



PAX BRITANNIA

CHRISTMAS PAST

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~ **December 1997** ~

I – WHOM THE GODS WOULD DESTROY

The atmosphere within the doctor's study was one of quiet, studious application, the only sounds the crackling of the fire in the grate, the scratching of the pen across the sheet of headed notepaper he had placed on his blotter, and the deathly ticking of the clock as it marked the man's last moments on this earth.

The pre-printed heading on the top of the crisp sheet of vellum notepaper read:

Dr Lockwood Lacey, Doctor of Psychiatry

Beneath it the doctor had written the date – 1st December 1997 – and then, in a meticulous hand, had proceeded to set down his written confession.

It was snug within the study: the curtains had been drawn against the encroaching night outside and the doctor had ensured that he had locked the door before he set about his night's business.

He put down his pen and, having re-read the last paragraph of the letter, took up the bundle of crumpled papers again. Shuffling through them one by one he read each again in turn. It did not take him long. Each was a letter, written on significantly poorer quality paper, torn from a child's jotter. Each was written in bright crayon colours, in the same childish hand, was decorated with simplistic illustrations, and each began in just the same way:

Dear Farthr Krissmus

There were thirty-seven of them in total.

With a sigh the doctor put them back on the desk, shuffling the papers together into a neat pile as he did so. Taking off his glasses he rubbed at his eyes. He felt tired, exhausted in fact. He hadn't slept for days; but he would have his rest soon enough.

Replacing his glasses, he re-read the last paragraph of his own letter. Taking up his pen once more he signed his name with a flourish, and then carefully replaced the lid. He folded the sheet of notepaper and slipped it into the envelope that he had addressed before commencing his act of confession and, licking the gummed strip, sealed it. Having tidied the other papers on his desk, the doctor laid the envelope carefully on top of the small pile in his out tray, his eyes alighting on the name of the addressee once more: The Reverend L. G. Havelock.

Calmly, the doctor rose from his chair, took off his shoes and padded across the carpeted floor of the study, the black dog that no-one else could see but which he knew was there – that was always there – trotting at his side. He stopped before the chair, which he had already had the forethought to place under the light fitting in the middle of the room.

Climbing onto the chair he slipped the noose over his head – the noose that he had also seen fit to prepare before he commenced on the rest of his endeavour, while his mind was still clear, his resolve firm. Kicking the chair away from under him, the doctor hanged himself.

A choking gargling sound disturbed the peace of the room, the spasming body sending jerking shadows dancing about the study in the flickering firelight.

And the black dog wagged its tail in approval.

II – THE DEAD OF JERICHO

Night fell as the Sunday faithful attended evensong, and with it, the first snows of winter drifted down upon the dreaming spires of Oxford. Feathery flakes descended right across the city from the blanket of clouds above.

The snow fell on the streets of Jericho, and the red-brick homes of the employees of the Oxford University Press, as much as it fell on the domiciles of dons and scholars, swirls of white confetti spiralling down between the terraces to form fractal icing sugar patterns on the roofs and roads and pavements.

But such beauty went unappreciated by Noah Hackett who, in his rotgut-induced alcoholic stupor was, for the time being, only concerned with finding a place to sleep. The snow only made things worse. Tonight it would be both cold *and* wet.

The prospect of sleeping rough on the streets of Oxford, amidst all the wealth and splendour of the complacent colleges, even among the less than salubrious warren of streets of Jericho, was never a pleasant one. But the knowledge that the cold and damp would leech what little warmth the last bottle of cheap gin had left in his bones, only made it seem all the more unappealing.

But he knew Jericho well – it was a favoured haunt of his, the memories of better days dragging him back to the area time after time, and there were always the boathouses and lock-ups down by the canal that were worth trying before hunkering down to wait out the night, the snow and the inevitable hangover.

He turned onto Canal Street, hoping to find an appropriately unlocked coach house in which to shelter. It was then that he heard the jingling sound for the first

time, although in the drunken haze through which he lived much of his life these days he barely registered it.

The sound provoked in him nothing more than mild amusement, and into his mind, blown like the whirling inconstant snow, came memories of childhood Christmases, twee carol-rhymes rising from his subconscious like the bubbles in a glass of champagne. Not that he got to drink champagne these days.

There was nothing worth celebrating nowadays; it was enough for him that he managed to beg enough pennies from the guilty worthies of the city to furnish himself with another bottle of cheap gin and a bull scrotum pie, if he was lucky.

