourse. *The Perception* had loosened his approach somewhat, knowing he had needed to fill a couple of hours, whilst the new challenge of Morgan's occasion granted almost unlimited scope. An event that would begin sometime after dusk, to run past the stroke of midnight - then on through the nocturnal hours, until the break of a midwinter's dawn.

The room was a composition in tones of grey, apart from a splash of yellow light at the table where Poynter reposed. Indeed, his aspect was far more relaxed than his general working posture: gone were the hunched shoulders, the low, secretive head and constricted motions of the pen. His position had become languid, with legs stretched long beneath the modest work surface that had been provided. The papers were less tidy than his usual habit, with their piles sliding so corners overlapped the table or, at times, slid to the floor. While such minor incidents were quickly remedied, this action was seldom undertaken by Poynter.

There was a witness in the room, partially reflected in the sombre mirror which otherwise saw just a cool, painted wall. Her face was a shadow, away from the lamp, although the raven hair caught glints of illumination. Her position was involved yet deliberately reticent, to the side of the diligent poet. The narrow bed was a pragmatic seat, lending the place an air of the student residence. However, it was close enough for Jacqueline to reach for a stray poem, or significant passage from a longer stream, as it might slip from the edge of the table. Several sheets lay on the bed now, as a kind of transitional covering, their inky phrases far bolder than the pale geometry of the counterpane. She held a sheet in her hand, negotiating the variable legibility of its vivid lines, before speaking to the poet.

"I adored The Perception," came the voice of Jacqueline, though neither her nor the poet's eyes met. Both were focused on

the medium in question, and how those lines of ink brought tangible expression. "I *adored* The Perception," she said, quieter. "The works you spoke that night, the verses you gave us...were the objective words of a poet. Yes, the feelings were deep, but they pondered the externalities that they might encounter. These new writings, Laurence...this verbal energy, is far more precious and powerful. The poetry reverberates with an aura, encompassing the subjects of inquiry and the poet...I mean *you*, yourself. The barriers between subject and object have been omitted, swept aside, like the cursed irrelevance they are. When Albert first spoke of you, I had a *shimmer*...a sense, of much that was buried and unsaid. When you came here, my feeling intensified. *It would be difficult to trace the precise motive behind Mr. Laurence Poynter...*"

"...and his isolated life," came a murmur.

"Isolation..." mused Jacqueline. "So now, you begin to express..."

"The reasoning," added Poynter. "The past."

"There are snatches of it here," replied Jacqueline, looking at the sheets of paper on the bed beside her. "Verse and narrative, interweaved. Moments of a troubled time..."

"*'Suited men who came to murmur, then agitate reason to a morbid growl.'* That was how I recall it, Jacqueline...and my father, ashen afterwards, at the demands those men had made. He thought they were...associates, which they were, but without the

limits he assumed. To succeed in those circles, they demanded a greater loyalty and...acquiescence."

The poet shifted in his seat, realizing how Jacqueline had breached his restraint. Her mood was alert, so he could only continue the tale. "I was a boy, listening by the door," he explained. "There are places they take the children. They wanted me, along with the others. Sharing them, in the circles of politics and law, and covering up their pleasures. Father's standing, in this group, had not been sealed...yet he had learnt some of their secrets. One of the men, a shadow, approached me in the passage. I ran back, father noticed, gripped him. There were shouts, I didn't stay to listen. The door slammed. I heard voices...*growling*. That's how I write it, trying to capture...not precision, but the sense. There was time. Maybe an hour, I don't know. It seemed an age, to a child. I watched from the stairway as they trooped out, these suited men. One of them pointed back, I was worried he would see me, but he was shouting intensely at father. He was in the hall, shaking after they'd gone. I didn't...think to go down. I went to my room, found comfort in a toy...an animal, but it didn't seem to help. Perhaps I slept, for mother had returned. She glanced in, opera finery, but her trip had this sombre epilogue. When the door closed, I heard murmurs in the house. I feared it would be the suits again, but no - there was just father now, and some higher tones, at times becoming shrill as if...my mother, she was worried." Poynter shook his

head, as if he could no longer picture these happenings with such veracity.

Silence fell for a moment. Jacqueline exhaled slowly, beginning to see the narrative that lay between the written vignettes, evoked in metaphoric language. Yet there was an ulterior tinge to her sympathy. Inwardly, she smiled. Detached from their specific cause, such words would serve as a powerful litany: a parable of shady forces, encroaching an innocent mind. The expressive art of Laurence Poynter would serve the motives of Albert Morgan, to grant the empowerment they sought.

\* \* \* \* \*

Any visitor to Morgan's home had a choice of methods by which to announce their presence. To the bold but casual visitor, the door knocker was the obvious choice: its solid design not only added character, but promised to rouse the occupants with a sharp, percussive sound. Yet the second choice held other attributes: the button of an electric bell, installed in the shadows to one side. It resembled that of a separate apartment, but served a similar role to its counterpart. To the knowing or invited caller, the button would alert the master of the house with little chance of mistake. For its circuit, once completed, would activate a sound quite similar to a bass piano note that, even now, resounded behind the glowing windows. There was a single electric speaker in the room above, so that only the required man would be summoned.

A head raised itself from a densely printed book, held upon the knees, while a coffee grew cool in the corner. The pages were a spread of convoluted text, interspersed with woodblock illustrations of a primitive, haunting quality: reptilian creatures in ancient woods, phantom faces, spirits and stooping peasants. The note sounded again: the simulated tone of a real instrument, with a tinny but persuasive resonance, loud enough to alert but not enough to startle. Could some inference be drawn from the coupled rings, and the moment of silence that followed? The button was known to regular callers, with serious business at the house, although it would gain a few random activations. True visitors would seldom press again, should no response be forthcoming. An ignorant caller might do so, or alternate with the knocker. Its function was utilitarian, for the postman or political canvasser, whilst the position of the bell discouraged use.

A valid caller might be waiting, while the heralding sound of arrival had gone unheard in the house. Sliding the book onto a low table, the man obeyed the directions he had been given: speak to those who need speaking to, and let Jacqueline deter the others. She was busy enough with Poynter anyhow, compiling those creepy poetic works. Saunders could see their value, in the expressive sense, but had found it tough to sit through a whole evening's worth. His exits to the lavatory had been, in this instance, welcome. Equally, his assistance with Morgan's administration had sometimes edged into disturbing areas, such as the book of lore he

was browsing. Morgan had asked him to choose some anecdotes involving various occult phenomena, with which to scare the audience before the stroke of midnight. This would mark a break in the planned events, and a chance to lose the faint of heart. After which, the doors would be firmly locked and the incantations begin.

Saunders had begun the task with a detached levity, viewing it through the objective lens of his psychological training. Yet gradually, inexplicably, the cumulative detail of these sagas and fables began to create a lasting effect. There was something there - a thread, or common theme, that lent an impression of truth. He had tried to retain his skeptical view of such folklore, and define it in metaphorical terms. But the metaphors were too consistent, too clever, for mere peasants to invent. The serpents, the spectres, the combusted humans and ghoulish walkers of the night: such themes were consistent through the centuries, and many a different culture. His real distaste lay in the tone of the book, which almost relished the various sufferings. It summarised each woodcut in aesthetic terms, rather than acknowledging the terrors revealed, while a lack of reforming sentiment named the populations as 'peasants' throughout. So was that who they were to this author, and had the opinion transferred to Morgan?

These thoughts ran through his mind as Saunders left the study, glancing downstairs to the tiled hallway. It was barely lit, for nobody else had gone to answer the door. Unless the knocker sounded, nobody would. Saunders knew he had best

investigate, for he had accepted Morgan's arrangement despite any issues at doubt. Whether the arrangement should continue, he was perhaps beginning to ask.

While there were glass panels in the heavy front door, their knobbed texture conveyed only a randomised pattern of light. Saunders could not determine whether the caller remained until the door had been pulled open. He was confronted by a stoutish, white-haired figure in a dark winter coat, who had been craning his neck to regard the window above. This meant the homburg hat perched awkwardly on his head had all but fallen off. The figure held it in place with one hand, then looked straight ahead. He must have taken a few steps back, thought Saunders, trying to perceive any motion behind the curtains above.

The man stepped forward, so Saunders had a clear look at his face beneath the brow of the hat. It was elderly, jowled - a pensioner, no doubt, with some connection to Morgan. Saunders remained silent, smiling merely to invite any information.

"Wasn't sure about the button," said the old man. "The knocker seemed too dramatic."

"A bit loud in the evening," agreed Saunders. "Can I help?"

"I very much hope so," replied the caller. "I'm really quite a poetry buff. It's something that's...*affected* me, since retirement, and I'll always take time to hear it, or crack open a new collection. Heard of this chap, you know, who's quite excellent. I was sad to miss his recital. He was staying here in

Hastings, and I'm keen to catch up. I might have things wrong, but...I believe he's staying *here*?"

Saunders was somewhat startled. He had expected an inquiry into Morgan's plans, from one on the invitation list, or the random call of a malcontent who wished to discourage them. However, this old chap mixed a sense of heartiness with a subtle undertone of insight. He might be *playing* the fool, but Saunders doubted he was really foolish.

"Why would you think that?" asked Saunders, blending an amiable manner into an otherwise wary tone. Whatever his own reactions, he was here to represent Morgan.

"Inquiries," said the visitor, "throughout the town. I made it my business, Mister...?"

"Saunders," came the response. "Yes, there was a recital - I attended it myself. Doomy poems in a wine bar, just after Halloween. Can't say they were good, sir. Poetry's not my thing. Mustn't discourage the man, though. Must have given him my card. Good of you to inquire, sir, but if he doesn't wish to continue..."

"Your card?" sighed the old man, regarding the imposing house. "This poet...he isn't from Hastings?"

"Probably not," said Saunders.

"He was staying in a guest house, so if he isn't *there*...?"

"Try another guest house?" said Saunders.

"One was enough," said the old man. "So I thought I'd try *here*."

"Perhaps you could return my card," remarked Saunders, "unless, of course, there *isn't* one."

"So I have perceived," replied the visitor. "I found this address, by my own means. An address that you are *guarding*, Mr. Saunders. Trying to confound me, when I know the master of the house."

"You are rather pushy, for a poetry buff."

"It depends which type of poetry. That of a disturbed or disturbing nature makes me a little more determined. I would like to read his latest work, or see the man himself."

In a sudden move, the visitor tried to slip past Saunders - who leant swiftly across the doorframe, blocking his progress. Quite lively for an old codger, especially one of literary pursuits.

"Even if he was here," explained Saunders, "you should understand his wish for a quiet retreat, in which to contemplate his work."

"And what kind of work?" growled the old man. "*Thou shalt not lie*, I'll drop the pretence. If you stand behind that door, you know of Morgan...and I, sir, know him of old. That poet...that Laurence Poynter, is a man of delicate character. Someone like Morgan can see his moods, and twist them to serve a cause. What is being planned, Mr. Saunders? Another cursed endeavour, like the Ouija boards? Souls were damaged that night...*minds*, if you prefer. Either way, Morgan manipulates ritual and power in order to build his cult. If you have any doubt in this matter, sir, I

beg you to stand aside. Let me see Mr. Poynter, explain the risk, and bring him out of here."

Saunders did not reply, for a moment. He had access to Morgan's study, and the shocking books it contained. There were plans for a great occasion, frequently discussed, of which Saunders was a willing part. Yet there would always be critics and reactionaries, disliking anything of an esoteric turn. This troublesome fellow was typical of many, if rather more persistent. Despite any ambivalence towards Morgan's scheme, Saunders had to choose his loyalty.

"It would be better if you left us alone," said Saunders. "I would like to close the door..."

The old man held his gaze, unflinchingly. "I cannot resist, of course. Just remember what I said, Mr. Saunders...and by the grace of God, let Mr. Poynter know."

Saunders, again, fell silent. But his gaze drifted from the elderly eyes that beheld him with such passion. They seemed to shift focus to a further distance, over the old man's shoulder. Then a voice came in the night, resonant and assured, which confirmed the old man had come to the right place.

"There is no grace in God," it said, with an edge of mockery. The old man turned to see a silhouette, with long dark coat and broad-brimmed hat. Timing himself to the reactions of this tiny audience, with their looks of incredulity, the man stepped forward into the shaft of light cast from the open door.

He ignored Saunders entirely, and fixed his gaze on the visitor. "Even so...I welcome debate with the gullible who sing his praise, and dare to seek my door. I have missed our encounters, Mr. Amery-Beevers. Let us delay the matter no more..."

Morgan dismissed Saunders with a gesture, and the younger man backed away. He moved to the staircase, glancing back as the others stepped into the hall. Morgan hung his coat and hat on the usual hook, while Beevers stood uneasily. He did, however, remove his hat but kept it in his grasp.

Then the master of the house led Beevers, not to the study, but the lounge at the front of the house. He would not see the worst of it, thought Saunders, as he started back up the stairs. The lounge held a few artefacts, but nothing to shock the layman. It was where the poet had been thoroughly interviewed, on his introduction to the group.

As Saunders vanished to the floor above, an almost invisible crack widened at the door of an inner room. The dimmest wash of illumination let it contrast subtly with the shadows around, and betray the presence of a listener. Jacqueline knew Morgan would deal thoroughly with his visitor, who would delve no further in the house. Even now, the subject of his inquiry remained undisturbed. Poynter was hard at work.

\* \* \* \* \*

Saunders had been right about the choice of room. Beevers had been kept away from the upstairs study, which contained far more clues than he ought to see. Once the old man had entered the lounge, Morgan quietly closed the door. There were things to be said that were best unknown, even to his acolytes.

He had been right to dash back from the nursing home, after tackling that appalling matron. What was it with these busybodies? Why could they not contain their ludicrous repressions, and allow those who were adept at their craft to soar? Now this foolish old bumbler had reappeared, with his moralistic drivel.

Morgan flicked his eyes to the newcomer, who was glancing around the room. He must have been most disappointed at how respectable it all looked. Still, Morgan knew Beevers was not to be underestimated. He was the one who had caused such trouble before, along with that wrinkled sidekick, and been following his affairs of late. Following rather *too* closely, it would seem. As Beevers had come *this* far, a degree of baiting might be profitable.

"Not many secrets, really," said Morgan, in a cool, ironic tone. "I was not expecting a guest, of course - or even, a colleague of a kind. Write ahead next time, let me know, I'll unpack the satanic altar."

"It was not my original plan," said Beevers, "but we must have a chat." The enemies had hardly spoken for years, although there had been a few surly encounters.

Morgan snorted. "Sociable. We don't do it enough. Had a mission of mercy myself today, your sort of thing. Went to see a poor old chap in Bexhill, but the poor old chap had died. Still...you can say a prayer or two."

"I would certainly be glad to," replied Beevers. "However, there is an urgent matter first. It concerns...those questions we have dealt with in the past, Mr. Morgan. 'Beyond the Esoteric'."

"So, you have finally taken note of my little volume," sneered Morgan. "Come to a true authority, not those wretched ministers of the church with their weak tea and sympathy."

"Your expertise is not in any doubt," replied Beevers. "That is the very problem. Despite what I said to your friend at the door, I do not come in ignorance. Neither do I have any particular love of poetry, and certainly not the experimental kind. However, my sympathies lie with the young man with whom we share an acquaintance. I do not know your plans, Morgan, or where you intend to undertake them. All I ask is that this man - this troubled poet, is kept away from any mental disturbance. I am too old to tackle you directly, although I shall be praying on the night of...the winter solstice, do I guess right?"

"An appropriate time," agreed Morgan. "The *true* festival, of course - not the hijacked paganism of your farcical belief."

"So what do you plan?" asked Beevers. "Poetry, some kind of recital? That must mean, a ceremony."

"Experience does not desert you," said Morgan, with the slightest respect for his old foe. "Am I not a patron of the arts? Should this not *please* you?"

"I know the kind of arts," sighed Beevers.

"It shall be a wonderful enchantment, for all who attend. You have guessed when, so I shall tell you where. A picture palace, no less, a mile or two from here. A place of thrills and fantasy, in a simpler age. We shall bring it to life for one evening at least, with an aura of magic. The power of charisma, the performer, the poet. Why do you seek to knock such a moment, Mr. Beevers? What does your religion offer, apart from hectoring and myth? We shall make a creed of our own!"

"Others have failed..." said Beevers.

"I shall not fail!" snapped Morgan.

Beevers pondered the nature of his adversary. Neither was at the peak of their powers, although Morgan had a dangerous edge wrought by desperation. "I wish you to fail, as a Christian man," said Beevers. "Equally, I cannot wish you harm."

"Your religion is a contradiction," smirked Morgan.

"I shall pray, as best I can," replied Beevers.

Morgan inclined his head, in acceptance if not agreement. Then he moved across to the mantelpiece, where an unusual print had been hung on the wall. Beevers would hardly have noticed it, if his attention had not been specifically requested.

"Study this emblem," said Morgan, pointing to the graphic image. It had been enlarged from an archive document, and framed

in gold. "It was used by the Baird Company. A full moon partially obscured by cloud, so just a single eye is visible. The other, one might say, is occulted by the darkness. A single eye beams at us - 'The Eye of the World' - seeing from a distance. *Television.*"

"That is merely symbolic..." remarked Beevers.

Morgan sneered, as he flipped the frame round on the wall. The reverse was another image, displayed in a similar style, but intended for more knowing visitors. "Compare with *this*, old man. The All-Seeing Eye. The eye in the pyramid. Each symbol is a single eye. They exist with independence, and never as part of a pair. I shall blend them into a single symbol. A single eye of power, seeing *all* from afar!"

Beevers felt his body quiver at a tangible sense of evil. He was aware of the all-seeing eye, which had a considerable place in occult lore. Alas, his own reticence in studying such material had denied him much deeper knowledge. If only Edgar was here to consult, thought Beevers. This was beyond anything they had known during the Ouija board episode.

"These are merely tricks of chance, Mr. Morgan," urged Beevers. "How can you equate the hideous intention of that symbol with a trademark of John Logie-Baird?"

Morgan sniggered, in a way more sinister than any grim emotion. "A foolish remark, befitting an advocate of the Christian church. You are lost in your own litany, like all religious men. Words and parables delivered from the pulpit to tire, to convince, to break down. The spirit of freedom is not to be lectured.

Freedom can see the world around it, and divine those images that possess a secret language. Such is how I draw these parallels, through emphatic moments of insight!"

"As I said, I shall pray..." said Beevers.

"I would take offence if you did *not*," sneered Morgan. "Tell your crinkly old colleague too."

The Satanist gestured to the doorway, leading to the entrance hall. Beevers did not prolong the discussion. The old priest was ushered quietly outside, into the encroaching dusk of Bohemia. There was something to reassure him, however. Already, Christmas lights shone in the tall, solid houses in this early week of December.

\* \* \* \* \*

A copy of Morgan's pamphlet lay on the workbench, folded open and streaked with clay. The sculptress had not thought it valuable, just a source of visual reference. The client had wanted the object to portray its subject with accuracy and power, and the result would be known before long. The process had been tentative at first, as it was with any likeness, before wet fingers worked their material with an increasingly fluid dexterity. Then the element of heat would be applied, in a chamber of tame yet ferocious flame. The clay would harden, the image rendered permanent, and then transferred to the specified container.

The man had visited the studio with his client's instructions, bringing reference photographs and that strange little pamphlet. Although they were known to each other, the man had insisted on secrecy - choosing an hour when the artisans who shared the place were customarily absent. He had carried a solid wooden box, of a familiar yet strange design. This had been placed on the workbench beside an old radio, with its casual drips of clay. The box had a solid handle, and would protect the most valuable items. It was about eighteen inches high, with stencilled lettering on the side: 'PROPERTY OF HASTINGS MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY'.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

*A Winter Ritual*

BY THE TIME of the winter solstice, the cheery lights of Christmas had become a familiar sight in Bexhill. Coloured stars shone upon lamp-posts in blue, green, yellow and red, while the shops down from the station had their own modest displays. A tinsel penguin gazed from an off-licence, while a restaurant had chosen a snowy white pine with lights of aesthetic blue. A brighter specimen stood outside St. Barnabas Church, with rainbow bulbs upon a natural tree. The war memorial on the seafront was content with wreaths of poppies, which remained from Remembrance Sunday. A bridal shop held just satin gowns, for their beauty was enough unadorned.

There were other motifs further into town, glowing by the roadside. Each design was rendered in tiny bulbs, mostly in yellow, with highlights of red and green: a snowman, flickering lantern, snowflake and candles with holly. The design changed a little for the Christmas trees, depicted in green with a yellow star. The shops along the railway track were linked by overhead bulbs, which were strung above the thoroughfare in dangling loops. These remained unlit against a turquoise sky. Shreds of cloud offered a shifting alternative, turning purple at their crests while pink below.

Beevers poured the dregs from a teapot into the cup he had just been sipping. There was enough to linger a little more,

unless he bought another pot. The old man had become a frequent customer of a particular café, opposite the façade of the old cinema. It was a cosy establishment with pastel walls, and square tables of stripped pine. Beevers had called a couple of weeks ago, having reached the venue of Morgan's event, and assessed the scene for an hour or so. He was able to glance at the cinema from a comfortable position, from a table just by the door. However desperate the need, Beevers could not repeat the chilly adventure of late November, after which he had taken to bed for a couple of days. Paula had admonished him, for the excuse of the bereaved parishioner had barely convinced. Indeed, she was worried for her great-uncle's welfare.

How he missed the heyday, thought Beevers. The times he would stalk through the countryside in pursuit of some dubious sinner, or lay wait in the shadows for those who dabbled in a questionable occult. The challenges had been of lesser need, when his abilities and health were sharp. Now he faced the most devilish affair, in the twilight of his years. At least his bus pass had facilitated the investigation, without incurring any expense. So much so, the chatty lady who ran the café assumed he was an immediate local. Beevers did nothing to contradict the impression, for he needed all the cover he could find.

In his seven or eight visits, Beevers had tried to grab his usual table and take the innermost chair. Despite a draughty chill when a customer entered, the spot served his purpose well. The decorative windows of the cinema rose above the foyer, although

they served no other function - unless another spy was lurking inside, and watching in the other direction. Beevers could bob his head behind the menu should he feel conspicuous, while being a customer where customers were expected.

There had been many dull moments over the weeks, when Beevers chewed slowly on a sandwich while awaiting any activity. Shoppers bustled to and fro, oblivious to the vacant building that had once held so much allure. The vigil would have been pointless without moments of promise but, of course, those moments came. One morning, not long after his arrival for tea and slices of toast, Beevers had seen one of the cinema doors ease open. Nosing forward, he had watched over cooling slices as a dark-clad woman emerged, with a glint of light beyond. Quickly, Beevers realized how the inside glass of the doors had been blacked with some dark material, so no hint of activity was visible within. A cursory observer would assume the interior to be dark, as befit an abandoned venue, while the very opposite was true: the place was coming back to life.

Beevers had continued to watch the woman as she crossed the road, a skirt of deep purple billowing beneath a heavy coat. Her raven hair must have been dyed, he thought, for it swallowed the light as if velvet. She was gone in a glimpse, heading east, and the door closed as he glanced back. Yes, there had been light in there. Workers, perhaps, with the lady directing them. She resembled the kind of acolyte who Morgan might acquire, if the past was anything to go by.

Beevers had wished he could discuss the issue with Paula, but feared to inform her of his ongoing mission. However, there was time to think in his attic bedroom, where Beevers traced the Bexhill streets on a local atlas and reached a number of conclusions. The cinema must have been rented by Morgan some time ago, and the preparations begun before their recent encounter. In that case, Beevers had missed a great deal of vital activity that might have given a clue to Morgan's plans. The poet was involved - he knew that, but what was his precise role? If poetry could be twisted into a ritual incantation, his inclusion began to make sense. Yet why choose a cinema, given the plethora of venues to be found in the locality? Was Morgan planning to show a satanic film, to shock his audience into compliance?

If only Edgar were here, thought Beevers, as he recollected the last few weeks from his usual place in the café. The man had a better knack with culture and whim, while Beevers understood the spiritual and arcane. A cinema was a place of entertainment, so perhaps the woman was involved in the arts. Did she know of Poynter, and been urging him to produce an appropriate composition? One should never judge by appearances, but the gothic style of her attire suggested a certain affinity. If such a surmise was accurate, the inference was troubling. She would urge Poynter into darkness.

Of course, Beevers had not been solely confined to the café observations. Taking a clue from the atlas, he had strolled along the row of shops to either end of the road, where he attempted to

see the back of the cinema. This was entirely blocked from the east, where a short row of shops and a municipal Christmas tree obscured the view along the railway. However, the western end was another matter.

Passing the redbrick library on the corner, Beevers found himself gazing at a small metal bridge that carried the railway over the road. There was a lighting shop to the right, glowing with fixtures of every hue, beside a large metal gate with a concrete driveway. This led east along the edge of the railway, behind the shops, and ended at the back of the cinema. The rear had none of the glamour presented to the street, for it had no need to attract an audience. The blocky, brownish shape resembled a minor industrial structure, as it backed onto the narrow wilderness of greenery that lined the edge of the tracks. Beevers stepped forward and grasped the metal gate. He rattled it foolishly, as if enacting some dramatic woe. Knowing he must not attract attention, Beevers took a deep breath and studied the gate. It was secured by a heavy padlock and chain, to deter casual intruders, and topped by spikes for the more determined. Entry might be possible, but this was a stunt beyond his power.

Recalling this frustrating episode, Beevers made a reasonable deduction. Any heavy items needed for Morgan's event would have been delivered via the driveway, to which Morgan must hold the key. *Damn*, thought Beevers, in a rare expletive - even if mental in nature. He had been watching in the wrong place, while the action had avoided him. Yet the old man forgave himself, knowing

how even this inadequate vigil would have proved impossible without the hospitable café. Any movements on the driveway could happen in the dead of night, when Beevers was fast asleep. I have the failings of an elderly man, thought Beevers, but I must accept these failings and work as best I can.

Ruminations were understandable, but should not replace the sense of the current moment. Beevers had ignored the view outside for a while, but noticed how a car had drawn up outside the cinema. It was a bland enough matter, hardly worthy of note, for the car obscured his view. Beevers sipped the last of his tea, watching idly as a thin man stepped from the driver's seat. He was in his fifties, thought Beevers, and wore a grey jacket and purple scarf. A little hesitant in his motions, the man unlocked the boot of his vehicle. The cup froze on Beevers' lips, steam rising.

Beevers could not hear the click of the lock, but the hood came up as the man stretched an arm inside. He lifted a heavy object by a handle. It was a square box of some sort, with stencilled writing on the side: a small but vital item, easy to deliver by the front door. The man placed the box on the tarmac between his feet, slammed the hood and locked it.

Beevers stood.

The man lifted the box and turned away, crossed the pavement and knocked on the cinema door. In a second, the crack had opened. The man was stepping inside even as Beevers left the café, and rushed across the road. The crack of light swept up to him, and

Beevers held up a hand. "Wait!" he cried, without thinking. "I'm a poetry buff...!"

There was the briefest glimpse of the stranger's face, glossy with a sheen of sweat, before the door slammed in Beevers' face. His palm pressed against a cold glass pane, but all was invisible within. Then, overhead, the dangling loops became tracteries of colour. The town had lit its festive lights.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan had kept a moment for himself, on this day of preparation. The secrets would awaken tonight, but the dark had not yet come. He enjoyed a fine end to the afternoon, as a bright orange sun descended over a soft, rippling sea. This fine reflection reached Morgan as he stood on the promenade, with an apricot tinge cast upon the shoreline buildings. A band of amber spanned the southern horizon while, in the north-east, a pale hazy moon rose in a light, ice-blue sky.

Morgan could picture the three celestial objects in a row: the sun, the earth beneath him, and the moon illuminated by this descending ball of light. That had been around four o'clock on this, the shortest day of the year.

Morgan called into a tobacconist, wanting a couple of fine cigars. He was no regular smoker, but relished the thought on this occasion. Morgan shared a little banter at the counter, making a joke about sinful pleasures. The sun lost its burning glare as he

did so, an orange disc slipping behind a low bank of bluish cloud. It had gone when Morgan emerged around twenty minutes past, leaving a patch of streaky reddish pink on the horizon. Indulge myself, thought Morgan, flicking one of the cigars alive in the crisp winter's air.

The moon had risen now, over his left shoulder as he looked out at the water. It hung, perhaps, at an angle of thirty degrees. The moon's sphere was the palest wispy yellow, and emanated a pinkish aura. This was the sun's light, reflected back through a thin mist or low veil of cloud.

The reddish patch grew narrow, but more intense, as the sun dived deeper below the horizon in opposition to the rising moon. Streaky clouds hung above in tones of ashen mauve, with the southern sky the same ice blue as the northern.

Morgan wandered the damp promenade, watching for the next fifteen minutes. He took care to avoid a thin veneer of ice, which lay in faint islands of greyish-blue. The reddish patch in the sky contracted from either end, so its tips grew pale, pinker, to a dusty amber till the intense red had gone. All that was left was a nebulous cloudscape of sepia and blue, fading low over the sea.

The southern sky was still surprisingly bright, an effect heightened as Morgan's eyes became adjusted to the dusk. However, the northern sky had a looming, dark intensity. The moon was around forty degrees in the ascendant now, as seen from Morgan's position, and truly luminous against a deep, inky blue. Soon, this would turn to black. The moon would continue this rising arc over

the next few hours, till it looked down on Hastings from high above. Truly, an eye in the sky.

"Tonight," he muttered. "*Tonight* is the time." So onward he marched through the late afternoon, turned so quickly nocturnal by the calendar's whim.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was the night of the winter solstice. Jacqueline had looked in upon Poynter in the early evening, prompting him to take such cosmetic recourse as she had already prescribed. Her pale, long fingers helped him to manoeuvre the black eyeliner to rim his upper lids, and powder the faint blush of his cheeks to retain an ashen complexion. Whether the degree of blush so obscured was the greater on this occasion, she could hardly judge. Jacqueline suspected, however, that Poynter's face had been the paler before her entrance had been made.

Jacqueline herself had dressed in a flowing purple gown, with a black waistcoat of fishnet material worn as an extra layer. This had become entangled with a number of beads. She also wore a stiff black petticoat, intricate lacy tights and black high-heeled boots. Poynter had resisted the urge to don a ceremonial gown, since his usual attire had a mock formality. He had acquired a ribbon tie with a metallic clasp, similar to those of the Wild West. It had been lurking in a curio shop, and added a subtle touch of intrigue. The clasp - a pentacle entwined with a star -

had a sense of decorative mystery. Its symbolism, if any, was unknown.

Jacqueline was seated to one side of Poynter, and brushed back his tufty fringe to create a more punkish look. This had the effect of inclining the young man's head, so he gazed slightly upwards at her vampiric face. Jacqueline smiled, her teeth white between the bright red lips. Her breath was warm on Poynter's face. He felt his heart quiver inside, trembling. Were those teeth a little more pointed than was natural? It was surely a mental trick. Her eyes opened wider, minutely. Poynter was utterly transfixed. Jacqueline retained the firm but gentle grip, her fingers entwined with his tufty hair. Her breath came as a stream of heat, enveloping him, caressing him, almost seeking to possess him. Poynter edged back a little, through instinct. She released him, and smiled.

"We look as one," said Jacqueline. "Your face is...most striking."

"I must look a freak," gasped Poynter.

"Only to the most conforming eyes," replied Jacqueline. "You are to read your composition..."

"Recite," corrected Poynter. "I will surely be able to recite it."

"I shall prompt you, as needs be," said Jacqueline, taking his papers. She continued to gaze at him, at the necktie.

"My clothing is satisfactory?" asked Poynter.

"A pity about the gown," she sighed. "But, yes, you strike a fine figure. The emblem, there. Albert showed it to me, once. I am sure it is of no consequence."

"A weird shop in the Old Town," smiled Poynter, his face clownish for an instant. He was about to suggest a move to the lounge, where they might wait on more neutral - and less intimate - terms. However, a timely knock sounded on the door. "Come," said Poynter, without turning.

Saunders stepped round the door, although remained in its immediate proximity. His attire would have been suitable for a formal dinner, or managing a metropolitan theatre: black bow-tie and tails. Despite his dislike of the man, Poynter was impressed by the more authoritative edge this tailoring provided.

"Albert asked me to act as concierge," Saunders informed them. "The tricks of tonight lie with others."

"Don't underestimate yourself," smiled Jacqueline. "A psychologist is just what we need to deal with the clientele."

"Yes. That was Albert's suggestion," nodded Saunders. "He's paired you off very nicely. I see Mr. Poynter and yourself are most artistic. David's been at the venue since five this morning. Albert joined him at noon."

"Leaving my attention...undivided," said Jacqueline, stroking the side of Poynter's neck. He flinched slightly by reflex, although the effect was invisible to Saunders. Jacqueline sensed it, without reaction.

"Perhaps I shall fetch the brandy?" mused Saunders. "A little 'warmer' before we go. I can order a taxi for eight-thirty, so we reach the venue before nine."

"Easily," said Jacqueline. "There are refreshments on arrival, but a brandy each would be welcome." Saunders retreated to comply without further word.

Jacqueline eyed Poynter through dark lashes, heavy with mascara. "Stage fright?" she inquired.

"Not so far," murmured Poynter. "Nothing could be worse than The Perception. I was the sole performer, and manager too. Nearly the sole audience."

Jacqueline snorted with amusement. "You haven't seen the worst! I remember a talk Bertie gave, to a conservation group. He had a slide show, everything. Local follies and monuments. Two in the audience, with me selling books. At least Bertie signed one of them." She shrugged off the memory. "You did well, Laurence. Very well. You came to our attention, and tonight we have combined our talents. I would like us to...combine more."

She leant forward. Her hand lay on his smooth velvet trousers, just above the knee. "Please, Laurence. You feel something. I sense it." Her hand crept further, gently. Very soon, *she* might feel it.

"Perhaps - a run-through of my lines," said Poynter, blushing invisibly beneath his facial powder. He had felt the trembling again, and more. An urge for Jacqueline's hand to move further. It

was an urge that might ruin his concentration, and addle the lines in his head.

The door opened, suddenly. It was Saunders, without the brandy. "I say, there's been a change of plan," he exhorted. "Albert's sent a car, it's just outside. Drinks at the venue, my friends, where we may greet the guests!"

Poynter nodded his consent. Jacqueline smiled hers, slyly. Her hand had already been whisked from the poet, as soon as the door had moved. She seemed to have sensed the pressure, the very movement of the air. The subtleties were lost on Saunders, despite his psychological calling. He offered a merry chuckle and bade the pair to follow.

\* \* \* \* \*

The cinema door was opened, not by a fancy concierge, but one of the heavies employed for the night. They were more used to supervising nightclub queues and had little knowledge of the event at hand. All they knew was to admit only those who bore a printed invitation, white letters upon black, then securely close the door till the next arrival. This was signalled by a knock from a corresponding doorman standing outside. Thus, only the briefest glimpse of the foyer was seen by anyone passing by. It was no doubt some private function, they thought - maybe a party, but nothing strange or suspicious.

Such a conclusion would have been erroneous, but it suited Morgan's purpose well. The chartered car slid up to the door, disgorging Jacqueline in a flurry of skirts, the nimble figure of Poynter and, more pragmatically, the smart but strangely bland figure of Saunders. He looked a little out of place somehow, as if a chaperone or observer rather than any real participant.

As the door was closed once more by its surly guardian, the trio found themselves amongst a chattering crowd that milled around the foyer. These were the sleek and fashionable, arrival cocktails in hand. The glasses held some blood-red concoction with black olives bobbing within. Jacqueline took one from a silver tray borne by a girl in gothic-burlesque attire, and passed it to Poynter with a sweeping gesture that, though fast, hardly shimmered the liquid. He took it, sipping cautiously but liking the strong, aromatic taste. Saunders was left to take his own drink, though winced noticeably at its flavour.

"Most of the guest list are here," said Jacqueline, "and we have received note of two latecomers. Of course, they will be here before the main event."

Poynter was pleased to hear it.

Jacqueline was keen to circulate, working the room while Saunders and the poet admired the decorative features her plans had provided. There were two statuesque figures of wicker and tissue lit with internal lights, made by local artists to commission. One was the winged figure of a bat-like hominid, the eyes tinted red, the other an attenuated Pierott character with a

shield-shaped mask. This seemed to be smiling though, to Saunders, the effect was more sinister than sweet. Poynter gazed at it impassively, with no visible reaction. He might have been puzzled, stunned or disturbed by the work, who could say? Saunders had formed his opinion. He considered it crude and grotesque.

Jacqueline returned, linking an arm with Poynter and urging him away. Saunders used the moment to leave his glass on the Pierott's plinth, appropriately unpleasant. Alas, Morgan hadn't supplied any lager. A swig of water, that's what he needed. Gargle the taste away. Also feeling a predictable call of nature, Saunders went in quest of an unknown place. The gents'.

"This is Marvin Harvard," purred Jacqueline, drawing Poynter up to the man. "The Canadian musician. I say *musician*, but...sonic explorer?"

The Canadian liked that description, indicating so with a bob of his head. He had short blond hair and dark glasses, wearing a black velvet top and trousers as if feigning invisibility. "The audio world is a journey," he announced. "A soul is a colour, a statement is noise."

Poynter felt none the wiser. "And what of poetry?" he asked, shaking the man's tight little hand.

Harvard smiled, or sort of. "If a poem is a sound, it is music," he said. "If a poem is a scream, it's a curse."

Poynter looked shocked somehow. Almost insulted. Jacqueline laughed quickly, liberally, smoothing awkward feelings into a general consensus. "Oh, I think you've offended our poet," she

gasped, with mock exaggeration. "Fear not, either of you. Marvin will be performing a movement for us - a sonic movement - and I know he will think well of your words, Laurence."

Harvard smiled a little more convincingly, and Poynter made a gaunt attempt in return. Even so, he remained somewhat perplexed. Poynter was unable to judge if this 'explorer' was friend or foe. Yet he must be sympathetic, if invited by Jacqueline.

Meanwhile, Saunders had found the facility he sought, sloshing handfuls of water into his mouth and then, less spontaneously, onto his face. He saw himself in the mirror over the basin, a man in early middle age with problems behind him and challenges ahead.

There I am, he thought. Russell Saunders. A professional man, a psychologist. A man who should understand the workings of the human mind, the psyche, and not be a victim of its whims. But I *am* a victim, he thought. I have allowed myself to become one, but how? This was never how it was meant to be. I was never one to follow blind instruction or do the will of anyone who asked. Yet I have done so, he thought. I am doing so now, I am here at this arcane event. Why?

There was much to ponder in the hours ahead. Much to be wary of. He would no doubt take another break like this. Needing to keep up appearances, Saunders pulled himself away from the mirror and resumed his role of floorwalker. Morgan was expecting reports while keeping discreetly out of sight, saving his impact for later.

Indeed, Albert Morgan felt master of the temporary office that had become his for the night's duration. The Satanist was smoothing his hair with a dab of gel, in a strangely domestic moment. He resembled an oversized beetle in his dark evening suit. A strange successor he made to the previous manager, recalled in the framed certificate.

"Our friends are gathering...?" asked Morgan.

"Oh, there's quite a throng." Saunders glanced at his watch. "Nearly eight, they're starting soon..."

"Music to create the mood," said Morgan, "then charades to keep us entertained. We need to put the gathering at its ease, the final impact will be all the greater. There are breaks at ten and twelve, of course, before we commence the ritual. Those appearing before may be admitted, but on no account after twelve. Security has been paramount, but some news of tonight may have been passed to those who do not harbour sympathy. While I doubt any great moves to intercede, you should be wary of the uninvited."

"They must all have an invitation," observed Saunders.

"Invitations may be swapped," replied Morgan. "If something can be made, it can be forged. At night, it can be difficult to tell. Do not think I expect much in this direction, but a vigilant eye is our best protection. Indeed, an *all-seeing* eye."

Morgan smiled at his clever reference, although Saunders felt a tinge of unease. "Are we *all* to witness the ritual?" he asked. "Maybe I should maintain a watch in the foyer..."