The tramp stumbled on along Canal Street, pulling the layers of scavenged shirts, cardigans, waistcoats and his heavy coat closer about him. He tugged his woollen cap down tight over his ears and for once was glad of his lice-ridden beard, which helped keep his face warm under its week's accumulation of grime.

Jingle-jingle.

There it was again, the tinkling of Christmas bells.

Noah trudged on through the slushy first fall.

Jingle-jingle.

And again.

This time the tramp turned. He peered through the snow and the night, and his own ever-present alcoholic fog, and glimpsed movement in a patch of shadow beyond the pool of light of the nearest guttering streetlamp. Something crimson swirled in the light escaping from a first floor window of one of the houses.

Jingle-jingle.

And then it was gone.

Confused by what he had seen and heard, but more irritated at still having nowhere to sleep, the tramp

continued on his stumbling way, grumbling to himself through his beard.

Reaching the entrance to one of the alleyways that ran down to the Oxford Canal, Noah ducked into it, fervently hoping to give whoever it was that was following him the slip. He had had enough of the police harassing him and of the do-gooders from the Temperance Society sticking their interfering noses into his private business.

Untended weeds clogged the alleyway, poking out from underneath the ill-fitting doors of lock-ups and boathouses. Surely there had to be somewhere suitable round here?

Rattling the doors of the padlocked outhouses, Noah was only dimly aware of the footsteps approaching him. The renewed jingling, however, was enough to alert him to the presence of the stranger behind him.

He shuffled close to the red-brick structure to his right. He had learnt long ago that it was sometimes best just to blend into the background and not draw attention to oneself, especially when you were creeping round behind people's houses. Accusations of theft and trespass sat all too easily on the shoulders of a vagrant, as far as the authorities were concerned.

The thumping footfalls came nearer.

Jingle-jingle.

Noah froze, his weak heart suddenly racing with fretful apprehension. But still he turned round, to see who was following him.

A huge shadow stepped out of the night and into the middle of the alleyway in front of him and stopped abruptly. Noah's gasp of alarm surprised even himself. Cowering before the figure, he peered up into the hood of the crimson cloak that was pulled up over the stranger's head.

He half-expected to see a jolly, rosy-cheeked face with a bushy white beard. The bifurcated brutish face he saw there instead turned his guts to ice-water colder than the snow, and caused him to blurt out another blubbing cry of dismayed disbelief.

“You?” he gasped, recognition coming to him, despite the mind-fogging effects of the gin.

There was a sudden flurry of movement that sent eddying snowflakes spinning into the air, the reflected flash of the streetlamp on finely-honed steel and Noah gasped again as the air was forced from his body by a crippling punch to the stomach.

The figure pulled back. Noah’s gaze was drawn to the fist with which the savage blow had been delivered. Four claw-like appendages glistened wetly, speckles of holly-red dripping onto the ground amidst the smattering of snow.

Noah instinctively put a hand to his belly. It came away painted red. In a state of shock the tramp found himself thinking how hot his lifeblood was, when he himself felt so cold.

With a feral wail of its own the red-cloaked figure moved in again with the gutting blades, and the jingling of Christmas bells accompanied the chorus of savage howls and agonised screams that suddenly filled the winter’s night.

And all the time the snow fell.

III – THE BODY IN THE LIBRARY

“Not another one,” Chief Inspector Thaw muttered grumpily.

“I’m afraid so, sir,” his loyal sidekick Detective Sergeant Whately replied, holding the door for his superior to enter the archive ahead of him.

There, between the rows and rows of shelves lay the crumpled body of the Chief Librarian. From his posture and the rigour-set expression on his face, the Chief Inspector could have believed that Everett Willoughby was only sleeping, if it hadn’t been for the blood-sodden mass of papers and irreplaceable archive documents on which he was lying.

The air of the archive was redolent with the smell of old books, mildew and the bitter-iron aroma of blood, and there was lots of it.

“Dear God,” Thaw uttered in dismay.

“Ah, you’re here at last, Chief Inspector,” a young woman wearing blood-stained white coveralls said, rising from where she had been crouched beside the corpse.

“And good morning to you too, Doctor Lavish,” Thaw replied, absentmindedly combing a hand through the swirls of white-grey hair on his head, in the presence of the attractive younger woman. “You’re looking radiant as ever, if I might be permitted to say so?”