"There are men on the door," said Morgan, referring to the hired staff. "If it comes to physical protection, they would be sufficient. Unless you really *don't* want to attend...?"

Saunders knew his loyalty was being probed. It would be wise not to anger the Satanist on this long-awaited night, whatever his inner feelings. "I shall sit...at the back of the auditorium," explained Saunders, "once my own little speech is done."

"And how goes that?" asked Morgan. "Shadows of the mind...feeling confident?"

"I shall be confident enough," said Saunders. "After all, I'm hardly the main attraction. I won't let you down, but...public speaking, it's not really my thing."

Morgan snorted, as if already lowering his expectations.

"After that, I can assist in the foyer should any trouble arise."

"As you wish," sighed Morgan. He fingered the handle of a solid wooden box, which had been placed on the office desk. It was about eighteen inches high, with stencilled lettering on the side: 'PROPERTY OF HASTINGS MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY'.

"Something important?" asked Saunders.

Morgan nodded. "It needs to go upstairs, to Lester. He brought it earlier today, and left it for me to check. Must say, I am *most* impressed."

"Part of the machine?" asked Saunders, probing further than was welcome.

"It is...necessary for the ritual," replied Morgan. "Lester's away from everyone, up in that projection booth. We cannot delve where his expertise lies. There is a glass panel set into the door, through which you can observe the operations. As you are not confined to the auditorium, I would value your observations. Look in at him whenever you can, and make sure no-one loiters on the staircase. Just wait till the crowd is settled. Jacqueline is running the show for now."

At least Saunders would have a reason to leave the auditorium, should he need a moment's relief. Perhaps he could remain upstairs during the ritual, and watch Lester at work. That way, he could escape the doom-laden poet and Morgan's excess. His own field, as a psychologist, covered the reactions that might occur.

"Do you have any concern...about Lester?" asked Saunders, expressing an ambivalence he sensed.

Morgan snorted. "Lester is a man I can work with, although he has never been without problems. A marvel with devices, to be sure, but I worry at his curiosity. A man of that inventiveness can resent instruction, so I had to lay down the law. The device was to operate *as specified*, but he's got a few ideas. Been poking round a nursing home, learning about the war. I went there last month, pokey dump. Place here in Bexhill. Some queen noodling with Christmas decorations, he said Lester spoke to a man. Quite *pally* they'd been, eating biscuits and sipping nursing home tea. Taped their little chat! I asked to see the room, then demanded it.

Silly queen got in a flap. We had an argument, this matron appeared. It was after visiting time, she said, and I wasn't even a relative. I tried to push past, we grappled a bit. Bitch said she'd get the police. I might have pushed it, but...the eye, the *all-seeing* eye was upon me. Camera on the ceiling, with a flashing light. Baird was having a laugh. Couldn't risk the Order, knew it was time to go. So I backed down, all contrary, practically tipped my hat. Matron led me out, the devil, scowling all the way. I stuck a hex in her pocket, that'll spook her. I heard them bolt the doors."

"That couldn't...endanger tonight," said Saunders.

"Of course not," replied Morgan.

For a moment, Saunders detected an edge of trepidation in his voice. Even a little fear.

The moment passed quickly, and Morgan spoke with his usual brashness. "There will be a ritual, and I have no doubt Lester's device will perform an admirable service. We can only trust to his skill."

Saunders took hold of the wooden box. "I'll take it up. You'll be part of the audience...?"

"In a while," smiled Morgan. "Although let's call it...a *congregation*."

He slid one of the cigars from his breast pocket, and reached for a lighter on the desk. The signs said 'NO SMOKING', though Morgan did not obey. A man urged to reign supreme through Satanic ritual hardly cared about health and safety.



Chapter Twenty-Five

*Secrets Awaken*

Saunders made his way back to the projection booth, a place he had first seen on that visit to the darkened cinema. His burden was less heavy than expected, with most of the weight being the box itself. Whatever was inside, it was unlikely to be any kind of technical device. Reaching the booth, Saunders looked through the glass panel to see the apparatus had been installed. Indeed, Lester - its constructor - was stooped over its workings, no doubt fine-tuning the components.

It was most certainly impressive, with a series of large discs mounted on a central spindle. Some had been punched with circular holes while other had curving slits. There were lenses at either end, one to gather an image, the other to project it. Saunders knocked on the glass, then tried the door. It was locked. But the scientist was already moving, and unlocked the door from within.

"A little gift from Albert," said Saunders.

Lester took the box, silently.

Saunders remembered his responsibilities. "Look, I don't think you should lock this place. No-one's going to come up, we've got security downstairs and I'm watching everything. If something goes wrong, Doctor..."

"You're expecting it?" snapped Lester.

"No, but we have to be mindful," said Saunders. "It's your domain up here, Dr. Lester, but you're still part of a team."

Lester just lurched into the booth, taking the box with him. Though as the door eased shut, Saunders noticed he did not lock it again.

Having exhausted her supply of cocktails, the burlesque girl tilted her silver tray and produced a small drumstick from some frilled extremity of her costume. With this, she struck the tray thrice. It sounded like a gong in a neat touch of theatrics. The crowd grew hushed, forming a ring around Jacqueline who spun gently while raising her arms. "Follow me across the threshold," she said, "as the auditorium awaits. It is surely our *temple* tonight!"

There was a sigh of satisfaction all round. Jacqueline took Poynter in her arm and led him deeper into the old cinema. They passed between the glowing creations of wicker and tissue, down a carpeted aisle through the looming, dark auditorium.

Saunders came down the stairs, catching the back of the crowd as it moved. He stood still in the foyer, just watching, noticing more of the cocktails had been left half-sipped. Glasses lurked on ledges and in corners, half-filled with the cold red liquid.

Saunders was not alone, though. Another man paused as the burlesque girl trailed at the back of the crowd, trembling her drumstick on the tray to create a low, metallic rumble. This diminished into the auditorium, leaving the two men alone in the foyer - apart from the doorman, who paid them no heed.

The other man wore a tweed suit with a knitted tie. He looked reasonably smart, though was hardly following the formal dress code. "Had to leave it," he said, meaning his drink. "Had a funny flavour I didn't like..."

Saunders guessed. "The olives?"

"No, I don't think the olives..."

"You're going in, then?" asked Saunders.

"Suppose I should," was the reply. "I'm rather unsure..."

The man slid the invitation from his pocket.

"They want you here," said Saunders. "They must do."

"Oh, someone passed it on," he replied. "Changed their mind, felt spooked I suppose." He offered a hand. "Ken Gillham, I'm a local councillor. Ought to keep an eye on things. Any problems, the council gets the rap! It's only art, isn't it? Some...mystical performance, load of nonsense probably."

"I wouldn't say *nonsense*," said Saunders. "But we don't have to take it *too* seriously. I'm a psychologist, Councillor Gillham. So whatever they do, however crazy..."

"It's even better for you!"

Saunders nodded, finding solace in another skeptic even if he didn't quite admit so.

They could hear music gradually rising. An ethereal, moody hum came from instruments neither could recognize. And despite their skeptical natures, both found themselves drawn inexorably into the dark maw of the auditorium.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lester had been doing nothing of real importance when Saunders had looked in. The more conventional parts of his device had been fully tuned and tested. The Televisor had been delivered in stages, with Lester assembling it over the last few days. While alone in the building, he had operated the machine for a short while in order to align the optics. Now it would be an easy task to deliver produce the effects Morgan sought.

Lester peeped down through the projection window through which the light would pass, with a lofty vantage point of the cinema. As the audience - or congregation - entered, candles had been lit along the edge of the balcony and at each side of the screen. While they hardly brightened the interior, these dabs of flickering orange defined the space in the way stars defined the shape of a constellation.

The burlesque girl was performing on the small stage that jutted out in front of the screen. A low light shone up, casting her gyrating shadow onto the screen. She was soon joined by two others her seemed to tempt her and tease her, with silk scarves whipped between them in a lively show. There was no deep symbolism but a sense of wild abandon, designed to ease the congregation into an attentive state. Heavy incense also helped, wafting from strategically place burners. The music was low, almost subdued, played by a beatnik trio in the corner. As the burlesque dancers wound down, they were joined by a musician of seemingly greater

standing - nine other than the Canadian maestro of minimalist tone, your very own Marvin Harvard.

Lester stifled a yawn. What a load of rubbish Morgan had concocted - or at least, allowed his freakish mistress to arrange. Well, not really a *mistress*, he supposed. Morgan's wife knew of their occult group, which met at the matrimonial home. Claudia was either stupid, culpable or liberal to an extraordinary degree. The reality, thought Lester, depended on the precise relationship between Jacqueline and Morgan. It was fun to think of them as a couple, but in truth they were merely advocates of a shared and ambitious cause.

Lester had no desire to go downstairs and mingle with the crowd. He could not risk anyone intruding on his space and fiddling with the machine. He would certainly not risk one of the complimentary drinks, with more being poured for the break. Who knew what Morgan had spiked them with? Even if his rhetoric fell flat, the combined effects of incense and dubious cocktails would nullify anyone's critical sense. No, Dr. David Lester turned to a far more basic form of refreshment. It was a flask of piping hot tea, to be stretched into the early hours.

Harvard's sonic efforts were subdued at first, but soon rolled through the auditorium in a series of piercing trills. Much was delivered via recorded sound, with Harvard adding his own inspired notes via a small keyboard balanced on his knees. Councillor Gillham had settled at the back with Saunders, where a few empty seats allowed them to murmur privately without upsetting

any devotees. Saunders' eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, and he perceived a pained look on his companion's face as they listened with strained tolerance. It was as if, thought Saunders, the devotion of the crowd was being tested by their faculty of duration. Could they sit through such discordant and unpleasant sound while keeping calm and appreciative features, knowing any scowl, any snort, any grumble might be taken as a vulgar critique?

In this regard, Councillor Gillham had little restraint. Starting with a few headshakes and the occasional *tut*, Gillham was soon glancing at Saunders with a comical grimace, clenching his teeth like a trapped animal and finally sighing with such loud, sonorous sarcasm that even Saunders was compelled to say "Hush!"

One head twitched round a few rows forwards, aiming a brief hostile glare in their direction. Even a hint of disapproval had alerted this sensitive fanatic.

Upstairs, Lester opened the wooden box that Saunders had taken up. He took hold of the object within, carefully lifting it out. Not so heavy as expected, he thought placing it on a plinth at the back of the booth. It was lined up with the Televisor, a vital part of the plan. There was a spotlight hanging overhead, also rigged by Lester, that lit the object with a focused hyper-clarity. Most effective, thought Saunders. His assistant at the museum had surely done her job well. For now, though, Saunders concealed it with a black velvet cloth so just a curved shape was visible.

As Harvard wound up his musical movement, Jacqueline rose from the front where she was sitting with Poynter. There was no applause as Harvard stepped aside, taking his organ with him. The whole occasion was a ritualistic one, not a popular performance with cheering and clapping expected.

Jacqueline stood at the centre of the stage, her shadow thrown up onto the screen. "The sun is currently occluded by the earth," she announced. "The brightness of the sky has faded, darkness has swallowed the town. This is not a matter of our choosing but the workings of the universe. The stars spin in the firmament, of which the earth is but a speck. Some say we should fear this. We should cower in caves, fearing the nocturnal hours. But I choose to embrace it, as do all of us who gather here tonight."

These words prompted murmurs of assent.

"Each night is a treasure sacred to our hearts. Our *gothic* hearts, as our poetical friend has written. We shall hear from him in due course." She paused for effect, before launching into the real business. "One night is most precious to hearts such as ours. The longest night before the shortest days, when the dark doth reign in fine supremacy and hours stretch like a year. We praise the universe for this gift of darkness!"

Jacqueline raised her arms swiftly, prompting a response from her acolytes. "We of the earth are thankful."

"We of the earth are thankful," said all.

Although, perhaps *not* all. The response seemed universal, but Saunders had mouthed a silent utterance while Gillham sat rigidly unimpressed. However, he was startled by the next phrase coming from Jacqueline's mouth. "Before we move to our deeper ritual, there is one of us who knows the workings of the mind as I have spoken of the universe. For a summary of its shadows, I give you...Mr. Russell Saunders."

Jacqueline gazed at the crowd as if into a void, which the interior appeared to be. She did not know where the psychologist was, seated beneath the balcony. Saunders felt a thrill of nerves at the sound of his name. Gillham frowned as if worried his ally was, in truth, a hardcore devotee.

"Looks like you're on," whispered Gillham.

Saunders rose to his feet reluctantly, a soft movement of the air causing a few heads to turn. He could discern the face of a tall, stern woman whose ear-rings twinkled in the distant candlelight. The aisle seemed a long, long walk as he shamble forward, almost hoping a wail from Harvard's organ would ease this self-conscious moment. It actually felt better when he stepped onstage, looking out at the expectant faces just visible in the dim luminescence.

Morgan had asked him to prepare, and prepare he had *not*. Saunders would only falter if sticking to some half-remembered script, while speaking from notes would make him resemble a dry academic. Years of experience should enable him to speak easily, with confident assurance. But as Saunders stood there, his growing

doubts conspired to stall his delivery. He groped blindly for an opening phrase, hoping to riff off Jacqueline's words so the verbal momentum was sustained. As it was, Councillor Gillham, cringed for him. Saunders stood like a schoolboy unable to account for himself, not knowing that the masterful figure of Morgan had appeared on the balcony. His face was cold and unresponsive.

Maybe Saunders could sense this scrutiny, somehow. While Jacqueline wafted in the background, it was the scorn of Morgan that worried him. It was vital to keep up appearances, so Saunders forced himself to speak.

"The darkness...we are all in the dark," he began, "apart from the candlelight. Our minds...do we need candles to illuminate their depths? I mean, good thoughts to show us how frightening and obscure the dark really is? There is light and shade, oh yes, like the sun coming up in the morning. But if we close our eyes, the darkness is gone. Yes, we have the power. We can open our eyes...wide open!"

With this, Saunders made an ill-advised attempt to match the sweeping gestures of Jacqueline. However, his effort was stiff and ungainly. If Saunders had expected a spontaneous response or spoken words of assent, there were none. A few coughs echoed round the auditorium, sarcastic and deliberate. Saunders crept back along the aisle, few eyes bothering to follow him.

Jacqueline fumed. She kept her outer composure, but inwardly fumed. A false smile flashed upon her face. "Russell...Saunders," she intoned.

"Ouch," mumbled Gillham, in unity with Saunders.

The psychologist's speech was meant to be brief, but Jacqueline had expected around twenty minutes plus the urge to add insights of her own. Now she was left with a hole in the programme, which was meant to run smoothly and tight. Quickly, Jacqueline prevailed on the goodwill of Marvin Harvard who surely had more than one movement. A gesture and mouthed instruction urged him back onstage.

Morgan moved from the edge of the balcony, withdrawing into the dark. He had witnessed the brief fiasco but would surely not forgive.

\* \* \* \* \*

Out in the wider world, a car was moving through the countryside. Its lights shone a bright patch into the vista ahead, illuminating the bare brown tendrils of overhanging branches. The Lady had her hands on the wheel, the Lord seated beside her. The vehicle was a vintage model, carefully preserved and - in some aspects - improved.

"I will not drive any faster," said the Lady. "These lanes are unfamiliar..."

The Lord assented, readily. "Do not worry, my love. My feelings have only intensified. I feel we should see more *esoterica* should we pause in these woods than attend this ridiculous event."

"Though we cannot tell, for sure," said his Lady.

"So why do we bother...?" asked the Lord.

"A taste of the...*uncertain?*" she smiled. "Does it not...pique your curiosity?"

"Indeed, it does," said the Lord. "Drive on, by all means. We have no need of the...opening charades. As long as we arrive by midnight, we should witness...the essential."

"But shall it be genuine?" asked his Lady.

Her Lord pondered this. "We can both be the judge of that..."

\* \* \* \* \*

More glasses were passed around in the break, now with a glittering greenish liquid. The door was open to a latecomer, though there was still no sign of Morgan's ennobled guests, while a few chose to leave.

Gillham heard their disgruntled voices, wishing he could join them. There was a pragmatic reason why not. "Left my coat on the chair," he said, "or I'd be off."

Saunders remembered Morgan's words, that none could be admitted after midnight. Nor could they leave before the ritual was done. "Choose your moment," he replied. "I might join you..."

One of the burlesque girls came over, bringing drinks but - more vitally, a message. "Mr. Morgan wants to speak to you upstairs," she said, addressing Saunders. He had taken a drink

from her tray but put it down, thinking it unlikely to improve on the earlier offering. Gillham declined his outright.

Ascending the stairs, Saunders left the bustling crowd and entered the office without knocking. Morgan was leaning on the desk, already looking at the door.

"Here I am," said Saunders, obviously.

Morgan stared impassively. "Why would I want you here?" he asked.

Saunders shrugged. "To give reports, that's what we said. Keep an eye on Lester..."

"Which I hope you've been doing," said Morgan. "I don't deserve two wayward followers. One, a scientist tempted by his own desires, and you - a dull and feeble psychologist."

Saunders blinked. "What do you mean? I have a great interest in your project, Albert. It's a whole new field for me..."

"But you remain an observer," said Morgan. "That is not enough. I need *dedication* now. I heard the speech you gave. I encouraged you to speak on shadows of the mind. What did we get? A series of rambling metaphors and bland, non-committal remarks. Our congregation shifted in their seats, too polite to heckle or moan. Oh, they were polite, Russell. Oh, so polite. Polite in deference to your hosts, Jacqueline and myself. So I will speak frankly. You were wretched. It was a snivelling, weak, pathetic speech that insulted our aims tonight. I asked you to explore the depths of the psyche, to bolster our coming ritual. Your efforts have done

the reverse. To offer weakness is to offer failure. You might have banged a tambourine, got them singing for all the harm you did."

Saunders raised a hand, defending himself. "I was trying to be...kind of, neutral. Show either side, good, bad..."

Morgan stepped forward, snarling. "I'm not interested in good, bad - *only* bad. I've got the elite coming. Bloodline Satanists, not low-level masons and minor celebrities. They don't care about drivel. But we had to attune the congregation so the ritual hits home and the Order is reborn. If my guests are impressed tonight, our group will be raised to their awesome heights. Any doubt, any divergence from our true purpose and they will know, Russell, they will know. If you hate me, if you despise me - fine. Your bile will only strengthen the ritual. But if you doubt me, Russell - if you pity me, then *be gone* from here now. Get out, Mr. Saunders, because you will nullify the affirmation!"

Morgan stopped suddenly, as if drained by the power of his sudden outburst. Saunders felt his bladder tingling badly. Morgan turned, moving to the window and glaring out at the street. He was surely hoping for his bloodline guests to cruise up in their vintage auto.

Saunders was in a difficult position. It would be the easy option to do as Morgan suggested and leave the occasion early. He could warn Gillham, a decent chap, and leave Morgan to his own delusions. But did he have another role tonight? A role implied, again, by the memory of that old man who had called at Morgan's house. Did he not bear responsibility to the one who, more than

any, was being twisted to Morgan's will? If nothing else, thought Saunders, he must remain to save the sanity of Laurence Poynter.

Saunders swallowed a huge dose of hubris. In agreeing now, he would be conceding to Morgan as if he were some mighty guru. This conceit would gain him, and Poynter, safety for a while.

"I apologize," said Saunders. "I was mistaken. Let the evening proceed with...refreshed momentum. My words will soon be forgotten."

Morgan had his back to Saunders. He was still gazing out the window. But a simple gesture he made had an unmistakable meaning: go.

\* \* \* \* \*

The tone of the evening increased in solemnity as the programme resumed at half-past ten. Readings from occult texts and obscure writings resounded in the cinema, spoken by paid performers or, in a few cases, devotees of Morgan's cult who chose to contribute. The burlesque trio gave a final vivacious dance, with one being the object of worship for the other two, before they adopted dark hoods and trailed into the foyer.

Jacqueline was soon speaking again, telling how her early though privileged years were most unsatisfying. "It was only when I found the occult," she said, "and embraced it, that I felt myself truly born. My father carried the name of Grace, but if I have *fallen* from grace, become a *dis-grace*, so be it. The urge of

joyousness and light, so trivial and pure, must be thrust aside forever. Seize the nobler tastes of shadow and grief, give your soul to this creed. Say unto me, 'We shall embrace the power of will. We shall embrace the darkness.'"

She made one of her theatrical gestures, making the crowd respond. Indeed, they repeated her last two lines with some gusto.

But Gillham was moving. He was already up, coat in hand, tugging Saunders to come. They followed the burlesque girls to the foyer, where they were already removing their sombre hoods and appearing surprisingly cheerful.

"Don't believe that stuff," said Gillham. "Whatever you do..."

"Just a frolic," said the fake goddess, seemingly their leader. "We're only paid till midnight. Get your coats on, girls. Reckon we can share a taxi."

Gillham looked at Saunders. "That's wisdom," he said, putting on his coat. "I'll see they get that cab, I'm leaving too. And if you've got any sense, Russell...?"

Saunders was tempted, sorely. He would have loved to go, but was not without his own obligations. "Thanks for that," he said. "See them off safe - and yourself, Councillor. Look, there's a few more..."

A group of disillusioned listeners walked fast from the auditorium, indicating their clear wish to the doorman. He undid the lock, letting them out.

"Your last chance," said Gillham, "before...whatever comes. Are you sure your reputation and sanity can take it?"

Saunders mulled this over, but his mind was unchanged. "I have another duty. We snared that young man in all this, a poet. He hasn't spoken so far. But I would be a mean spirit if I fled now without trying to protect his interests."

At this, Gillham merely nodded. The burlesque girls were suitably clad, with just their dark hosiery and heels visible beneath long winter coats. Then he was away, letting the girls out first before exiting the place himself. The doorman sensed there would be no further departures, locking the door behind them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Areas of woodland alternated with open countryside, all of it hidden by night. A car came in the other direction, illuminating the Lord and Lady briefly before vanishing into the dark behind them.

Then the Lord saw speckles of light from the passenger seat. "Hastings?" he queried.

"No, Battle," said his wife. She meant a town named after the scene of conflict, north of its eponymous neighbour.

The Lord smiled at this oddity of attribution. "A town called Battle named *after* a battle. I am surprised there are not more..."

"That would be very confusing," she replied.

The Lord gazed south-east, trying to visualize the terrain that stretched down to the coast. "Old fellow lived that way. Netherwood House. Loved to have seen it but they pulled it down."

"Most unforgiving," said the Lady. "Superstitious fools..."

"Possibly," mused the Lord, "or crazy planners with dumb ideas. Give me a tumbledown mansion any day next to some cubist *monstrosity*."

She laughed, liking her husband's use of the word. "You think there's any trace?" she asked. "Any nuance a sensitive one might detect...?"

"Old Crowley haunting the ridge? I could see him having a go. Love to find out, but...we have plans."

"Not *our* plans, darling," she purred. "Only the plans of a fellow worshipper who we have agreed to humour tonight. Bexhill, of all places! I do hope it's worthwhile..."

"I know you weren't sure," said the Lord. "I'm grateful to have a driver."

"Oh, I'm curious," she said. "But this Morgan, he seems a bit of an upstart. Rather cocky on the phone. Presumptuous. He recognized our standing, to be sure, but the way he spoke to me...he assumed we would see him as an *equal* once the ritual was done."

The Lord hummed thoughtfully, long and deep - so much so, his Lady barely heard it, for the sound blended perfectly with the mechanical hum of the car.

"Slow us down," he said, presently. "Stop somewhere, if you can. There must be a verge or something..."

They both scrutinized the road ahead, till the Lady spotted a patch of bare earth where the car might be halted. She drew it up skilfully, switching off the engine so they sat quietly together in the deep, black night.

"Just then," said the Lord, "I had a feeling. The tone of your words awoke a truth in my mind. I wanted to believe this Morgan so we accepted the invitation. But I must admit, I was never comfortable. True, I never spoke to him. You did. But you are not my Lady for any small reason, and if I trust you as my companion then, assuredly, I should trust your instincts too. If those instincts say our confidence is misplaced, I would rather avoid the unfortunate."

His Lady widened her eyes a little, entranced by this understated tone. "You predict a social *faux pas* or a crude, ineffective ritual? Us devils can take pain and despair, but never let us feel silly!"

There was silence for a moment, at least inside the car. The couple sat with a growing appreciation of the subtle sounds that emanated from the land. The Lord heard a distant dog, slight scuffling, a fox cry, flapping and the snap of a branch. *Creatures of the night...* he mused, wryly. Then he let his mind relax, let his body settle and sent his soul into the dark.

"You are scrying..." said his Lady, hushed.

Minutes ticked by. Another car passed, casting a pall of light but nothing to disturb the Lord. His head was still now, breathing low, eyes rolling behind closed lids. Then he jerked, and they flicked open.

The Lady put an arm on his shoulder, concerned despite knowing her Lord's technique. He took a deep breath, recovering, then looked her straight in the eye.

"I saw the place," he said. "I saw the future, after midnight. There was...sincerity at first. A poet, speaking deep and wisely crafted words. Then I encountered...a sense of fear, then falsity. Then a burst of sudden chaos..."

"From the ritual? A manifestation...?" His Lady felt a new glee, to go.

Her Lord shook his head. "I don't know. The scrying was true, but the feelings...complex. There was more than the ritual. Some other factor I was unable to identify. We have seen much, my dearest. We are not timid. But supernatural forces, in the hands of a novice...this would put us in the greatest danger. Your initial doubts are confirmed now. We must not attend."

All flirtation with novelty was wholly forgotten. Without pause for any more discussion, his Lady assented fully. "I shall turn the car around," she said, reaching for the ignition key.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan remained at the office window, watching the less worthy of his congregation vanish up the road. So what? The early part of the evening had been a charade, stripping wheat from the chaff. It mattered not if one heard the peculiar music of Marvin Harvard, witnessed the burlesque, or even listened to the various readings. Saunders' speech was a little troubling - but if it had prompted the wavering to leave, it might even have been a bonus. Better a few true acolytes remain than a host of inauthentic groupies.

Should he delay the ritual, however, until the arrival of his noble guests? There was still no sign of the aristocratic couple who had so expressed sincerity. Their letter was a prized possession, bearing a heraldic crest and the name of a manor house. But the minutes, the seconds, were ticking by and still they had not appeared.

Maybe they were afraid, thought Morgan suddenly. Maybe *they* were the real posers, fooling him into thinking they respected his aims. He would show them, then. He would wait no longer. No-one was to be admitted after midnight, his words had been perfectly clear. Now Morgan donned his long, Satanic robe, checking his watch once more. The long and short hands had met at twelve. The seconds ticked on.

It was time.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

*A Glimpse of Notoriety*

Lester still lurked in the projection booth, without having left it for hours. Just after midnight, an attentive face peeked through the window from the passage. Saunders was doing his duty, and Lester was seen to be doing his. He switched on the main switch of the Televisor and that of the projection device. Valves began to hum with power as they started to warm up, some glowing with a faint amber light.

like a fly stepping on a web. But he was a fly that had sentience, one that could perceive the motives of the spider that spun the threads upon which he dangerously crept.

This was the time, he knew, of the culmination. The moment the spider would jump, the trap snap shut, and his whole identity be part of the scheme that Morgan had contrived.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

*Poetic Discord*

POYNTER WAS SURE he could hear sobbing as he awoke the next morning. At first, it had no sense of a physical source - as if the sound were a mood that had permeated the house, and clung to his own spirit. After twenty minutes or so, Poynter identified the source as Jacqueline.

She must be in a bedroom above, or maybe a room to the side. Either way, the sound was strangely dislocated. The house provided an excellent medium for its vibration, however. The sobbing seemed to emanate from the very plaster of the ceiling, the very paper upon the walls.

The poet could bear no more. He rose stiffly, unsurprised to find he still wore much of his clothing from the night before. The jacket was on a chair, and he donned it quickly. Brushing himself down, Poynter realized his sleep had not been refreshing. A feeling of numbness hung over him, and his ears seemed hypersensitive to the tiniest sounds. Perhaps that was why he had heard the sobbing. Poynter realized it had now stopped.

Poynter tried to pull his thoughts together. Dim images of the night before threatened to grow vivid, so he pushed them out of his mind. It would be better to concentrate on practical moves. This was not his home, he had a home in London. Even the guesthouse had been more legitimate. Poynter decided to go quietly, before others in the house were roused. He did not wish

to become any more associated with this particular crowd, nor its sinister endeavours.

Poynter threw some oddments into the modest suitcase, from which he had managed to live. It was small and easy to carry. His coat should have been hanging in the hall, but the routine had been disrupted. It lay on the floor like a sultan's rug. Poynter draped it over one arm, and opened the bedroom door.

All was still. The sobbing had not returned, unless the sound was deeply suppressed. Should he go up to Jacqueline, try to comfort her? Poynter glanced up the stairs, as if waiting for a clue. A feminine wail chilled him with a horrible clarity. It came from a level of despair beyond any he had ever known. Indeed, beyond any he had ever imagined in his mournful poetry. She was becoming something *other*, in her mind.

Poynter had his answer. He turned away - but jumped at the figure before him. A figure of grey weariness, equally dishevelled, who had stepped from the living-room. A figure who had slept there, on the sofa. It stood between Poynter and the front door.

The poet tried to make some kind of appeal, but found his throat dry and unco-operative. Instead, it was the other who spoke first that morning.

"She is unwell. I will go to her."

Poynter exhaled slowly, his breath a vapour of grey. He had never much cared for Saunders, but the man was now a relief. The psychologist was worn and tired, like Poynter, but his profession

allowed a certain objectivity. Saunders had seen the madness descend, and his understanding rose above it.

Saunders noticed Poynter's case, and the coat still slung over his arm. "Wise move. Go now, I won't say anything. There is no record of your presence here, and I will never mention it again. I saw what happened last night. There are bound to be...investigations."

Poynter worked some saliva round his mouth, allowing him to speak with decency. "Thank you, Russell. I...respected Morgan, for a while. And Jacqueline was quite likeable."

Saunders took a step forward, adding a firmer tone. "Don't think of them, Laurence. No good will come of it. There's the front door. Use it, while the place is quiet."

Poynter nodded. "Thank you, Russell." He started towards the door, but paused briefly. He owed a little personal gratitude. "And thank you for attending The Perception."

Saunders offered a wry smile. "I admired your poems, Laurence. Wrote a couple when I was younger. Teenage, really. Dreadful stuff. Tried to understand feelings, anyhow. That's why I studied psychology."

Poynter blinked. "It was just...your reactions."

"I might have been a little restless," said Saunders. "Just my bladder problem. I'm seeing a doctor."

"I appreciate what you say," nodded Poynter. "Goodbye, Russell." The poet slipped through the door.

Saunders had already turned his attention to the staircase, and the shrieks now piercing the air.

\* \* \* \* \*

Poynter stepped onto the pavement outside Morgan's door, and proceeded past the solid terrace of sandy-coloured houses. Evergreen trees clustered darkly on the grass bank over the road.

The poet crept further, with a long view down the road ahead. A bulbous evergreen tree loomed to his left, before the slope flattened to a lesser incline. A church stood out against the grey-blue sea, with an octagonal turret on the corner of the main edifice. Poynter continued past the terraces, displaying a greater variety of pale colours. Those to his right gave way to the backs of other buildings, along with their yards.

Poynter turned right at the bottom of the road, catching a diagonal view across the lower garden of St. Leonards Warrior Square. Small, spiky palm trees appeared a fresher green before the pastel yellows and creams of the façades. Glimmering fairy lights and baubles provided their counterpoint, most often within the hotels - tempting visitors with festivity during this unseasonable time for the seaside.

The upper garden was lined by the grey outlines of deciduous trees. They were leafless now, and spread in vein-like complexity across the architectural geometry: dark, vertical windows within angular bays, crossed by iron balconies and topped with cupolas of

slate. The sky was a grey-blue, with a tiny hint of green, created by a tinge of yellow sunlight from behind the cloud.

Poynter entered the lower garden. Along with the spiked palm trees, there were ground-hogging specimens. These were like tufts of giant grass, lapsing into yellow and orange where the climate had bitten. Seagulls rose in a flurry of squawks, emphasizing the surreal bleakness. They wheeled behind a statue of Queen Victoria, who gazed over the sea from a pink marble plinth. This was encircled by cemented pebbles, like a private beach.

Crossing the coast road, Poynter found himself on more familiar territory: the promenade, which he had explored in early spring. That had not been the height of the tourist season, but it was even less seasonal now. Poynter regretted leaving the guest house, and moving in with Morgan.

The poet was halfway between Marine Court and Hastings Pier. Turning east, Poynter decided to retrace his original route. He had found happy moments in the town, and enjoyed some intriguing encounters. There had been the guarded conversations with Beevers, and the difficult poetry evening. Perhaps it had not been such a failure, after all. At least Poynter had relied on his own instincts, and garnered a small crowd. Morgan and his cronies had caused the trouble, leading to chaos and death.

He should have rejected Morgan before tea in the bookshop, where the man had twisted him round. Now Poynter was moving away from him. Away from the trouble he had caused. Leaving Queen Victoria to her musings, Poynter retraced his journey along the

lines of diminishing perspective: seafront terraces and promenade, with the familiar hump of East Hill urging him through the haze.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan had recovered his senses in the auditorium, which lay black and obscure around him. Still, he knew its geography well. Once he had appraised his own cuts and bruises, Morgan tackled a greater priority. How did matters lie at the heart of the beast, the cinema's projection booth?

Morgan crept from the auditorium into the hallway, now clarified by a dim, greyish light. Some element of morning had found admittance, despite the curtains and veils supplied by Jacqueline. Things were no better than expected, as Morgan arrived in the projection booth to survey the shattered equipment. He cursed the body of David Lester, who had proved so incapable of handling the Baird device. The scientist had been useful, but ultimately a fool. He had been right about one thing, however. The end, when it came, had been quick.

More worrying were the fates of more knowing acolytes. Had Jacqueline failed in her excursion? Had Poynter been affected by the energy wave? Had Saunders finally lapsed into skepticism, or even outright hostility?

Morgan dwelt upon these questions. In his mind - or his mind's eye - he saw glimpses from afar. Jacqueline on his bed, writhing in a frenzy of despair. He could see that she had

injuries, but the real damage had been done to her sanity. Saunders was there. Saunders was soothing her with a damp cloth to the brow, but he had made his diagnosis. Somehow, her mind had been snapped.

Morgan realized the new power that surged within him. He had channelled the energy from Lester's device, opening his psychic abilities. If he could see Jacqueline and Saunders, he could find Poynter. Morgan breathed slowly, almost trance-like as he stood in the projection booth. He felt the presence of an eye, an All-Seeing Eye, awakening on his brow. He let it move down the stairs, through the door of his house, and then towards the seafront.

\* \* \* \* \*

The paving slabs were pink and grey upon the promenade, suggestive of a Battenberg cake. The image reminded Poynter of his lack of a breakfast, following the all-night ritual and his fitful sleep. A café! That's what he needed, or at least a takeaway snack. Maybe somewhere he had placed a poster, to advertise The Perception. They would not frown too badly on his dishevelled state.

Then Poynter filled a blind spot in his own perception. The answer lay to one side. The pier! He had never been there, and it must have food. A café, a snack bar, anything. Reprising his original curiosity on coming to the town, Poynter turned towards the structure.

The initial deck was framed by concave rows of shop cabins, with a dome at each end. The wooden pavilion was painted yellow and blue, with three hexagonal towers. The middle held a doorway. A strip of blue neon enlivened the roofline, bright against the winter's sky. Poynter entered a glass-roofed chamber, supported by metal girders. It featured toy cranes to win cuddly creatures, and a Christmas tree. The place appeared to be deserted - although shrieks drifted from the games arcade, along with bleeping sound effects. The effect was a little ghostly.

He wandered deeper, along a passage lined with numerous shop fronts. They were styled in a Dickensian pastiche, with small square panes, and displayed clothes, records and novelties. Yellow fairy lights stretched across the ceiling in a zigzag design.

Soon, Poynter sat upon garden furniture in a large, octagonal room. Crooning tunes and piano music gave an air of the pre-war era, an effect heightened by the potted palm that stood sharp against the windows. The seafront terraces were visible through the windows as a pale, diffused panorama. Tea and toast were a welcome breakfast, and Poynter took his time.

Someone entered through a sliding door, and Poynter idly watched the operation. The door had no runners on its lower edge, but hung unsupported. It had oscillated for a moment, so its reflection of the opposite windows rocked back and forth. It had felt, very briefly, as if the pier was unstable.

Poynter glanced down at the planking, and the effect was heightened. Lines of twinkling light divided the wooden strips,

betraying the sea's proximity. There was nothing else between him and a watery grave. Sitting there in the Bistro, Poynter imagined the planks snapping beneath the weight of a diner. What lay beneath? Seaweed, fish, swirling monsters. The poet shuddered.

Poynter stepped through some double doors, into a deserted lobby. It was painted an orange-cream colour, with deep red as a second tone. It was cold and a little shabby. The art deco style evoked better times, although the place surely bustled during social events. Two staircases rose to the side balconies, with square glass columns like blocks of ice piled upon each other. Poynter gripped the cold steel rail, and started to ascend.

Morgan's eye was flying along the coast. Poynter. He must find Poynter. The slabs of paving whisked past, and ambling figures in winter coats. There were domes below, wooden buildings, and a construction above the sea. Morgan's eye found a set of windows, then a lobby within. His All-Seeing Eye hovered at the top of the stairs, looking down past the glass column to the crouched figure below. A ragged, unruly man. The man he had searched for.

Poynter stopped. Was there someone up there, watching him? Only the hissing of the sea could be heard. He could see no-one, but there was a feeling of unease. The lobby reminded Poynter of the cinema, and the trauma of yesterday. He had no wish to spark off similar emotions. Poynter released the banister, and marched out across the scratched, grey tiling.

Poynter moved outside, onto the thin wooden planks that comprised the principal decking. They were laid across the width of the pier, allowing narrow glimpses of the greenish sea below. Just an inch of dead arboreal tissue kept him from this swirling mass.

There be fish, thought Poynter. *There be monsters*, swirling in the sea. Ugly squid and toothy dragons, as drawn on the ancient charts. Poynter had seen the unknown, he knew the unknown. He would tread carefully, to avoid the weaker planks. Two men in coloured macs were fishing by the rail, with striped deckchairs for the odd rest. Poynter approached the pair, and murmured a stern warning as to the serpentine creatures below. They must surely be careful when casting their lines, in case the bait found more than expected. Poynter did not heed the brief comments offered in return, or the ironic tone of their agreement.

Poynter reached an expanse of bare decking beyond the pavilion, like the bow of a ship. There was no adornment or entertainment. He walked to the blunt tip, which was marked as an obstacle for shipping by a red light. Poynter gazed down at the cool green sea, which slopped around a cluster of vertical wooden columns. They had once supported a jetty, but the decking had been removed. The effect resembled a city of skyscrapers, rising from a flood. Each column was grey and stained, with giant rusty nails protruding. The sea turned blue towards the distant horizon, becoming darker as it followed the earth's curvature. A sailing ship moved eastward, in some distress. It resembled the sailing

ship that Poynter had bought, trapped inside its bottle. He had often contrived tales and romances concerning the vessel. Now, it seemed, he was witnessing some kind of reality. Perhaps it was a reality of long ago, which had inspired the crafting of the little ship.

The sails flapped despite the lack of wind, as if Poynter was glimpsing the past. There were cries aboard as a mast snapped, then the vessel tilted at a terrible angle. Choppy waves engulfed it, despite the calmness of the water all around.

Poynter shook himself. The ship had gone.

To the west, a panorama of seafront terraces ran towards the crisp white layers of Marine Court. A hazy Bexhill lay beyond, curving out so its beach aligned with the pier. Much further, the cliffs past Eastbourne stretched to Beachy Head, where Poynter had walked with Madeleine so long ago.