“Well compared to our friend the Chief Librarian here, I suppose I am,” she smirked, looking down at the dead man’s puffy, fish-white face. His eyes were sunken within blotchy purpling hollows.

“Is it our killer?” Thaw asked, returning to the matter in hand.

“That’s for you to find out, isn’t it Chief Inspector?”

Doctor Lavish said, a twinkle in her eyes.

“Well, yes. Of course, but —”

“But if you mean, is it the same M.O., then yes. Knifed in the stomach with what looks like a fistful of kitchen knives. He was stabbed multiple times. Position and pattern of the wounds suggest that the victim was struck repeatedly with an instrument made up of several long blades.”

“You’re sure, doctor?”

“Either that, or our killer took the time to meticulously measure the space between each stab wound before administering the next.”

The Chief Inspector expressed his irritation by breathing out loudly through his nose. “Point taken.”

He turned to his Detective Sergeant. “First it was Higgins, wealthy banker, out for a walk with his dog along Brewer Street, two nights ago. And now this poor bugger.”

“Yes, sir,” Whately confirmed.

“Two men, two murders, two nights. But what was it that connected the victims? Why were they the targets that our killer chose?”

There was the creak and bang of a door opening and closing, accompanied by the *tap-tap-tap* of footsteps on the polished archive floor.

“And what have we here?” came a cheery voice from behind the Chief Inspector. Thaw turned and came face-to-face with a smartly-dressed man, in his mid-to-late thirties judging by the streaks of grey present at the temples of his thick head of hair. He was handsome, with a well-defined jaw-line, and tall, and the Chief Inspector could see that beneath his long coat and tweed suit he had the physique of an athlete. Behind him, at his shoulder, stood an older man, dressed in the traditional attire of

a butler. He was tall like his master and broad across the shoulders, his grey hair swept back from a clearly-defined widow's peak

"Who the bloody hell are you?" Chief Inspector Thaw demanded.

The interloper fixed the policeman with sparkling brown eyes and grinned. "Ulysses Quicksilver, at your service," he said, holding out a black-gloved hand. "You might have heard of me."

"Might I?" the Chief Inspector returned. "Should I have heard of him, Whately?"

"Oh yes, sir," the Detective Sergeant blurted excitedly. "Mr Quicksilver saved her Majesty's life, sir, during the Wormwood Debacle. Don't you remember?"

The Chief Inspector muttered something as undoubtedly unflattering as it was unintelligible.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir," the Detective Sergeant said, with all the enthusiasm of an over-excited puppy, taking the proffered handshake where his superior had not.

"Thank you...?"

"Whately. Detective Sergeant Whately."

"Sergeant Whately. A pleasure!"

"Who let you in here anyway?" Thaw snapped.

"Does that matter? I'm here now, and I'm here to help."

"What brings you to Oxford, Mr Quicksilver?" Whately asked, patently awestruck finding himself in the presence of a genuine Hero of the Empire.

"Looking up an old friend," Quicksilver replied. "Or at least I will be when we're done here. Saw all the commotion in the street as we were driving over to Boriel."

"Well, you'll be pleased to hear that we are all done here," the Chief Inspector declared. "Isn't that right,

doctor?"

"Yes, Chief Inspector. It's over to you now."

"So thank you for the offer of your help, but we won't need to keep you from renewing your old acquaintance after all."

"What happened to the poor fellow?" Quicksilver pressed, craning to peer past the Chief Inspector at the body lying between the stacks. "Stabbed was he?"

"Yes," Whately replied helpfully, "several times. Just like the other one."

"The other one?"

"Whately!" the irascible Thaw growled.

"Sorry, sir." The Detective Sergeant turned an embarrassed shade of beetroot.

"So, Mr Quicksilver, as we like to say in the Force, there really is nothing to see here. We have everything under control."

"Oh, I'm sure you do, Inspector."

"That's *Chief* Inspector."

"Oh, I *do* beg your pardon, *Chief* Inspector. We wouldn't want to be getting in your way now would we, Nimrod?"

"Indeed not, sir," the dandy's manservant replied in a tone that matched the severity of his expression of aloof disdain as he regarded the two policemen with a stony, sapphire gaze.

"But if you would like my help at all, I'll be in Oxford for the rest of the day, so don't hesitate to get in touch."

He pulled a leather wallet from a jacket pocket and from that extracted a printed calling card, passing it to the still-grinning Sergeant.

"Thank you for your time, *Chief* Inspector. Merry Christmas."