He winced at the memory, and turned to the east. Hastings was far closer, and more imposing to the eye. It was still mid-afternoon, but the coast road was already dotted with amber lights. West Hill loomed in a green-brown mass above the rooftops, dark and distant despite its central position in the town. The broken castle sat upon it, forlorn yet somehow enticing a visit.

Poynter turned away from the railing, and began to walk back along the pier. The Pavilion's southern end was flat and windowless, with the curved look of an aircraft hanger. It dwarfed a single iron bench at the centre, with a pattern of leaves and

roses. A pleasant place to sit in summer, and for those of a winter's constitution.

However, Poynter was heading back to the seafront. The fishermen made no reference to his earlier words, absorbed in their occupation. Poynter thought it best not to mention the ship.

Where now? Poynter felt drawn to the town centre, and even back to the Old Town. He would soon return to London, but wanted to see the places he had visited once more. Poynter did not wish the darkness of the ritual to become his abiding memory of the town. While he was not religious, there might even be a modicum of comfort to be gained from visiting the church. Perhaps that priest, who had attended The Perception, might have words of solace or advice. There was even the old duffer, Beevers, who Poynter had first encountered on the cliff-top. Poynter felt a certain respect for him, and the advice that had proved well-founded. It would be best to tell Beevers of the ritual. It might even be a duty for the poet.

Poynter sighed with the inevitable. Unless he found Beevers quickly before taking the train, he must stay another night. Poynter did not cherish the thought of the unfamiliar, and hoped he would not need to trust it. For there was an increasingly familiar place, a few minutes walk away. The door he had found on that first evening, once Madeleine and her friends had departed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan felt his connection with Poynter had been broken for now. His vision of the seafront faded, revealing a grainy image of a wall. Morgan was still in the projection booth, by the broken Televisor.

He felt a tingle of cold, as if only now realizing the winter temperature. Without the crowds and candles of the night before, the old cinema was a silent, unheated morgue. Indeed, it held the body of Dr. David Lester - sprawled on the floor nearby. Sobering slightly, Morgan felt a twinge of regret. This was quickly followed by the worry of official action. Should he try to conceal the body, or come clean about the experiment? How would they explain the man's untimely demise?

Yet the evening had not been a total loss. Morgan had failed to revive the Order of the Golden Dawn, while leaving his audience in confusion. But powers had become manifest, through the medium of Lester's device. The energy had passed into Morgan, and Poynter too. The poet had escaped without physical injury, although in a state of shock. Morgan's state of unconsciousness till the early morning had stopped him detaining Poynter, or witnessing everything that transpired.

Uneasy in the projection booth, Morgan descended the technicians' staircase to the floor below. He reached the passage near the manager's office, and passed through another doorway onto the balcony of the auditorium. It had provided the best view of the screen, with images filling the sight of those in the front row. The curtains remained open, displaying an expansive rectangle

of blankness. This had a grey, shadowed quality in the unlit cinema.

Morgan took his pocket lighter and flicked an orange flame into life. The dimmest shadows of his profile fell upon the art deco walls, cast by a vastly diluted source. However, the flame caught elements of brass work in a series of dancing gleams. Morgan found several more candlesticks along the edge of the balcony, defined by his lighter's glow. He approached one, turning down the flame as it touched the wick of the candle. Suddenly, a more permanent shine took hold. A moment later, Morgan had lit all nine candles across the width of the balcony. This created a linear constellation in the looming darkness of the auditorium.

The screen seemed no longer dead, and the show no longer over. Perhaps it had never ended, for the curtains had never been drawn. It had merely been an interlude, to sort the wheat from the chaff. Morgan's acolytes had been wanting.

The New Order of the Golden Dawn was no failure. Morgan had succeeded, after all. The numbers had been reduced to a single trustee, empowered by the whirring device.

Morgan tipped down one of the old velvet seats, near the middle of the second row. This gave him a clear view of the screen, behind the glowing vista of candles stretching either side. He was like an old man on a solo visit to the cinema, waiting in that breathless pause after the curtains open for the first images to appear. There was no censor's certificate or

company logo to punch its way through the darkness. Just the images Morgan could see in his head, and apparently on the screen.

As he sat there, for hour upon hour, the clarity of Morgan's perception increased. A shape had appeared before him, as if cast from the projection booth: a golden triangle with shining rays, and a single eye at its centre. It became charged by the scrutiny of its lone acolyte, the figure of Albert Morgan. His eyes had now been joined by a third. A symbolic, All-Seeing Eye.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

*Slow Revulsion*

It was possible for Mr. Hargreaves to tell the time without any mechanical aid. At least, he knew to within a quarter of an hour, after starting his jigsaw at three. The image of a Swiss village was partially complete, with gabled rooftops discernible between patches of wood grain where the table still lay bare.

His wrinkled hand shuffled through a stack of pieces, like a poker player selecting a winning card. There were shapes that resembled flowers, although a little out of focus. Others held geometrical patterns, surely fragments of window. The more difficult elements lay in further stacks, compiled by Mr. Hargreaves in the early stages. Some were the flat, pure blue of an Alpine sky, while other pieces were a mottled white - the side of a great mountain. Mr. Hargreaves did not feel able to construct such a mountain, just yet. With a sigh of satisfaction, he added the corner to a pretty chalet. Mr. Hargreaves rubbed the piece flat in satisfaction, so the puzzle interlocked with a pleasing smoothness. His eye caught a fleck of colour: part of an anorak. Maybe it belonged to the blonde girl in the bobble hat. Now, where had he put her head?

So, Mr. Hargreaves shuffled through more pieces. On average, it took five or six minutes to place each one, in his meticulous way. Thus, Mr. Hargreaves knew an hour had passed. Twenty pieces had been added.

The fairy lights had been on for most of the day, enlivening the living-room window. Mrs. Hargreaves always dusted in the morning, after which the lights were switched from their dormancy into a square of dappled colour. It was a trick she had learnt from the big hotels, ranged along the seafront. The couple would have forgotten decorations with their daughter gone, but they might still encourage guests.

Mr. Hargreaves became distracted from his search for the missing head. There were more bits with flowery patterns, which he tried to assemble. A shadow passed behind the net curtain, before the blue of a fading sky. It was followed a second later by a tinny, electric chime. Mr. Hargreaves waited a beat, unsure whether to respond. Then he heard a step in the hallway, and the click of the latch. His wife had answered, as usual.

Poynter stood on the pavement, inches from the threshold. The amber light of the hallway cast a soft glow on his features, in contrast to the evening sky beyond. Warm air from the guesthouse mingled with the cool air outside, in an invisible fight for supremacy.

"Mrs. Hargreaves," said Poynter, with a slightly contrived smile. "I have a case. I would like to leave it here tonight. Perhaps I could...stay with it?" Poynter raised his modest suitcase, pleadingly. He resembled a wartime refugee, keen for a surrogate home.

Mrs. Hargreaves had no need for selling points, for a good customer had returned. "Mr. Poynter!" she smiled. "Step in. You

could do with a cup of tea. Please - put your bag down there. No-one's going to pinch it."

Poynter lowered his case to the floor, next to a rack of umbrellas. "I was on the pier," he explained. "I was cold. I saw your lights. They were so welcoming."

Mrs. Hargreaves was grateful for such a review. Her pounds had not been spend in vain. "Pop in the lounge," she said. "Tom's there, trying to make the Alps."

Poynter paused in his motion, confused.

"A jigsaw," added Mrs. Hargreaves.

Minutes later, Poynter sat in an armchair with a steaming mug in hand. The sky was now a deep navy blue, creating a stunning depth behind the fairy lights. The fussy ornaments and wallpaper provided a quaint familiarity. The poet let his body relax in the upholstery, while his legs stretched long and thin upon the threadbare carpet. The gas fire glowed on a low setting, like a miniature blacksmith's forge. Mrs. Hargreaves regarded Poynter with an attentive smile. Mr. Hargreaves found the missing blonde head.

"We have guests for Christmas," said Mrs. Hargreaves. "I've tried to whip up some trade. I'm very sorry, Mr. Poynter. We don't have a room to offer."

The poet stiffened. "Very sorry to hear."

While his actions suggested otherwise, her husband had one ear on the scene. "Come on, Joyce," he murmured. "Don't let the lad freeze."

Mrs. Hargreaves snorted. "I never suggested anything, Tom. I put his case in the hall."

"Oh..." intoned Mr. Hargreaves, as if the statement conveyed great information.

"You can sleep here," his wife added, "on the sofa...for a day or two. We've a marvellous quilt, as cosy as toast."

"Tonight will be fine," said Poynter. "Or...maybe tomorrow, too." He lapsed into relaxation, then almost into sleep. Poynter had breathed enough cold air, for now. It was a most reassuring fact.

Mrs. Hargreaves watched in tenderness, of an almost maternal kind. Her eyes flicked up to a photo on the mantelpiece, of a smiling young woman in a local park. What a shame her daughter could not be there. Perhaps she would like Mr. Poynter.

\* \* \* \* \*

[SAUNDERS MULLS THINGS OVER, FIELDING CALLS ABOUT THE RITUAL.]

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. and Mrs. Hargreaves had never been night owls, although darkness came early in these midwinter months. So they had been compelled to amuse themselves for several hours, along with their unexpected guest, before giving in to natural instincts and retreating to a welcome bed. Another guest had joined them for a

while, enjoying a long-running soap and some reality rubbish - both relished by Mrs. Hargreaves. Her husband had cast intermittent glances at the screen, while continuing to labour on his jigsaw.

Poynter sat with an air of concentration, with his eyes looking at the screen. It was fairly large and in colour, although the guesthouse had yet to invest in the latest technology. The television used the traditional cathode ray tube, so its innards grew hot within a bulky cabinet. Mr. Hargreaves had bought a video recorder some years back, although the format was now in decline. While their collection of chunky VHS tapes held hours of viewing pleasure, the couple would need a digital upgrade if they were to stay on trend.

Despite its growing obsolescence, the television functioned well enough. Such images would have been a marvel, just a few decades before. The couple had owned far older versions, dating from their marriage in the 1960s, and both could remember the pioneering pictures broadcast after the war. Having seen the crude effects of the Televisor during the disastrous ritual, Poynter watched these glowing phosphor dots with admiration.

Yet something was not entirely right. The picture drifted in and out of focus, its lively shapes hard to identify. They were less a depiction of a dramatized world, or snatches of life observation, than a mingling of colour and movement, photographed in the third dimension and then recreated in this ethereal way. Occasionally, as he narrowed his eyes, Poynter could sense the

presence of another factor: flickering patterns like delicate moths, appearing for the briefest interval within the pictures on the screen. One hovered over the face of a chatty presenter, and Poynter glanced at Mrs. Hargreaves to judge her reaction. There was none.

Poynter looked back at the screen. The entity was still present. Perhaps it was a fault with the tuning, he thought. Maybe the shapes were ghosts of another channel, superimposed on this one. He guessed the Hargreaves must be used to the effect, so long had they owned the set. Poynter tried to apply a little of the science he had glimpsed during that night in the old cinema. They were right down on the coast, after all, with plenty of shipping and radar. Maybe there was a French station over the sea, broadcasting on a similar wavelength, and the Hargreaves' old analogue set was receiving some of the signal.

Testing his theory, Poynter looked at the other guest - a youngish woman, business type, who was older on close inspection. She was watching the television with a smile on her face, amused by the reality show antics. Poynter nearly asked if she had seen the intrusive patterns, but stopped before uttering a word. He could tell, somehow, that they were invisible to her. The question would only seem strange.

"Bingo!" came a sudden voice. Poynter looked round, a little startled. Mr. Hargreaves popped another piece into his jigsaw puzzle and took a sip of tea. However, the stray pieces on the table showed that the task ahead remained arduous.

\* \* \* \* \*

Saunders studied his reflection in a mirror once more, still loitering in Morgan's home. The bathroom was a refuge from Jacqueline and her sobs, for he could hardly invade Morgan's study. Indeed, the man and his ambitions were the focus of Saunders' pain. Why have I allowed myself to become so ensnared in this scheme, thought Saunders. A scheme that has more to do with social manipulation than anything truly esoteric, not that such a path was advisable to a qualified psychologist.

By slow degree, Saunders felt - no, *reasoned* - by slow degree, he had allowed himself to weaken, to accept, to compromise the ideals and standards he held. He had been interested in Morgan and his motivations, but the Satanist had drawn him in, ever closer, until he had joined the inner circle. Here he was minding Jacqueline with Morgan's fate unknown. Should the man return, his state of mind was a mystery quite apart from the effects of the ritual. He would see himself and Jacqueline as complicit in the scheme, and expect even greater devotion.

Just as he had washed that vile cocktail from his mouth, Saunders sensed - no, knew instinctively - that this was his time, his moment to save himself. To draw back, reject his mentor and his role as an acolyte.

Saunders had a flash in his mind, just then. An image of that old man who had pressed the bell. He had offered something, thought Saunders. An alternative path.

He had offered salvation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Duncan, the son of Paula, lay in his small room at the back of the house. It was situated in a lane that rose from the side of All Saints Street, just to the side of East Hill. Stretches of paving were divided by stone steps, allowing a more gradual incline. Paula's house could only be reached by pedestrian means.

There were terraced houses each side of the lane, three storeys high, and rising up the gradual slope. Each had a bay window protruding into a small garden, several displaying Christmas trees lit with white or coloured bulbs. Past the lower end of the lane, the blue-grey of night was a wash of neutral colour, upon which dabs and flecks of light defined the shapes of the town. Above, the rising hump of East Hill lay dark against the sky. It marked the beginning of the country park, which ran east along the coast.

A quick glance would not have revealed a presence in the shadows of All Saints Street. This was a place of cottages and half-timbered houses - each with its share of quirkiness, although none so differed that the unity was broken. It was here that the figure stood, regarding the antique street lamp that marked the

lower end of the lane, its gas replaced with the whiter clarity of electric light. This cast a cool glow to the lower steps that led up into the lane, an iron banister in the middle.

The figure extracted itself from the shadows, and walked quietly into the pool of light. Its coat was long, dark, and resembled a cloak as it swung gently from side to side. The rim of its hat was broader than conventional fashion, at least in the contemporary world.

The figure glanced at each house impassively, as it moved upwards along the lane. Rising six steps up, it clicked some twelve paces along the paving, up another ten steps, then continued up the paved slope. Shaggy bushes brushed upon its coat, protruding from the gardens close on each side. There was another lamp, like the first, and a further stretch of paving before the pattern was repeated, merging with the gloom.

The figure saw how many of the windows were lit, and provided glimpses of internal scenes. Some, of course, held Christmas lights, adding coloured speckles to the dark. The bay windows had been chosen to display that most timely of objects, the tree borrowed from paganism to mark the festive time. Lights and decorations enhanced them into objects of veneration. The figure sneered at the sheer naivety, for there were few such lights in the street from whence it came.

It was not the obvious or luminescent that would satisfy. The figure drew to a pause by one of the houses, where the lilac window-frames were made grey by the evening gloom. A pleasant

little garden, too, although just a few feet deep. There was only a distant orange light, seeping through an open door. The figure could sense something. An emotion, within. There was something...warm. Love. A bonding.

This did not invoke the man it knew, but others who shared the house. A mother, perhaps...and her daughter? The figure concentrated, hard. No...a boy. A young and sensitive boy. He was definitely her son.

Vulnerability, it thought. A useful knowledge. Every piece was an asset, in fulfilling the work.

It could sense the boy. See into his dreams. Glimpses of a story his mother had told him. He was too young to understand, but had absorbed every detail. It was waiting in his mind. Waiting, to be tapped like oil.

It had not been a noble or even interesting death. The father had been jogging in the country park, hoping to enter some charity marathon. Warren, the father of Duncan. Warren, who was Paula's late husband. He had taken his sense of purpose and discipline too far. Instead of heeding the warnings of pain, he had carried on. Warren had liked to push things to the limit.

The figure pushed its inquiry further, deep into the little boy's mind. An interlude had passed, in the country park, between the moment Warren's body had faltered and the first person found him. An interlude of anguish and pain. He had known death was near, and called out for Paula and Duncan. The voice had been no more than a croak, but a scream in Warren's mind. Then he had

fallen into an unconscious state. Some rambling fool had found him and alerted the emergency services.

That is how the father had died. In fear, like a little child. Warren had been pronounced dead of cardiac arrest, before Paula had seen him again.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Poynter slept in the living-room of Mr. and Mrs. Hargreaves, a series of images began to play in his mind. He had experienced these scenes before, when their message had related to the problems of poetry. Now, nearly two years later, they struck him in a different way.

Poynter was walking upon an expanse of wild, open downland. He descended a chalky hollow, entering a murky, tight-knit grove. His jacket brushed the clinging mass of ivy, which entwined the trees with a botanical lattice. Disturbed by Poynter's intrusion a Ghost Moth - the white male of the species - released its grip on the plants. It glided past the edge of his Poynter's vision, disliking his intrusion into the obscurity of its home. Startled, Poynter swept his net wildly - but the moth was forever a receding shape. It was bright against the earthy colours of the grove, like a negative silhouette.

Always at the edge of my vision, thought Poynter. The moth was the sense of refined insight he sought in a bleak modernity.

It fluttered through the cracks of mortal existence, a spectre in search of a banquet.

Poynter knew he must follow it. He stretched his arms, and willed himself to rise. Yes, he was no longer a rigid observer. He had *become* the thing he sought, and no longer feared it. His body was, indeed, lightening. Rising from the ground, Poynter began to surge forward through the dense trees of the grove. The branches brushed at his face - brushed *through* him - as he rose into a greyish-blue sky.

He was catching up with the moth, which had become larger and more ethereal. Its wings were edged with the geometric lines of a television picture, and the sky was an electrical vista of high-frequency interference. The moth was joined by another, then another, in a mass of phantom life.

Poynter jerked awake in the night, pushing the quilt from his face. The shadows around him were strange, and the window unfamiliar. The street cast a dim glow into the room, so the dark television was visible. The past came back to him, as Poynter realized where he was.

So, what were these fluttering phantoms? Did he really have the urge to fly? Poynter wondered if he should test the theory: push the quilt away, spread his arms and levitate in the room. But his eyelids were heavy, while his head lolled back on the pillow. Even if he had done so, it would have felt like a dream in the morning.

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[JACQUELINE SINGS OUTSIDE PAULA'S, TENSION INCREASES.]

\* \* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \* \*

[MORE JACQ. SCENE, SAUNDERS TO BEXHILL. HE TURNS CAR AROUND.]

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

*Testing the Faith*

POYNTER resumed his passage along the promenade, following his interlude at the guesthouse. The quilt had been warm enough, as Mrs. Hargreaves had hoped, and the visions on the television screen had passed from his mind. Sleep had come with unexpected depth, despite the momentary awakening, and his body felt strangely revived. Poynter's suitcase remained with the Hargreaves, of course, for he would be staying another night. Then it would be best to buy a rail ticket, and get back to London. There would still be time, he realized, before the trains wound down for Christmas.

Still, it was hard to leave the town just yet. The centre of Hastings lay before him, on the opposite side of the coast road. The poet paused by the entrance to the pier, although did not tempt fate by entering. Perhaps the watching presence of the day before had been nothing but paranoia, fuelled by the disturbed imaginings of the cinema ritual. That was two nights before now, and the details were already dimming in his mind. Despite the shock of the moment, perhaps it would have no lasting influence.

The imposing mass of Palace Court rose above arched windows, with small seafront shops beneath. Though it was light, the white paintwork had been cooled by a wash of blue: an early sign of dusk. The first daubs of yellow were visible on several ceilings, as seen from below.

The eastern tower resembled a block of iced cake, topped by a tapering slate roof as if a steeple had been sliced off. Poynter was intrigued by the little round windows, set into the tower. What unusual chambers lay within this prominent yet aloof edifice? Was someone up there, looking down at him? Watching through a round window? It was almost like a floating eye, seeing all from afar.

Morgan could see Poynter through the round window, standing far below. Morgan was physically distant, yet his sight had transferred to the tower. The images were clearer than before. Less choppy and impressionistic. Morgan was becoming accustomed to his All-Seeing Eye, and the visibilities it provided.

Poynter raised his hand to the building, clawing at the windows as if attacking a doll's house. Perspective had deluded him. He was unable to strike the tower, even though his hand appeared to swipe it.

Poynter fizzed with a mixture of fury and fear. He ignored the bemused looks from seafront strollers, and scuttled across the road. A stream of cars had paused for a moment, their tail lights evoking heated ingots in cloudy fumes of exhaust. Fire and brimstone, thought Poynter.

The All-Seeing Eye rose through the roof of the tower, gazing down at a dizzy, vertiginous perspective. It was unaffected by the cold or height, unable to falter or fall.

Poynter crossed the cul-de-sac of Claremont to his left. A quirky shop sold fancy dress, of the scary and lacy kind. Rock

music pulsed from within. There was a Santa costume of black satin, and little dolls in coffins. A girl at the door eyed Poynter curiously, as if he might provide custom. She wore striped tights, a short red dress and had bold spiky hair. If the girl was insulted by the poet's look of revulsion, then knowledge would have granted forgiveness. He was repelled, not by her, but the sinister Jacqueline she evoked.

Poynter glimpsed the redbrick tower of the Brassey Institute. A staircase twisted within, down which Morgan had descended to greet the visiting poet. Poynter wished he had made his exit, before their first encounter.

The All-Seeing Eye had featured in that little book, given to him by Morgan. An eye in a pyramid, radiating energy. A symbol of Aleister Crowley.

The Institute vanished behind a corner shop, as Poynter walked further along Robertson Street. There were twinkling stars fifty yards ahead, although it was not yet night. They were illuminated decorations, affixed to the iron lamp-posts, inviting shoppers to the main plaza.

As he passed the sandstone drinking fountain by the Holy Trinity church, Poynter noticed a dark, wooden frontage over the road. He passed between some bollards into the pedestrianized area, and put his nose to the glass. A memory of The Perception, and Morgan's bonhomie. The festive drinkers might have been his audience, waiting for the recital to begin. Poynter did not linger.

As the shops to the right curved away, the poet had a clear view ahead. There was a Christmas tree in the main plaza - about twenty feet high, lit with yellowish-white bulbs. A few seconds later, the outline of West Hill appeared - complete with castle - so it hung in perspective above the top of the tree. The tree was like an arrow, pointing upward, indicating Poynter should climb the hill. The illuminated tip touched the angles of the castle, and rose above it, as Poynter approached.

He reached the tree in a moment. It was set in a circular pattern of bricks, laid into the paving, at the centre of a similar ring. It was like a circle of protection. There were benches near this perimeter, so Poynter sat for a while.

The All-Seeing Eye dropped down the side of the Brassey Institute. Columns and windows swept past in a blur. It turned away from the pavement, and swooped along Trinity Street. Morgan felt a painful twinge, as if his right cheek had become sunburnt. Then he realized the proximity of the sandstone church. Morgan steered the All-Seeing Eye to the left, so passed along the shop fronts. The sense of discomfort faded.

Morgan mingled invisibly with the shoppers, who plodded through the pedestrian precinct. Yes, pedestrian. How heavy they were, in those clumsy physical bodies. Two lumpy appendages to balance on, like the legs of an incomplete tripod. A precarious body to support, like a lump of clay, with crude limbs flapping around. A little head on top, with two dim eyes that could neither hover nor fly.

The All-Seeing Eye sensed a trail, and swept to the window of the wine bar. There was a trace on the glass. An aura, of a long and miserable face. Inside, customers joked over festive drinks. Morgan recalled his visit there, and felt the power of the eye weaken. The screen of the cinema loomed in his vision, superimposed upon the wine bar. Morgan swept the eye back through the lumbering shoppers. Its vision intensified once more.

So this power had a weakness. The sanctified could null it, and egoistic thoughts divert its focus.

It was a quarter to four, and the sky was lapsing to an early twilight. Girls in short skirts chatted about presents, solemn guys marched through their purchasing chores. Other lamps held other decorations - single blue snowflakes, or constellations of five-pointed stars. The light of the street was soft and grey, emphasizing their simple beauty. Poynter had nowhere to bustle to, no troublesome gifts to buy. So he could watch, wait and appreciate. The shining tree was Poynter's companion as the sky darkened, ignored by all but this admirer. He might have been a drunk or a vagrant, making his Christmas on the street.

Poynter remembered the old priest, Mr. Amery-Beevers. He had tried to stop Morgan and his cronies, and encouraged Poynter to a brighter path. Poynter had not taken it, and had been dealt the consequences. At least Madeleine had not witnessed his downfall. Poynter winced to think of her, and the approaches she had made. Perhaps she was sitting by a Christmas tree, whoever it belonged to: her mother, Roland or herself.

As the shops to the right curved away, Morgan had a clear view ahead. There was a Christmas tree in the main plaza - about twenty feet high, lit with yellowish-white bulbs. The All-Seeing Eye winced at the sight. It was a pagan tradition, but diverted to Christian ends. The eye throbbed with an angry pain. A dog pulled at its owner's lead, and began to bark at the eye. The owner could see nothing, and admonished the poor animal. A child screamed suddenly, for no reason.

Morgan spun the eye round, so the pain subsided. He backed towards the tree. It could sense someone, waiting there. The aura of Laurence Poynter. He had his eyes closed. There was a tear on his cheek. Morgan hovered close, observing through the All-Seeing Eye, sneering from his place in the cinema.

Poynter's eyes flicked open. He stared at the eye, which blinked. Morgan jerked back with shock, grabbing the balcony edge for support. His forehead pulsed with energy, as if the stream of power had snapped back. Morgan was back in the room, in a metaphorical sense. The cinema auditorium.

Morgan had exercised his powers, and had learnt the location of Poynter. He would move now, physically, to reach him. If the poet could be persuaded, he would make a powerful ally. Morgan had turned him in the bookshop, after the poetry evening had seeded doubts. He was a twister of minds, after all. If Poynter had found a new independence, empowered by the energy conveyed by the device, he might become a real enemy. Should the message of persuasion fail, the message of force would not.

Morgan's hat and coat had been taken by Jacqueline. He would be a quicker, lighter being in his dinner suit. However, something would come in handy...

Morgan crept back to the projection room, where he pulled a shard of metal from the broken equipment - curved, like a scimitar. It was a fragment of the scanning disc, which had ruptured in the explosion. The ripped slots created a jagged edge, the circumference a steely curve. Morgan slid the metal shard behind the belt of his trousers, and let his jacket fall in concealment.

\* \* \* \* \*

At last, Poynter decided to find whatever awaited him in the night. He arose from the bench, and moved past the Christmas tree and two living saplings beyond. These were enclosed in tight metallic fences, forming their own protection. He crossed a curving strip of brick road, onto the next area of paving. To the left, festive lights brightened the length of Queens Road, diminishing into the distance. White reindeer with a red Santa were strung across the street, forming a gateway to the distant shops. Tiny lights were bunched into inverted cones, which hung upon lamp-posts in dabs of colour. Each was a bold nebula of a single hue, blue, green or red.

However, Poynter continued to the next curve of tiled road, arriving at Wellington Place. It was another area for pedestrians,

beyond the intervening traffic. The banks had already closed, while shops served their last customers of the day. Soon, the carpets would be vacuumed, and lingering browsers sent on their way. The white snowflake lights were repeated here, like those near the Christmas tree, hanging on lamp-posts each side of the thoroughfare.

The shops ended after a brief stroll, as Wellington Place opened into a small precinct. Lines of inset brick swept in wide arcs, with circles of white tiles converging in concentric rings. Poynter caught a glimpse of West Hill against the darkening sky. Its southern half was visible as a jagged silhouette, against the deepening blue. The castle was hidden by the looming houses of Wellington Square, ranged around a green. Their style was tall and perpendicular, with iron balconies twinkling with fairy lights.

Poynter moved on, taking the upward slope to the east of the square. This was Castle Hill Road, curving gently away behind the square. Poynter had a clear view of the castle now, on the far side of the road. The black mass of the hill rose above pale houses beneath, their white walls faded to a greenish-blue in the diminishing illumination. There were no floodlights on the castle tonight, adding to a sense of foreboding. The structures blended with the top of the hill, so they appeared to be toothy projections from the larger, curving mass. Yet somehow, Poynter felt this place held his destiny.

The lower part of the cliff had been reinforced with a brick wall, rising perhaps twenty feet high. It was also strengthened

with solid, chunky buttresses. The wall glowed orange by the light of three electric lamps, ranged along its length. These only made the hump of West Hill all the more darker and mysterious, against the sky above.

The road continued upwards, becoming darker and narrower. After a set of steps, the wall jutted outwards to swallow the pavement. It was topped by bare, wintry trees, with a glimpse of homes beyond. These had been built on West Hill itself, around the edge of the castle. The wall stretched further up the road, tapering gradually to a low level.

Rather than stay on the western pavement, Poynter crossed to the jutting wall and climbed the steps. After a couple of landings, they reached a path along the top of the wall. This rose dark and straight between iron railings and the houses on the right. It might have led to his goal, but no - the town had played a trick on Poynter. As the wall tapered in relation to the rising land, more steps turned left down to ground level. Poynter sighed in the orange glow of a street lamp. This place was like a maze.

The wall was hardly taller than a man now, made of eight or so layers of rounded sandstone bricks. Rather than cross to the opposite pavement, Poynter followed the wall along the edge of the road. He kept close, moving swiftly, nimbly, virtually invisible in his long dark coat. Poynter spread himself flat against the gritty bricks as a passing car caught him in its headlamps, casting his shadow along the wall. Poynter's spectacles reflected the lights as his head turned to watch the vehicle. He could see

no-one behind the tinted windows, which were obscured even more by night.

Seconds later, Poynter reached a corner of pavement that met the end of the wall. Castle Hill Road turned sharp right, and rose further upwards between the houses. The summit of the hill lay beyond them, with its crevices and ancient castle. With a fresh sense of energy and focus, Poynter began the final stretch.

A short way east along the coast, a taxi pulled up at the roadside. A figure stepped out in a clumsy manner, as if he had not enjoyed being so confined. He handed a note to the driver, who accepted it with gratitude, before slamming the door with relish. The car moved on, as the figure gained his bearings for a moment. It was a strangely dapper figure to be standing where it was, beside an amusement arcade. It was dressed in a dinner suit, with no coat despite the cold. A reddish mark on his forehead was a peculiar touch, perfectly aligned between the eyes.

He glanced left, to the electric glow that had caught his attention. Morgan smiled. What quaint diversions, he thought. Morgan was fully incarnate once more in his physical body, after the flight he had made through the All-Seeing Eye. However, the mark on his forehead pulsed with a mixture of energy and pain. Something was growing there, with increasing intensity.

The amusements proved too enticing to resist, so Morgan stepped into their colourful domain. The hour was too late for the daytime crowd, yet too early for the evening trade. So Morgan moved alone through the vista of brilliance, as if bathing in its

electrical vivacity. It was a world of flashing lights, glowing neon and gleaming mirrors. Soft toys were enshrined in prize-giving games, piled in mounds of fluff and cutesy eyes. The repetitive trills and beeps of fruit machines sounded like a chorus of jungle creatures. He moved darkly through the luminescent machines, before stepping back into the cold.

The arcade was on a short street, which split away from the seafront. There was an antique shop next door, to the right, with a narrow archway between the two establishments. A large, old-fashioned lantern was fixed to the wall above. Apart from this, the doorway was wholly unremarkable. Indeed, it had a definite touch of obscurity.

However, Morgan knew Hastings well. He stepped through the archway into a short alley, past a jagged kink in the walls. This had made the alley look even more narrow when seen from outside. It was lit a ghastly green by a fluorescent fixture, but quickly led to the open air. There, a well-worn set of stone steps rose between cold brick walls. There was a landing, another flight, then another landing, in the usual Hastings fashion. The buildings fell away to the right, lapsing to a mass of hillside scrub. Morgan paused on the third landing, noticing the hum of electrics to the left: some kind of transformer, perhaps, feeding the arcade with power. More steps rose up the dark cliff, providing a strange transition from street life to an area of sombre wildness.

Morgan was at roof level by the fifth landing, where some wider steps turned to the right. He glanced back at the distant

alley, at the foot of the steps. It was now a glowing strip of light, framed by a mass of dark shrubbery. The steps had become lost in shadow - lit neither by the fading sky, nor the far brightness of the street.

The next flight of steps resumed their upward progress, straight up the side of the hill. The land had become a mass of scrub each side, while the crest of the cliff made an uneven ridge against the dim glow of the sky. Exhilarated, Morgan skipped up the next few landings, arriving at a path that curved away to his right. A stone wall marked its northern perimeter, along with a wooden bench. Beyond lay the upper part of the cliff.

Morgan jumped up onto the bench, then leapt straight over the next two feet of stone. The wall was effectively a buttress, so the ground reached its top on the far side. Morgan landed with surprising agility, as he began to stretch his abilities. Taking two paces forward, he leapt a concrete buttress that retained more of the sandstone. Morgan landed with increasing expertise, with the softness of a cat.

He found himself on a wide, grassy ledge, perhaps thirty feet deep. This depth created the appearance of a plain, with the cliff looming beyond. Morgan allowed his eyes to adjust to the darkness, as his forehead continued to throb. He felt the presence of an eye, an All-Seeing Eye, awakening on his brow. Perhaps it was more than ethereal. As he moved forward, the cliff filled his vision like a Wild West canyon. The last elements of the town had slid aside from his peripheral vision. Apart from a subtle hum of

traffic, only the bleeps and chimes from the distant arcade broke the sense of remoteness. They were funnelled up from the alley below.

Morgan whirled around on the tussocks of thick, wild grass. The tails of his dinner jacket caught the air, rippling like the fins of a fish. He slid the long shard of metal from his belt, and whisked it through the air. The metal glinted in the seafront lights, which caught the serrated edge with a sparkle. It made inviting sounds, like a whistle or a whisper. Morgan practised the moves of thrust and parry, twisting his weapon with increasing verve. It would serve him well, should the moment arise.

Once he had slid the weapon under his belt, Morgan turned back to the cliff. He could see everything in detail now, and studied the angles and cracks of stratified rock. Crossing the width of the grassy plain, he arrived at the base of the cliff. Morgan touched the ancient surface, so a few grains of sandstone became adhered to his fingers. He was here for a reason, surely?

Morgan looked up, close to the cliff. The knobs of rock were heavy above him, curved by time and erosion, while the shadows evoked caves of mystery. As Morgan began to step onto a low outcrop, his newfound qualities exerted their power. He found himself moving quickly, instinctively, further up the cliff - using both hands and feet as he scrabbled against the sandstone, clinging to the rock with remarkable agility. Then he tested his powers more, or rather - the powers tested *him*. Morgan jumped across a gap in a blur of black and white, his shirt the brightest

element in the night. Somehow, he was able to cling to the sheer surface, with his limbs sprawled wide like some habitual creature.

Morgan grinned in delight as he studied the way ahead. With a sudden whisk of movement, he scuttled into a crack. It was wide enough to crawl through, but rather too narrow to walk. Morgan vanished in a lithe motion, blending into the shadows. He moved fast through the rocks, and upon them, as their challenging angles proved a mere diversion. Someone would be up there, awaiting him. Morgan was already gazing ahead - not through those useless organs, so blind in the dark, that God had given him. Morgan now saw through the blossoming eye, which the pain on his forehead revealed.

Chapter Thirty

*A Time of Wildness*

AS POYNTER ARRIVED at the top of West Hill, he began to realize quite why some measure of destiny had drawn him there tonight. He had just passed a pathway to his right, leading a brief way to the entrance gate of Hastings Castle. Of course, it was now closed for the night. So a few more steps had taken him onto the wide, grassy field that comprised the top of the hill. Poynter felt a sense of openness, as he twirled himself around like a ballerina upon the darkened expanse. The lights of the Old Town were visible to the east, with the gleam of the seafront to the south. As he moved down the gentle incline, more lights became visible beyond this area of darkness. It ended just ahead of him, in jagged shapes of stone.

Poynter knew where he was. This was the edge of the sandstone spurs, where he had once stood to compose poetry. It was where he had imagined a treacherous fall, should the mist descend suddenly. It was also where he had stumbled a little, and been hailed by a voice of concern.

This was it. The place he had met that emissary of good, Mr. James Amery-Beevers.

The poet had foreseen a time such as now. A time of wildness, even danger. He had dwelt on such concepts in poetry, expressing a morbid concern. Now he had become a player in the game. He was no longer a dabbler in bleakness, but the channel for an active

reality. I have mastered this, thought Poynter, turning slowly on the sandstone edge. I have beheld the shadows and conquered the dark. The poetry is redundant, for the power is within me now.

It was not that Poynter wished to spurn the night, and in future concentrate on sunshine. Rather, that he was no longer a victim of his mortal fears. He had screamed during the ritual, and almost died when the energy surged within him. However, these moments had not had a negative outcome. They had cleared his system, purging him of pain, and opened a channel to the new energy. This had flowed somehow, through the Televisor, despite the sudden end to the ritual. Poynter had been more than purged, but *activated* by a force of the supernatural.

Shall I run to the cliff, thought Poynter. Run towards it, leap through the air, and land without injury on the ledge beneath? How can someone so refreshed and lithe as I come to any harm? Poynter spread his arms wide, feeling the breeze, letting it ripple his coat. To leap in the air, he thought. To feel that magnificent freedom. If it should prove his final moment in this physical incarnation, why - what a moment it would be! To exist in a state of no restraint, without pressure holding one to the earth. To feel nothing but air around oneself, rushing past and caressing oneself. What a stunning release it would be, he thought. If his powers were unable to cushion the impact, as he landed on the ledge below, then Poynter would have to accept that reality. Experience would make its judgement.

Poynter turned from the edge of the cliff, and walked back a few paces. Flight, if possible, would need a fast approach. A dozen or so steps felt adequate, at which point he turned with a sharp precision and faced the edge once more. Sky above sea, blended by the night. The backs of the seafront establishments, glowing with patches of yellow, then the lower slopes of the hill. Poynter spread his arms again, then ran.

Yes - it was good! There was buoyancy within Poynter. His legs barely stroked the ground as the grass brushed swiftly by, and his soul crackled with the buzz of sheer excitement. It would be easy. The cliff would sweep behind him, and he would hardly know the difference. *I am flying*, thought Poynter. *I am flying already! Here comes the cliff, the edge...*

The figure pounced somehow, from beyond the edge of the cliff, so it landed skilfully on the rugged sandstone. Its arms were spread wide, reaching forwards, so Poynter had no time to slow his momentum. The hands grabbed his outstretched arms, pressing hard into the flesh. Poynter's stoppage was sudden, and the grip so powerful, that he was jolted as if striking a solid obstacle. The figure began to push him back, away from the brink, so his feet stumbled through reluctant motion. All of Poynter's grace had been stifled by the stocky, grappling figure. The distinctive hat was gone, and the face obscured by night, but Poynter knew it was Morgan.

Then came the voice, in fast confirmation - its acoustic deep, and amplified somehow. Perhaps some energy had augmented the

vocal cords, to create a domineering resonance. "I have been seeing from afar," said Morgan. "I have watched you move through the town, a man among many. A man in denial of his power."

"I have power," replied Poynter, shoving hard against the Satanist. Morgan's force was checked somewhat, although he still pushed the poet back. "I have felt a lightness within me," added Poynter. "I was about to test that lightness."

"Lightness, with *ignorance*," said Morgan. "You would mock your gift in a flight of fancy - !"

With this, Morgan thrust Poynter heavily so the poet crashed onto the grass. Poynter groaned bitterly, his head dazed by the sudden impact. Quickly, Morgan stood astride him. He pinned the poet's arms to the ground, and knelt across his chest. While Poynter wheezed with the lack of breath, his attention was riveted by Morgan's words.

"Energy flows, my young poet. As ideas flow in poetry, and become a tangible art, so energy has flowed in the ritual. That foolish old duffer weakened our plans, and threw the night into chaos. Yet did I not try to summon the very unknown, through the creation of a portal of empathy? The chaos only made things *better*. Yes, I had faked the visual elements and the image of Crowley. I wished to create acolytes throughout society, who might do the work of the Order. Lester mistook my intentions, and built a workable machine - not just a Televisor, but a device of psychic attunement."