And with that he turned, and left the library.



“Nimrod, I do believe we have tarried here long enough,” Ulysses Quicksilver announced as he and his manservant left the crime scene that the Bodleian Library had become. “I rather feel we’ve kept old Monty waiting far too long already.”

“Very good, sir,” Nimrod replied matter-of-factly. “Would you like to take the car, sir?”

The two of them ducked under the police line at the arched entrance to the Bodleian Square and turned left, making for where Nimrod had parked the Mark IV Silver Phantom at the entrance to Catte Street.

“Let’s leave the car,” Ulysses said, buttoning his coat against the cold. “A walk in this bracing air will help clear the remains of last night’s excesses from my head, I hope.”

“Very good, sir.”

A young woman, wearing a woollen beret and full-length coat against the cold, emerged from the throng of curious onlookers collected outside the Bodleian and hurried to intercept them.

“Mr Quicksilver?” she called.

“Who wants to know?” was Ulysses’ sharp rebuttal.

“Lucy Gudrun, *Oxford Echo*. What is that brings you to Oxford on Christmas Eve, when only last night you were seen gallivanting at Lord and Lady Rothschild’s Christmas Ball?” The young woman suddenly seemed very confident as to Ulysses’ identity.

“Personal business.”

“And would that same personal business include the investigation of the Christmas Killings?”

Ulysses’ carefully-composed grimace of passive indifference slipped and he turned to look at the girl directly. “Killings plural, you say?”

He was caught by her obvious attractiveness, which she seemed at pains to cover up. But even without the application of any obvious make-up, her cheeks still had an appealing rosy glow and her rosebud lips were none the less appealing.

“Everett Willoughby’s death is the second in as many days that match the same M.O. within the city.”

“How do you know...?” Ulysses broke off. He wasn’t that naive. His comment had been a knee jerk reaction. He knew how the press worked. They always ‘had their sources’.

“I have my sources,” the young woman said with a mixture of smugness and pride.

“I knew you were going to say that,” Ulysses said raising a wry eyebrow. She was young and eager, barely into her twenties, if he was any judge, and he was. “Look, Miss Gudrun, I have tarried too long already and have places I need to be, as I’m sure do you. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

“Just one comment for the *Oxford Echo*?” the plucky reporter pressed, tireless in her efforts.

Ulysses stopped. “Alright, here’s a comment for you. *No comment!*” With that he turned on his heel and strode on his way.

“Can I have a comment from you, sir?” the young woman asked, thrusting the hand-held recorder under Nimrod’s nose before he even had a chance to follow his master. The young woman almost wilted under his withering sapphire stare.

“Good day, Miss Gudrun,” he intoned sonorously, but the look in his eyes said so much more, and none of it pleasant.

She watched them leave.

Lucy Gudrun knew a good story when she stumbled

on one, like a chalk-outlined body on the floor of the Bodleian library, but she also knew when she was pushing her luck and when to admit defeat. Besides, she might have lost this particular battle, but she hadn't lost the war. Not yet.

She turned back to the Great Gate that led from Cattle Street into the School's quadrangle and from there into the Bodleian itself. She was just in time to see the curmudgeonly Chief Inspector Thaw and his sidekick Sergeant Whately emerge from beneath the stone gateway and cross the police line.

Ensuring that her hand-held recorder was still running, she trotted towards the pair of policemen. "Chief Inspector!" she shouted. "A word for the *Oxford Echo*?"

IV – THE DAMOCLES CLUB

He knew that something was wrong before the porter even opened the door to the old man's rooms. It was the smell. The iron-rich tang of blood at the back of his throat again, the rancid ammonia smell of voided bowels, the unpleasant and wholly unmistakable smell of death.

"Bloody 'ell!" the porter swore, his hand slipping from the doorknob as he stood there dumbfounded, the door swinging open to reveal the scene of devastation and death beyond.

"Monty!" Ulysses Quicksilver gasped, pushing past the porter – his bowler hat held tight in his shaking hands now – and into the room.

It had obviously been a mess to begin with. A proliferation of books and manuscripts, along with empty tea cups, half-eaten plates of food, and the skull of an Australopithecus, were scattered over desks and bookcases. The half-expected scholarly clutter of an absent-minded professor even littered the tops of glass-fronted cabinets containing stuffed animals and Neolithic tools, cracked leather chairs, and the Persian rugs on the floor as well. The attack on Professor Montgomery Summerson, had obviously left the study in an even greater state of chaos and confusion.