"An attunement...to *what*?" gasped Poynter.

Morgan shot a glance at the night sky, in acknowledgement of the great unknown. "Imagine a place of higher frequencies beyond our own, yet existing side by side. A dimension of hidden entities, unseen by humanity - until ritual or technology intercedes. Crowley has given us ritual, and Baird the technology. Only *I* have blended the two. The instrument punched into the lost domain, this plane of the Ultra High Frequency, at the very height of our ritual. A place now polluted by the babble of broadcast, yet still inhabited by its primal forces. They see from afar, Laurence, and visit us now."

Poynter's sight had become used to the night, so details in the shadows were visible. The poet could detect a bump or weal, which had formed upon Morgan's forehead. It was strangely precise, like the mark of a branding iron, yet seemed to throb organically. As Morgan noticed the direction of Poynter's gaze, he brought his face closer to that of the poet. Poynter could see the sparkle of seafront lights, reflected in Morgan's eyes. Morgan closed them just then, so the poet's attention switched to the shape above.

"The entities are *within* us," said Morgan. "Manifest in you and me, within this physical domain. Realize the power, Laurence. Feel it, *know* it..."

The shape was far clearer now, and Poynter recognized the outline of a pyramid. Surely there was a glow within it - expanding, pulsating, like a buried larva. Suddenly, the glow stretched to a line of silver light. The edges split apart to create a shining symbol, with a burning point at its centre. There

was the symbol of Morgan's cult, alive and staring on his forehead.

Morgan hissed in confirmation. "Behold the *All-Seeing Eye!*"

The paralysis of fear only added to the tightness of Poynter's predicament. As he became accustomed to the glare upon Morgan's forehead, Poynter felt a sense of recognition. He had surely seen that image before, in old engravings and manuscripts. Those books of his father, kept in the Hampstead house. The Eye was strangely precise in its shape, like a hieroglyphic symbol more than a living organ. Indeed, Poynter doubted that Morgan could see through the Eye in a literal sense. It was merely a sensor for what lay before him, or the point from which to project a perceiving mind.

There was something about that phrase, *All-Seeing*. As Morgan continued to loom above Poynter, the Eye shone with a sharpened intensity. The shape of the pyramid was glowing too, so the Eye was a brighter image upon luminous gold. Still it gazed down upon Poynter, who felt a crawling sensation on his skin. There was also a tingling on his brow, which extended into his soul. The Eye must be probing me, thought Poynter. It was spying on his memories like a scholar browsing through a library.

Poynter gasped as an emotional nerve was touched: some distant memory, then another, which had each inspired poems. His distant father, and a mother who had cried. Mysterious meetings in the house, which the young Laurence had listened to. Strange regalia in a cupboard, and punishment for finding the same. A

beating or two to instil compliance, then a sudden death in the family. His father had left young Laurence alone, and the mother had not returned. Wealth had cushioned him with a guardian and inheritance, although the disturbance had been repressed. It would be difficult to trace the precise motive behind Mr. Laurence Poynter and his isolated life. However, Morgan had mastered the difficult. He had managed to trace it.

"I see...the source of your poetry," smiled Morgan. "The source of your brooding, the cause of your scream. We have both come by similar paths, to meet on the hill tonight. Join me, Laurence, in this New Order of the Golden Dawn. Poetry tries to see from afar. I grant you the literal vision..."

As Morgan spoke, Poynter had feverishly compared his options. Either Morgan would fight him, or they would join together in the cult. Yet Morgan had done something brutal to an artistic mind, which had kept its secrets for years. Poynter had found expression in poetry, and explored his inner feelings. He would always have his deeper pain, but had dealt with its effects at a rational pace. Now Morgan had crudely punched through the barrier provided by art, into Poynter's inner psyche. How dare he intrude like this, into the realm of privacy? Such a crude invasion would spoil subtle understandings, and destroy the power of poetry. Why should Poynter care for the *literal* when the *elusive* was far more evocative?

If Poynter wanted to retain his sense of integrity, the time to act was now. Pinned to the ground, the poet could barely move.

The grotesque visage of Morgan descended, so the glowing Eye would touch his forehead. Perhaps the symbol would be imprinted on Poynter, who would gain a similar Eye. Thus the energy would spread between chosen ones, with Albert Morgan as their master. Unless...

Poynter jerked his head forward, at a carefully determined point. With an audible crack, his forehead struck the descending head with vigour. A shockwave of energy pulsed from the Eye, as Morgan jerked back with a groan. Releasing Poynter's arms, Morgan slapped his hands over the Eye like a wounded Cyclops. The poet scabbled back from between Morgan's legs, and turned away from the scene.

The Old Town! The church! He must run there now, and warn someone - maybe the priest, or that old fellow who had advised him in the spring. Poynter started to run, but felt a sudden coldness rushing up from behind. Morgan was already sprinting behind him, covering several strides at every leap. The Satanist had practised his moves, so was able to recover quickly.

Again, Poynter felt the sense of tingling in his mind as Morgan tried to access his memories. Poynter had thought he would be able to fly, so perhaps he should try again. With that, Poynter thrust his arms in the air while suddenly stretching his legs. He leapt upward, above the height of a man, as if propelled by the energy within.

The Satanist charged beneath Poynter, confused. Morgan's stocky form swerved as he realized how the poet had fooled him.

Poynter dropped down behind Morgan in a second, and started to run back to the cliff. Recalling his previous visit, Poynter knew enough about the rocks and boulders to know they might provide some cover for escape. He could not hope to evade the All-Seeing Eye, especially if Morgan projected its image once more. But the Satanist could only hurt him through physical contact, and would still have to reach his victim. Equally, Poynter was no longer resisting the energy within. Its power was flowing now.

Why would two energized humans fight each other, if the energy was channelled from the same domain? The energy must be neutral, thought Poynter. Like the carrier signal of a television broadcast, it only provided a medium for the message. In Poynter's case, the message was that of poetic resonance. For Morgan, spiritual domination was the goal. Each had their different faith, and now worked in opposition.

Poynter arrived at the edge of the cliff, unsure of his next move. Turning to face inland, he could see the golden glow of the Eye as Morgan approached swiftly. The man was a shady figure, just an appendage of that occult symbol. There must be another way down the hill. If only Poynter could slip away from Morgan, and find help in the town. Yet what help was he after? Who would be able to tackle the Satanist, when Poynter had already been granted a similar power? How could he unleash this demon on the old man, however much goodwill he possessed?

This was no time for ambivalence. Poynter decided to stand his ground. As the figure of Morgan charged towards him, Poynter

stretched his legs wide in a determined stance. His arms hung loose and ready to react. Poynter let conscious thoughts slip from his mind, so the energy could flow freely. Morgan was just a few feet away, about to slam into him. They would wrestle on the edge, push back and forth, and possibly fall together.

Poynter was ready for everything, except the thing that occurred. With uncanny precision, Morgan stopped in his tracks just beyond the poet's reach. The All-Seeing Eye was bright now, as it had recovered from Poynter's head-butt. A rippling glow emanated from the occult symbol, and fizzled a short way from Poynter. Crackles of bluish light shot around him, meeting the golden aura cast by the steadfast Morgan. It must be a meeting of energies - an interference pattern - as Morgan tried to cancel the source of Poynter's abilities.

Morgan was most experienced at rituals and supernatural schemes, so the poet felt himself struggling to stay put. One foot jerked back to the edge, somehow forced by Morgan's energy. As the other followed, Poynter's position was impossibly dangerous. A smile broke out on Morgan's face, although his true eyes remained closed. Indeed, it appeared they had shrivelled somewhat as the luminous organ overwhelmed their necessity. Poynter spread his arms to balance himself, as Morgan threw his head back to laugh. At that point, there was a slight weakening in the energy field. Poynter thrust his arms forward, grabbing Morgan's lapels, and pulled the Satanist down.

Morgan crashed to the ground beside Poynter, with a deep groan at the impact. Retaining his firm grasp of the dinner suit, Poynter tried to drag Morgan over the edge. His head and shoulders were overhanging the cliff, with a void of darkness below. However, the Eye tried to focus on the poet once more. Poynter averted his gaze, and continued to pull at the dinner suit. His shoes overlapped the edge of the cliff, so a few grains of sandstone were scraped away.

Morgan's hands were able to grab Poynter's ankles, and jerk them suddenly aside. By instinct, Poynter released Morgan's lapels as he tried to break his fall. However, the Satanist caught Poynter in his arms like an oversized baby and began to crush his waist. Poynter emitted a weak scream, as his breath was quickly exhaled. Crackles of blue light buzzed across his body, repelled by the shine of the Eye.

Morgan tried to sit upright, but Poynter was too heavy to allow this. So he focused his energy, raising his upper body in a partial levitation. Poynter began to recover, wriggling wildly and thrusting his fists at Morgan's face. The Eye was too powerful now, and countered these attacks with a zone of energized repulsion. Morgan continued his levitation, and reached a standing position like a living marionette. Easily managing his human burden, Morgan turned left and strode the length of the cliff. Pausing on an outcrop of jagged sandstone, Morgan overlooked the descending chasm between the cliff and broken walls of the castle

opposite. It was a place of rough rock and strewn boulders, descending to the grassy ledge.

Morgan raised his arms, holding Poynter high against the bleak backdrop of the castle. "*Descent is always easier,*" he hissed. With a vicious throwing action, Morgan cast the flailing poet through the air, so he arced down into the chasm. Poynter was quickly swallowed by the gloom.

A second later came a terrible scraping thud. A momentary flash of blue light illuminated the rocks and Satanist, who loomed against the dark sky. There was a trace of smoke in the air, and a resumption of the night's silence.

Morgan turned away from the scene of victory, shouting loud across the vista. All the town should hear him, and the sea and the land. "*I am the light of the world!*"

\* \* \* \* \*

Even before he had been thrust aside by Morgan, Poynter had begun to separate his present sensations from the rigours of physical action. As the supernatural energy had surged through both combatants, it had felt as if those powers were beginning to assume a control of their own. They had been testing the state of incarnation, to see how far these new bodies could be pushed. As Morgan had carried Poynter towards the chasm, the poet's fists had beaten his face with a frenzied, defensive urge. Once the Eye had repelled this assault, Poynter flopped back in a wave of numb

exhaustion. He could see the sky drifting overhead, while Morgan's head and shoulders loomed over him like an outcrop of lumbering rock. Yes, they were moving along the cliff-top. Morgan was taking him a short way, raising him high. Poynter tried to struggle, but his limbs felt paralysed by the sheer power radiating from the demon that held him. For that was what Morgan had become, thought Poynter, in a second of detached rationality. The forces had moulded him to the form he desired, and had attempted to invoke in the ritual. Morgan had achieved his goal, in an unexplained way, by becoming the very thing he had worshipped.

These thoughts had little time to crystallize, however. After a sibilant remark that he barely heard, Poynter had found himself flying through the cold winter air. There was a blur of the hillside, then spinning rocks. Poynter waved his limbs wildly, trying to direct whatever energies he had. If he could twist like a cat, study the rocks, bring himself down safely.

Alas, the moment was one of speed and confusion, with no time to counteract the fall. The sides of the chasm swept past Poynter, the edges of rock battering him, so his body slammed to the hillside as a puppet would topple once the strings had been cut. The energies throbbed within him, making the nerves twitch every muscle and sinew. Poynter lay with no sense of pain, just a dimly present consciousness. This would soon diminish. It would seep from the body, and go wherever consciousness must go.

The form of Laurence Poynter was a broken one. It had served the poet well, but was now beyond all recovery. The energies

flashed in disorientation, arcing across the body in surges of blue luminescence. Their light touched the nearby chunks of sandstone, which flickered into sharp if momentary relief. Then, something else appeared.

Angles of light fluttered from the motionless body, and began to explore the chasm. They were shining wings of pure geometry, no bigger than a common moth, pale and half-glimpsed in this lower dimension. They seemed to materialize from the smoke that emanated from Poynter, although its quality was more of an ethereal mist. They skimmed the surfaces of the angular rocks, a few rising high to sense Poynter's rival. He shouted a ludicrous slogan, then began to lumber away. His destination must be the town, where he would seek the hapless and meek. What kind of greeting would this demon make, with its sinister All-Seeing Eye? What evil would it wish to do?

Confusion rippled through the fluttering shapes, as if torn by conflicting outcomes. Their wings flexed in communication, forming patterns of abstract meaning. Fractal shapes twisted with secret intelligence, until a conclusion was reached. The outer portions of this vaguely defined swarm regrouped around Laurence Poynter. Tentatively, a few settled on the body - tickling the skin, testing the nerves, finding what might be possible. The smoky aura began to contract, and seal the body in a glow of ectoplasm. Poynter felt the light surround him, envelop him, so a kind of vigour returned. His consciousness was the puppeteer who could relax in comfort, while the puppet did its final work.

Although the injuries were grave, a puppet had no power of its own. Allow us, came the thought in Poynter's mind. Allow us to grant you power.

Poynter agreed with a calm acceptance, and the glow fully merged within him. It grasped every bone and muscle in its energized grip, while the lingering shapes flickered into his sides and merged with the embodied forces. In seconds, Poynter was rising again - a little jerkily, but with growing confidence. The battered limbs had been cushioned by these energies, which gave Poynter his motive power. All he had to do was supply the will, and this would be obeyed. When he wished to turn to the east, the body turned. When he wished to leap, the body leapt. Poynter observed with amazed detachment as his limbs scrambled up the eastern side of the chasm, suddenly fast and agile again. Suddenly able to jump.

Poynter came out of the chasm, fast, tearing towards the dark figure that had started towards the town. As Poynter imagined a fearsome scream, so one emanated from his lips. As the figure turned, the sockets of its eyes were blind beneath the glowing yellow pyramid. Yet even this eye reacted to the sudden form it beheld. The leaping form of Laurence Poynter, his eyes glowing a pearly blue. For the first time ever, the All-Seeing Eye reacted in an inexplicable way. It blinked.

Suddenly, Morgan was engulfed within crushing limbs as Poynter reached him - locking arms and legs around Morgan's body, so the Satanist lurched unsteadily. Poynter's eyes had locked onto

Morgan's, casting their bluish shine back into his own sockets. They were revealed as dead, ashen pits. The All-Seeing Eye flashed back, the energies meeting between them and crackling in the air. Each head was pushed back by the repelling forces, and tried to turn their gaze aside. This created a twisting effect, so the two bodies began to turn on the spot, grinding the earth beneath.

Poynter wanted to crush Morgan, and let the power within him increase its pressure. Morgan groaned in discomfort, treating Poynter to a glow of flame-like ambience that pulsed within his throat. Morgan grappled with Poynter as they spun around, rising together in the air. Poynter concentrated on this motion, willing the energy to spin them faster, faster, while squeezing Morgan to stop his breath.

Morgan had been shocked by the poet's newfound power, but was fast regaining his focus. His mouth slammed shut, hiding the glow, while the white slit at the centre of the Eye burned with a growing intensity. Poynter found his power being diverted from his limbs, so his eyes could counter Morgan's All-Seeing gaze. His grip was loosening, Morgan's breath was returning, as they spun together past the edge of the cliff. Poynter knew he had seconds. He must concentrate on the Eye, the All-Seeing Eye. What was the worst that could befall such an organ?

One of Morgan's hands released Poynter, and delved down to his belt. Forgetting the attempt to crush Morgan, Poynter released the Satanist so the pair twirled together in a moment of calm. They had reached their maximum height, way above West Hill. The

lights of Hastings drifted below, along with the splinters of the Castle. Even Bexhill was visible, away to the west. The rivals assessed each other for the next move. Slowly, they began sinking together, towards the wide, grassy ledge below. There was a slight wryness about Morgan, who was both appalled and impressed by this acolyte. He would leave the next move to Poynter.

The poet unfurled his fingers, with thumbs ready to strike, and lunged towards the Eye. As he did so, Morgan whipped a sliver of steel from his jacket. The curved fragment of the scanning disc glinted in the night, reflecting the seaside lights below. With unerring aim, Morgan thrust it through the cloth, then flesh, of Poynter's stomach. The jagged teeth of the ripped slots formed a serrated edge, which shredded organs with hideous ease. Morgan wrenched his weapon viciously, tearing Poynter's guts so blood sprayed into the air.

The light in Poynter's eyes faltered. But his thumbs found the All-Seeing Eye, and popped its outer membrane. The white slit fizzled into the sky, dissipating into nothing. It was followed by a flash of miasmatic flame that poured from the ruptured organ, breaking the charred edges into fragments. Morgan screamed an agonized, croaking roar. As he did, more flame poured from his mouth. Morgan was propelled backwards, ripping the metal shard free of Poynter.

As the pair separated, Poynter caught a glimpse of Morgan's head as the flame finally expired. A gaping hole in the forehead revealed it to be hollow, like a clay sculpture with only a void

within. Whirling on its trajectory, Morgan's body fell away from Poynter. It crashed into the electrical transformer behind the amusement arcade, still gripping the metal shard. There was a mighty bang, a flurry of high-voltage sparks, and the smell of acrid fumes.

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Poynter fell more gently to the grassy ledge, for his speed was moderated by the energy that remained. Already, it was flowing back into the etheric realm from where it had been drawn so unexpectedly. Poynter watched in fascination as the tenuous, fluttering shapes peeled from his body and floated away in the night. They quickly became invisible, like melting snowflakes. His body remained standing, somehow, but the effects of injury would soon overtake the miracle of his revival.

For a while, Poynter stood in the darkness of West Hill, looking out from the ledge to the murky vista of the coast. Still the sea hissed, and the wind rustled the shrubs of the lower slopes. The distant traffic rumbled, although the bleeping melodies from the arcade had been stilled by electrical failure. Nearby windows had fallen to darkness - but the farther lights still shone in the night, oblivious to the battle.

As he turned, Poynter once more looked up towards the crest of the cliff. It was a textured wall of shapes, combining shady hollows with formations of bulbous stone, and obscured by the

night into a grey impression of looming bulk. It had witnessed much in its time, but could hold its secrets.

The sky above was shining with the sea mist that had drifted in, emphasizing the silhouette of the cliff top, while the air grew increasingly cold. Feeling, too, the wound in his flesh, Poynter decided to head for refuge. Rather than descend to the coast road, he turned east towards the area with which he had some affinity: the Old Town.

Moving with a crouched, painful limp, Poynter took the rising path away from the coast, which curved further up the hill. He needed to go higher before descending, so trekked on with a fevered effort. Spots of semi-clotted blood lay on the path behind him, appearing deep purple in the night. His field of view was confined to greyish tones of land and sky, until the shrubbery to the south fell away to reveal the speckled lights of the Old Town. Poynter gasped, feeling the gurgle of blood in his mouth.

Somehow, the lights spurred him on. They sparkled through the intervening branches of bare winter trees, which marked the perimeter of the grassland before the hill gave way to the closest homes. Poynter lost sight of the lights for a moment as the path led north, heading up in what seemed an interminable stretch in Poynter's agonized state. Surely he should be wise - just collapse and die here - but still, Poynter carried on.

Then he knew why. The tower of a church became visible, illuminated an amber colour so it appeared to hover like a beacon in the drifting mist. In a flash, Poynter recalled his sight of

the tower way back in the spring, during his visit to the castle. Forgetting the path, Poynter struck out across the grass, his blood dropping invisibly between the shaggy, wild blades. The tower kept him locked on course. The ground started to dip, so the Old Town spread before him in a mass of huddled buildings interspersed with lights.

Poynter would have known his way by daylight, but these driven motions swept him on without heed. His feet hit another path, and he turned sharply to the right - grasping the handrail now as the path sloped down, a wall on one side, a mud bank on the other. Down the pavement he stumbled, reaching a sharp turn left where a mass of ivy cast a deep shadow beneath a welcome lamp. The mud bank was left behind as Poynter continued, with brick wall on either side. He struggled down a short flight of steps, then along the descending path, until more steps took him down to the street.

After a pause to regain his rasping breath, Poynter moved through the old houses, their windows glowing a warm yellow. A knock on any door might have gained him help, but Poynter felt an urge to go further still. After a couple of turns, he emerged beside another church - far closer than the tower, which lay beyond his reach. At the end of this particular terrace, the shops of the Old Town were displayed in all their prettiness. Curtains of tiny lights hung in the windows, in colours of gorgeous intensity, while tiny Christmas trees had been fixed at first floor level and lit by yellow bulbs.

Poynter beheld the scene - the church and the town - knowing how the old man, Mr. Amery-Beevers, would be somewhere behind a window. His home must be one of devotional warmth, thought Poynter, but where...*where* can I find him? Go to the house, be welcomed, perhaps healed.

Still the injury spouted blood, and the wish was quite impossible. Yet the comfort grew in Poynter's mind as he sank to his knees. The Christmas lights blurred in his vision, then merged with the shining beams that swirled to him from on high. *Heaven*, thought Poynter. That's what the old man would have said. He could not resist any more. Thus, the light came into his being and the town faded, and the body slumped away from him. It struck the hard but strangely welcoming ground, for Poynter was beyond physical pain.

Someone would come here soon. There would be a huddle, a phone call, then a siren with blue flashing lights. Even now, an old man was stirring with a sense of apprehension, despite the comfort of his home. Beevers stooped to pray for one who might be in peril, out in the winter's night. The answer he found, in his sensitive soul, was a wave of glorious relief.

Chapter Thirty-One

*Forever Lost*

THE DISPLAY OF FLOWERS did not indulge in grief. Rather, it added a touch of lightness to the recent headstone. A breeze rippled the blooms with a subtle motion, as if they were vibrant creatures keen to enjoy the sun. Instead, the flowers had been gathered into three small bunches, and placed across the width of the grave.

It had been kind of Mrs. Madeleine Twine to remember the anniversary. Her life in Richmond had its own preoccupations, with the needs of a demanding husband. Roland, the eternal critic, had never restricted his profession to the borders of English literature. His initial praise of Madeleine had brought early warmth to their coupling. But the role of the critic cut both ways, to acclaim and denounce.

She had been a wonder at The Enlightenment, prompting Roland to issue such positive remarks. Why, he had been knocked sideways! Now, Roland was prone to condemn the project that Madeleine had embarked upon. It had become a frequent distraction.

As the sun moved round, the flowers cast cool blue shadows on the solid grey stone. Paula no longer shared the name inscribed there in simple capital letters. No trumpeting angels or trumpeting bibles, as might befit a religious man. The directions had been modest, and held in trust by the Reverend Trevor Newton. He had been honoured to conduct the service, and lay the old man to rest. 'JAMES AMERY-BEEVERS. PASSED AWAY ONE SUMMER, AGED

EIGHTY-SIX YEARS. MISSED BY THOSE OF TOWN AND COUNTRY FOR HIS WISDOM AND GUIDANCE.'

Beevers had not wanted a summary of his vocation, or many escapades - although they had been mentioned after the service, with a gathering at Paula's home. Summer was a strange time for a funeral, perhaps, but put gothic fancy to flight. The warm air had penetrated the house, with the doors open to the small garden that Beevers had loved so much.

As she looked at the flowers for a few moments more, Paula thought back to that occasion. Duncan had been sullen, but could understand what had happened to his elderly relative. Doris, their faithful dog, had no such information - so Duncan had amused her in the garden with a rubber ring, whilst adult conversation transpired inside. The dog's mood had brightened, and rubbed off on the boy.

Edgar had been on fine form. He felt sensitive to grief, yet able to cast a sympathetic inspiration. Tales of his old friend had flowed after a glass or two of wine, delighting Paula's mother and parents from the local school. Once the crowd had reduced somewhat, with final words of condolence, Edgar had broached the more serious aspects. In this, he had a keen audience in Paula and her mother. Most of all, the man she had married in the aftermath of these events. Russell Saunders sat on the sofa, alongside his pretty wife.

"*The Parish Gathering...*" mused Edgar, in response to some earlier remark. "I have never read it in detail, for I did not

share that period with James. We met in Canterbury much later, when he took that sabbatical."

"How long ago was that?" asked Russell, with something of his professional manner. He was keen to know more of this back-story, and increase his understanding of the recent past.

"A good fifteen years," said Edgar. "Probably more. It was after James gave up his parish, before settling in Hastings. I suppose he had retired in a financial sense, but that curiosity was undiminished. He studied theology in the city, to improve his knowledge. Even met the Archbishop! But attention at that level is hard to come by. He was led to me, a Christian man of no denomination. A test of his reasoning, quickly a friend, and then...I suppose we were colleagues."

"I know a little," said Paula. "You spoke of the supernatural..."

"A series of conversations," nodded Edgar. "The Christian miracles, and the tale of an apparition witnessed in his parish. My own studies went further, of course."

Paula smiled gently, not wanting to broach the subject. Russell was mindful of her feelings, but knew Edgar was quite some authority. "Perhaps you could discuss it with me, Edgar. Another time. I want to put all this in perspective. We can never forget the trouble, when James served us so well." He glanced at Paula and, by proxy, his adopted son.

"We shouldn't forget it," said Paula, "but we don't talk about it much. It was a horrible business. That young man,

collapsing outside the church. James had met him a couple of times, I wouldn't say they were friends, but...he spoke of that Laurence with real compassion."

A shiver ran through Russell's nervous system, at the visual image conjured by these words. He had also known the man who had been killed by Morgan, in a final cliff-top encounter. The desperate Satanist had been found by the fire brigade, who had swiftly reached the scene. His body had been wedged inside the remains of an electrical sub-station, on the seafront slopes of West Hill. The injuries had befitted such a fall, although the coroner had mentioned one curious discovery. There had been some kind of burn or welt upon Morgan's forehead, in the form of a perfect triangle. Had it been sustained during the electrical accident at the cinema, or by impact during the fall? There had never been a definite conclusion.

Russell, in his mind, knew better. It was far too great a coincidence that the mark had been a triangle. For he knew, from the books which Morgan had lent him, that the shape was actually a pyramid. In its full manifestation, it should feature a single eye at its centre gazing upon the world. The All-Seeing Eye of a New World Order, through Morgan's New Order of the Golden Dawn.

At no time during these troubling events had Russell directly witnessed the paranormal. Maybe the mark was some kind of masochistic branding, inflicted by Morgan on his body as a form of dedication. Certainly, no answer was likely to come from Jacqueline - at least, no reliable one. She had been sectioned

under the Mental Health Act, and was currently held at a secure facility deep in the Sussex countryside.

On the one time Russell had gone there, to satisfy personal interests, he had been shocked by the figure he encountered. Jacqueline had hissed and gabbled within her padded cell, then seemed to sense Russell at the peep-hole. She had lunged like a bat, clawing with her broken nails. Few words had been distinguishable, but "*The boy...*" had made Russell draw back. He knew she had meant Duncan, of whom he was now a guardian. The images of that night were embedded in her mind, and would never leave her. Jacqueline would forever be lost in Poynter's scream and the phantom pictures on the screen. Most vividly of all, though, was the imprinted scene of her attack on Paula's home.

\* \* \* \* \*

TEXT

\* \* \* \* \*

There had been three deaths that night, and a woman driven mad. A difficult story for the police to unravel, even once they had raided the abandoned cinema. The Televisor had been removed for analysis and never seen again. Later, a statement explained how the old cables in the building had been faulty. This had apparently caused an electrical overload, leading to the death of

Dr. David Lester. Galvanized steel shutters had been placed across the entrances to the cinema, which remained empty following the ritual. Whilst knowledge of its notoriety was neither widespread nor publicly conceded, rumours and gossip pervaded the town and somehow repelled new users of the building. Perhaps it would thrive again, thought Russell, in some future time. Perhaps someday Duncan could sometime enjoy a film within, or perhaps a beer should its purpose vary.

Russell had many doubts about the whole affair, but who was there to tell the truth? Still - he would make it his task to investigate. Was he not partly responsible for the whole calamity, by aligning himself with Morgan's cult? In marrying Paula and moving to her home, Russell had acquired more than just a new family. There was the upstairs study of the old man, with notes and letters from the past. James and Edgar had shared a previous encounter with Morgan, involving the Bexhill Ouija boards. This had sewed the seeds of animosity. Russell hoped he could interview Edgar before he, too, became infirm. There had been no chance during the difficult period when Russell had courted Paula, while her great-uncle's health had faltered.

She had found him one morning, in his study, as if ready for another day. James had been wearing his dressing-gown, and seated in a wickerwork chair. A copy of *The Parish Gathering* lay before him. Just a glance at the old man's face - suddenly pale, yet at peace - had told her that James Amery-Beevers would read no more.

He had passed to another gathering, beyond any parish. Maybe he would meet the young poet again, and at last find mutual accord.

"Did James ever mention...a poetry book?" asked Edgar, placing his finished teacup in its saucer. "Laurence Poynter was a poet. A talented one. He had been creating this book for years."

"Poetry got him into trouble," murmured Russell. "I was at his recital, The...Perspective or something. We were most impressed. My friends - that is, you know who *they* were."

Paula hugged her husband softly. "Don't speak of them now, Russell. This is a day to remember James. But the poet had some connection. We had a letter from a girl called Madeleine, who knew Laurence up in London. Maybe you would like to read it, Edgar? It's up in the study..."

Chapter Thirty-Two

*The Contemplation*

So the colleague of James Amery-Beevers finally sat in the old man's chair. Edgar opened the letter carefully, mindful of its private value. However, it might shed light on the matter. 'Dear Mr. and Mrs. Saunders,' it began. Taken aback for a moment, Edgar realized how this referred to Paula and her new husband. The letter continued:

I was pleased to hear of your wedding announcement, and can only hope that your Uncle is not too ill to attend. At least it has brought him happiness, and your little boy too. Despite the final tragedy, I often wish I had come down to Hastings and met you all before. You were all so kind at Laurence's funeral, and I shall certainly try to make the wedding. Unfortunately, my own life here in Richmond has been somewhat tense. While I still care for Roland, most of the time, he has been a more demanding and opinionated husband than I had hoped for.

Of course, you know of my project - the compilation of Laurence's book, which I plan to publish eventually. Much of this involves sifting through notes, deciphering his handwriting, trying to make sense of it all. Some poems, I remember clearly from *The Enlightenment*, and they had been clearly transcribed by Laurence into the pocket notebook from which he recited them. The

later works are more confusing, particularly some of the pieces dating from his own 'Perception'.

You will understand, it can be disturbing to touch on these later works. They cast a mood of their own on the reader, and in some cases - where the text is hard to decipher - I have willed myself into Laurence's frame of mind, hoping I can divine the missing fragments. This has been quite successful, and my confidence has grown bolder. In some poems, I have added a word or two - even a couple of lines. Roland has complained of my altered moods, when I undertake this work. I can only say how important it is, and that Laurence would be very proud. Roland had his Circle Of Radical Verse, although it proved quite ineffective. Before Roland, there was only Laurence and myself. I can remember him in that gazebo of his, focused and intense. I can see how distracting I must have been, although I think he liked my company too.

There was a later time, during our trip to the coast, when we had a moment up on the cliff. It was alluded to in one of the poems, I think one of Laurence's best. He conveyed that sense of loss, of poor communication, when the words are never said. Roland was never much of an influence on Laurence, but there was one thing he said - just a phrase, which had stuck in Laurence's mind. It became the title of his poem, 'The Elusive Revelation'.

I know you will want to read it, but please bear with me in patience while I compile the rest of the book. This is the way Laurence wanted his work to be appreciated. If Roland does not like the time I spend, then Roland is the problem - not I.

Hope these flowers reach you in good condition. It is just a little posy, but easier to send by post. Please give me the name of a local florist, so I can instruct them to reach you each year. Please, no reciprocal arrangement is necessary. Laurence is at rest with nature - his mortal form, as they say. Buy some comics for your little son, tell him they were from me.

Well, the fountain pen runs dry. I know what a mess I make when I refill it, so I think I shall leave it there. I must wrap this posy, and get down to the post office. Roland and I are out tonight, at a publishers' function. Boring, boring - but maybe they do poetry books?

So - the best to you all, and the memory of Uncle James. I'm sure Duncan will know the story one day. He has a wonderful new stepfather to tell him.

In life and poetry,

*Madeleine Twine.*

Madeleine Twine, who had been Madeleine Quinn. Edgar read the letter again, more slowly, to absorb the inference of every word. If only James had engaged him at an earlier stage, when the poet had first arrived in town. Maybe they could have reached him, and imparted the knowledge to resist Mr. Albert Morgan.

Yet, there was a more hopeful strand to the finale. If Poynter had not confronted Morgan on the cliff-top, events would have gone even further. What terrors would have arisen from a

triumphant Morgan, reigning in satanic power? Perhaps fate, in its strange way, had groomed Mr. Laurence Poynter for that final encounter. At least James had kept an eye on the situation, right from their first meeting.

As to 'The Elusive Revelation'? Edgar cracked a wistful smile, based on his own experience. Old Laurence had been a romantic, deep, deep down. He must have loved Madeleine despite her troublesome visits, but never managed to tell her.

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The display of flowers did not indulge in grief. Neither did Mrs. Paula Saunders. She had followed Madeleine's pragmatic instruction, and a florist supplied the later posies. Each came with Madeleine's personal wishes, inscribed on a pretty little card. In time, the surname would revert to Quinn.

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During this period of mid-afternoon, Russell had taken Duncan up to East Hill where he loved to roam. With a respectful nod to the gravestone, Paula passed home and continued on to find them. Steps between curving, sandstone walls took her up from Tackleway, a row of colourful houses in blue, cream, even lilac, with the rooftops a habitat for moss. They faced the grassy bank, which rose at a steep gradient to the castellated structure on top.

It was late September, following a dry summer. Rain had finally returned the grass to its natural green, including the showers of the morning. Some of the wetness lingered, creating a lively sheen in the sun. Paula glanced back a short way up, before the path turned away from the sea. There was a sweeping sight of Hastings seafront, with the bulk of West Hill especially dominant. Its appearance was dark and sodden today, leaning back in disdain from the seafront below.

The fishing beach was closer, on the other side of the picket fence. This had always been a favourite of Paula and her son. Duncan had made a charming model at school, with folded paper boats and a beach of corrugated card. The thought only reminded her of her family, and she moved on. The steps turned away from the fence, which continued straight up the edge of the cliff.

Knowing of this little expedition, Paula had dressed smartly for the graveyard but without too much formality. Her dark skirt flapped in the wind, but the flat boots allowed solid progress. Higher, the scene was more expansive. The pier was a silhouette upon the sea, obscured by distance and a subtle mist. Sadly, the harsher elements had not been so flattering. Fire had ravaged the structure and destroyed its pavilions, leaving just spindly remains. Perhaps the pier would live again, or slowly crumble.

The sea was a succession of horizontal tones - greenish ripples upon grey close to, and a darker slate grey beyond. Even so, the horizon held brilliant slivers of light, cutting from east to west. The sun was an intermittent orb of brilliance: a white

disc that seemed to float upon clouds of grey, but actually shone through their ever-shifting density. For the time of day, it was noticeably further out to sea than at midsummer. It was just past equinox, and the days would shorten to winter. The same thing happened, every year. Each time, Paula's thoughts would inescapably return to that woman Jacqueline, and how Uncle James had tackled the devilish cult.

Each short flight of steps led to flat paving, before rising a little more. The steps soon began to turn right again, while the western turret of the mock castle bobbed above the leaves. Unseen to Paula, the cliff lift had just completed its upward journey - something she detected by chattering, foreign voices.

The fence at the top overlooked the town, not far from the cliff lift. Paula paused before the visitors reached her. It was a true bird's eye view of the Old Town, for she stood higher than the gulls wheeling above the rooftops. The line of light upon the horizon had shifted inshore, painting stripes of a dazzling silver opalescence on the area of rippling grey.

It was a beautiful sight, thought Paula. Hastings could be bleak at times, then transformed in wondrous moments. Real sunbeams cut through the grey clouds - not the yellow beams of a child's painting, but soft and silver like those within a quiet church.

Paula wanted to find Duncan and her husband. Yet the vista held her for moments more. A wave of warmth struck her forehead as the sun became less restrained - the cloud turning patchy, then

breaking like cotton wool to show patches of pure blue. The rooftop moss became luminous green with the effects of this solar generosity.

The little houses were like toys Paula had as a child: each a simple block of wood, with printed windows and triangular roofs. She had loved to arrange them in little villages, or end-to-end like a street. It would be a lucky child indeed who could create this vista: dozens of little wooden blocks, to depict the walls, rooftops, chimneys and gables that made up the Old Town. Even West Hill, now, was touched by a glance of light. Its sandstone was lightening, and less brutal. The pale yellow highlights stood sharp against deep brown shadows.

The magic passed in a while, as the sky cast over again. But the pastel shades were still pleasing in a softer, more subtle way. It was as if the town had smiled at her, on this day of remembered sadness.

A couple of girls came over in red and green cagoules, chatting away in German. Paula had seen the best of the view, and relinquished her prime spot. Up she went a few more steps, until they fanned out in a concentric fashion and gave way to grass.

A beacon stood as if ready to warn of invasion, although its use was confined to festivals. It had a rusty crown of metal upon a thick, square trunk of wood. Hastings Country Park stretched along the coast, to Fairlight Cove in the east.

As Paula walked across the grass, the Old Town was lost from sight. West and East Hill stood opposite in an illusion of former

wildness. Only the highest homes topped the far crest, against the sky. The beacon fell away behind her, to match the length of the distant pier. Their extremities seemed to touch, like the hands of a clock at nine. The beacon shrank some more, making a brief cross with the pier - the way two sticks might be crossed before a vampire. Another echo of Jacqueline, but Paula shook the thought away.

The westward shore was a wriggly line that rose like a figure '2'. It met the pale, curved mound of the Downs beyond Eastbourne. Their broken edge provided the white, chalk cliffs currently lost in haze, where Poynter's most sensitive moment had been found.

Turning, Paula concentrated on her route through patches of shrubbery. There was a mass of bracken to her right, on the edge of the cliff - deep green, if brown and crumbling in places. Such was the way it would turn, through autumn. Ahead, past the open grassland, another knob of land appeared. It rose above the foreground hedges. The sun was brighter there, so the grass evoked a savannah. Paula stepped carefully down a short bank, then through a gap between rippling bracken. She emerged onto a clearing, with a stunning vista beyond.

The knob of land had been sliced in half, or eroded, so its southern end was a steep cliff of orange-brown sandstone. This was like a wall or buttress, above a zigzag beach of similar colour and edged by foaming surf. The ravine was filled with vegetation, in a rich encrusted mass of green and speckles of autumnal red.

The open sea appeared turquoise, with a pinkish daub provided by submerged sand. The sun ignited the nearby fronds of bracken into waving flags of green.

A vast white cloud hung above the land, almost solid in its curvaceous bulk. Its base was hardly less straight than the horizon, topped by scooped hills of white and silver-grey. The elements, in their stark richness, had the vivid detail of a Salvador Dali painting.

An artist might include figures, so Paula was not surprised to see a running form. For a second, she was struck with a strange emotion: of a moment known to her, but forever unseen. Her husband Warren, who had run through the country park and succumbed to the pressures of his heart.

It was Warren, she thought. How could it be? Then Paula realized who she could see. It was Duncan, of course. At a distance, he had almost *become* Warren. Paula gasped at the likeness struck by her son, and another decisive factor.

Something had changed. She had not been reminded of Warren till now, despite previous sad trips to the park. Maybe she had moved on, with her new husband. Warren had offered his approval in the shifting weather. The subtle mixture of sun and shadow, promising warmth but respecting grief.

Warren had died at another season of the year, so today was no time to mourn. Paula could see Russell now, rising against the shrubbery that crammed the ravine. A lively shape moved beside him. Their little dog Doris, no less.

Why did Russell did not react to her? He made no sign of greeting. Then Paula realized how the sun was behind her, so she would appear as a dark outline or merge with the scenery.

"Russell!" cried Paula, with a gleeful smile. Russell waved in recognition, and she moved faster over the grass. By now, Duncan had noticed his mother, and began running towards her. The dog barked playfully in the breeze, as she always had.

Perhaps she could remember Mr. Laurence Poynter.

THE END