Ulysses stood there, amidst the disorder and disarray, staring down at the cold carcass of his old tutor. Honeyed sunlight pierced the leadlights of the room's windows, revealing the full horror of the scene in intense, sun-washed colours, predominantly red.

Summerson had called him at home only the evening before, but Ulysses had been out on the town, enjoying the company of tipsy and compliant young socialites

at the Rothschild's Christmas Ball, held at his Lordship's Gunnersbury Park estate, west of the capital. Ulysses had missed the call then and hadn't even been aware of it until Nimrod woke him that morning, having checked the calls logged to the house the night before.

"I should have come sooner," he said, his voice barely more than a whisper of regret.

"You were out, sir," Nimrod replied. "You weren't to know that Professor Summerson would call. After all, you have not heard from him in some time."

"I know, but if hadn't been out gallivanting about the place, like the self-indulgent idiot I was in my youth, I wouldn't have missed his call."

"You've had a lot on your mind, sir."

Ulysses swore under his breath. "He was onto something, Nimrod," he said, nudging a pile of papers at his foot. "He wanted my help and because I wasn't there for him he's dead."

Ulysses looked at the body again. It was a mess. He didn't need to be a coroner to pronounce the cause of death. He had been knifed like Willoughby the librarian. His face had been carved up by four slashing knife strokes, while his shirt had been turned wholly red by his own blood.

Ulysses knelt down beside the body. Summerson had died in agony, his body curled into an agonised question mark, as if in death every part of him had wanted to know why he had to die in this manner. As far as Ulysses could tell, he had bled to death, having been stabbed so many times that the blood-sodden fabric of his clothes now lay in tatters over the mangled meat of his chest.

There was blood on his face, on his chest, his arms, blood had pooled on the floor around him, soaking fallen papers, the threadbare Persian rug on which he

lay, contorted in his death-agonies, it covered his hands... Only it didn't. Ulysses paused and looked more closely.

The dead man only had blood on the ringed claw of his right hand, and no signs of any wounds there. The hand was stretched out from the professor's body, his fingers partially obscured by a bloodied document that must have fallen across him as he lay dying on the floor of his study.

Suddenly aware of the rapid beating of his heart, caged within his chest, carefully Ulysses moved the papers aside. His breath caught in his throat. There, formed of bloody finger-strokes, was one semi-congealed word: *Damocles*.

Monty Summerson had sent Ulysses a final message, written in his own blood.

"I-I'd better call the-the police," the porter stammered, backing out of the room, leaving the door open behind him.

"Just give us half an hour," Ulysses said, without looking at the man, but flashing him the contents of his leather card-holder again just in case he needed reminding who's authority they were working under.

For a moment neither Ulysses nor Nimrod moved. Neither of them said anything, the only sound that broke the stillness of the study the insistent ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece on the other side of the room.

As Ulysses continued to take in every detail of the murder scene, a shadow fell across him from the doorway to the study behind him.

He heard a startled gasp and turned.

In a moment the young woman had composed herself again. "Perhaps you would like to make a comment now, Mr Quicksilver," Lucy Gudrun suggested, recording device pointing towards him.



“Anything that has the name Damocles on it. Anything that might give us any kind of a clue. Anything at all.” Ulysses said, frustrated at his own failure to so far discover what it was that his former tutor had been trying to tell him through his last, dying act.

Heedless to what Chief Inspector Thaw might have to say about them disturbing a crime scene, Nimrod set about bringing some semblance of order back to the professor’s study – although he made sure that he left the body just as it was – so that Ulysses’ search for clues might be made all the easier, while the reporter began going through the papers on the dead man’s desk.

Ulysses had taken the attitude that her arrival at Boriel College, having obviously followed them from the Bodleian, had been opportune. She obviously already had a handle on what was going on, and she had seen too much of the scene of Summerson’s murder already to be fobbed off, and so he had decided to treat her presence as an asset rather than a hindrance. He had put her to work, promising her the scoop of her career as he set about solving the Christmas Killings. She was tough too, not seeming to mind that the professor’s body was still there in the room.

And yet, here they were, with the half hour’s grace granted them by the porter almost up, half-expecting the police to turn up at any moment, and still without any answers.

“Here, take a look at this!” Lucy suddenly piped up. Ulysses joined her at the professor’s desk. She was poring over a pile of newspapers, among them copies of the *Oxford Echo*. Ulysses peered over her shoulder to see what it was that had caused her outburst.

She had a copy of *The Times* in front of her, folded so

as to expose the obituaries page. Circled in red pen was the obituary of Dr Lockwood Lacey, doctor of psychiatry. Ulysses scanned the piece.

“Fifty-seven years old... worked at the Saint Ophelia Sanatorium for the Mentally Infirm,” he read. “Very interesting, but what does this have to do with Damocles, or the other killings, for that matter?”

“Well, your professor friend circled it for a reason and then there’s this.” She moved the paper to reveal another, with another article circled, this time reporting the murder of one Aloysius Higgins, a banker. “This one just made yesterday’s *Echo*.”

“When’s the obituary from?”

“The eighth of December. It says Lacey died on the first of December.”

“And when did Higgins die?”

“The night of the twenty-second.”

“So how does this one fit in?” Ulysses asked, lifting another folded newspaper from a pile of books on a chair beside him and placing it on the desk. In this case, Summerson appeared to have circled a few lines at the bottom of an inside page of the local paper, that reported the killing of a tramp well-known in the Jericho area, who went by the name of Noah.

“That’s news to me,” Lucy admitted. “When did that happen?”

“On...” Ulysses paused, searching for a date at the top of the page. “On the twenty-first. Sunday night.”

“And then the Chief Librarian was killed last night, which was the twenty-third,” Lucy pondered, gazing thoughtfully into the middle distance.

“Along with Summerson. So, what could possibly connect the Professor of Social Anthropology, the Chief Librarian of the Bodleian, a successful banker, and a

homeless tramp?”

“You think something does connect them then?”

“Well, apart from the manner of their deaths? It seems likely, doesn’t it to you?”

“Well yes, but a couple of academics, a banker and a tramp?”

“And let’s not forget the suicidal doctor of psychiatry.” Ulysses’ face twisted into a knot of concentration. “Physician, heal thyself,” he said quietly to himself.

“Excuse me, sir,” Nimrod said interrupting his master’s musings, “but I think this might be of interest.” He was holding up a framed photograph. The glass was cracked right across the middle, no doubt having been damaged at the same time that Summerson was attacked.

Ulysses crossed the room in a series of excited, leaping strides. “Good show, old chap!”

The photograph showed seven young men, undoubtedly undergraduates, by their dress and apparent age. The picture had been taken within the Boriel College quad. Although the pose was formal, their attitude was anything but. All of them were wearing expressions of smug arrogance or feigned aloof indifference.

“Obnoxious arrogant bastards, convinced of their own superiority over the rest of the human race the lot of them,” Ulysses muttered under his breath.

“I couldn’t possibly comment, sir,” was Nimrod’s tactful reply, his gaze lingering on Ulysses.

The sepia-tint photograph was mounted within a card frame, at the bottom of which had been written, in an exaggerated Gothic hand:

*The Damocles Club, Michaelmas Term,
1960.*

Underneath that were recorded the names of the individuals in the picture.

“Well, there are a few familiar names here,” he stated with glee. Her reporter’s sense of curiosity piqued, Lucy rose from her place behind the desk and joined the two men in their inspection of the image. “There’s Higgins, the banker, second from the left, and L. Lacey next to him, the suicidal doctor. Two along from him again is poor old Monty, of all people, and next to him, second from the right, is Willoughby.”

“You think this is the connection then?” Lucy asked.

“Well, considering that we have the word ‘Damocles’ written over there on the floor in Monty’s blood, and three of the men from this photograph have been murdered within as many days, I can hardly see how it can be anything other,” Ulysses declared.

“It’s four, actually,” Lucy said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Four men from that list have been found dead since Monday morning.”

“Really?”

“If you include old Noah. N. Hackett?”

“Of course!” Ulysses exclaimed, flashing the girl a delighted smile. “The tramp! Oh how the mighty have fallen.”

He turned back to the photograph.

“So, one dead by his own hand. Four dead by the hand of another in the last three nights. That just leaves two names on this list, neither of which mean anything to me. But we have to find them, that is most imperative.”

“You think they are in danger, sir?” Nimrod asked.

“Indeed I do. One of them could even be our killer. Either way, we have to find them as quickly as possible. Which is where you come in, Miss Gudrun.”

“It is?” the young woman met Ulysses intense gaze.

“Indeed it is! I want you to use the immense resources of that local rag you work for to find out who S. Fitzmaurice and V. Ashton-Griffiths are and where they might be found. I have a feeling that it will be somewhere not a million miles from here.”

“Very well, but what’s in it for me?”

Ulysses’ look of childish excitement darkened to become one of bitter disdain. Reporters the world over; they were all the same.

“Do this, for me,” he said, “and I’ll give you the exclusive of your career. I’ll hand you Oxford’s Christmas Killer on a platter.”

V – SLAY BELLS

“Mr Fitzmaurice?” Ulysses tried, as he entered the fusty darkness of the glasshouse. “Saintjohn Fitzmaurice?” he called a little louder. Eyes straining to see anything through the failing twilight, his manservant cautiously followed him into the building.

The place seemed to be entirely deserted – there wasn’t a light on anywhere – but that didn’t put pay to the uncomfortable feeling Ulysses’ had, like a persistent itch on the inside of his skull, that something wasn’t right. There was danger here.

It had been several hours since they had made their hasty exit from the Professor’s study, leaving as Chief Inspector Thaw and his attendant officers were making their way into Boriel College by the Longwall Street entrance.

As the reporter returned to the *Oxford Echo*’s newsroom and its difference engine database, Ulysses and Nimrod retired to the backroom of the Turf Tavern, Ulysses muttering something about the hair of the dog that had bitten him the night before.

In time, Lucy’s scouring of her Babbage engine’s reader screen had come up trumps and she had contacted Ulysses, furnishing him with the current whereabouts of Saintjohn Fitzmaurice, formerly of the Damocles Club, now Director of Oxford’s Botanic Gardens.

“Mr Fitzmaurice!” Ulysses called again into the gathering gloom between the potted plants, louder this time.

Still no reply.

They had tried the man’s home already, only to be told by his housekeeper that he had left earlier that evening

in a state of high dudgeon, having taken a handwritten missive at the door, saying something about having to go back to the Gardens.

Ulysses edged forwards slowly. The insistent subconscious scratching on the inside of his skull grew in intensity. Was Fitzmaurice waiting for them, just around the corner, garden fork in hand, ready to do them in? Or had the killer struck already, and the Director was, right now, lying dead, half buried in a compost heap somewhere?

And then Ulysses heard the incongruous sound for the first time, the jingling of bells.

“Come on, Nimrod!” he hissed. “This way!”

And then the two of them were running through the glasshouse. Ahead of them the insistent jingle-jingle of the bells continued, leading them on.

Ulysses reached a glazed divide and pushed through the unlatched door swinging on its hinges, almost tripping over the body lying in the darkness between the trestles of the potting shed.

Ulysses guessed that the figure curled in an expanding pool of his own blood, that glistened black in the darkness, was Saintjohn Fitzmaurice, but there wasn't time to stop and check.

The body groaned weakly.

“Nimrod, stay with him,” Ulysses instructed his manservant, hopping over the fatally wounded man and charging on his way in pursuit of the bells.

There was a cacophonous crash of breaking glass and splintering glazing struts from the far end of the glasshouse. Ulysses ran on.

He emerged from the end of the glasshouse through the wreck of another glazed door that it looked like his quarry had run straight through without bothering to

open, into the oily darkness of the formal gardens.

He ran on, between carefully-manicured black lawns, along gravel paths, always chasing the steady jingle of the Christmas bells. Sleigh bells.

Shrubs and the dark skeletal shapes of trees loomed ahead of him. There was a change in the rhythm of the jingling, as if, Ulysses imagined, the killer had taken a running jump at the walled boundary of the Gardens. A moment later he heard the thud of someone landing heavily in the street on the other side.

He reached the wall himself only a matter of moments later. Using his unnaturally muscled left arm in particular to help with his ascent, Ulysses pulled himself to the top of the wall that marked the western boundary of the Botanic Gardens.

He peered down into the poorly-lit lane beyond. He couldn't see anybody, either running up or down the road, and, he now realised after his own desperate scramble up the wall, he couldn't hear anything in the way of pounding footfalls or jingling sleigh bells either.

A hissed expletive escaped Ulysses' gritted teeth. They had been so close. If only they had got there sooner, he might have had the Christmas Killer in his clutches right at that very moment. Instead he was no closer to catching the murderer of his old friend and tutor, and all those other men. In fact his failure to act in time had led to another man's death. Not for the first time that day, Ulysses berated himself for not answering his tutor's plea sooner.

It was at that moment that his personal communicator buzzed inside his pocket. Straddling the top of the wall, Ulysses took out the device and pressed the enamelled answer key.

"Yes?" he snapped sharply into the mouthpiece.

“It’s Lucy,” the woman’s voice at the other end of the line said. “Did you get to Fitzmaurice in time?”

“No. We were too late. The killer got here first and now he’s got away. I lost him!” he snarled, the rancour evident in his voice.

“Well I think I know where you might find him,” Lucy said.

“Really?”

“I’ve identified the last man in the photograph. Get yourself back to Boriel, it’s the Master. It’s Virgil Ashton-Griffiths! Either he’s the killer or he’s the next victim!”

VI – THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

“So, tell me about the Damocles Club, Master,” Ulysses said, regarding the gargoyle-faced man opposite from over steepled, black-gloved fingers, “and, more specifically, why somebody would want every last member dead.”

Ulysses Quicksilver was impressed. The Master had maintained the same stony facade ever since they had invaded his private sanctuary.

The porter – still shaken by his discovery of Montgomery Summerson’s eviscerated body – had reluctantly led Ulysses, Nimrod and Lucy through the college buildings to the Master’s apartments, as if he half expected to stumble upon another corpse. It had been with some obvious relief that he had opened the door, hearing the Master’s voice command them to “Come!” Ulysses’ ‘by Appointment to Her Majesty’ ID had done the rest.

Ulysses and Virgil Ashton-Griffiths met each other’s unblinking eyes, each regarding the other by the ruddy glow of the fire crackling in the hearth. For a moment, all that could be heard within the Master’s study was the insistent ticking of a clock and the snap and crackle of the fire smouldering in the grate.

And then the older man’s expression of steely resolution slowly began to crumble, the hard lines of his hawkish face becoming sagging lines heavy with worry.

“We were undergraduates at the time, here at Boriel College,” the Master said quietly. “We were young, we were arrogant –”

“I could see that for myself,” Ulysses threw in.

“And we were bored. The idle rich, if you like,” Ashton-Griffiths went on.

“So, apart from looking down on everyone else and

your Daddies having more money than you had things to fill your days with, what did you do that would make someone wish you all dead?"

"From what I remember of your own background, Mr Quicksilver, you were not left exactly destitute by your parents when they died." The Master's previous steel had started to return in the face of Ulysses' brusque manner.

"But my name isn't the one that's at the bottom of a list of dead men," Ulysses pointed out darkly.

The Master sighed. "To be honest, it will be a relief to be able to tell someone about it after all these years."

"How many years, precisely?"

"Thirty-seven."

"So, around the time the photograph was taken, when the Damocles Club was at its height."

The Master reached for his cup of tea and took a sip before continuing.

"It was the product of the recklessness of youth, I suppose, a group of like-minded individuals, cast free of boarding school and our mothers' apron strings for the first time, with enough money and status to do pretty much as we pleased. Such youthful exuberance manifested itself at first in terms of ridiculous drinking games at various pubs around the town, but they didn't really appeal to our thrill-seeking natures. It was adrenalin that motivated us, the need to face impossible odds and triumph.

"We began to partake in various gambling pursuits, but when money is no object, when you are not really risking anything in a real sense, it takes away the element of risk and saps the excitement from it. So we started gambling with things that were more precious to us than money. We took up some of the rather more extreme sports, rock-climbing, white-water rafting and the like."

"But we've all done that sort of thing haven't we?"

Ulysses said, recalling the time in his own life when he had frittered his life away in idle pursuits. He had held the Paris-Dakar rally record for eight years running, for a start. And it could be argued that his life now was even more dangerous, and satisfying as a result. Well, most of the time, he thought, rubbing at the shoulder joint of his left arm.

“We fashioned ourselves into the Damocles Club, named after the infamous sword, of course,” the Master went on, as if he hadn’t heard a word Ulysses had said. “But, unlike Damocles, we liked that feeling of imminent danger, that everything about our position of privilege could be over-turned in an instant.”

He paused, returning the teacup and its saucer to the table.

“And then we met Marley.”

“Go on.”

“Lacey brought him along, I think he had a bit of thing for him to be honest. Lockwood always did go for those rigger types, the old poof. But Marley wasn’t one of us. He didn’t fit in. He didn’t come from the right background.”

“What do you mean?” Lucy asked.

“His father was a churchman. They didn’t have money.” Ashton-Griffiths gave her a disparaging look. Something of the arrogant youth was still there, just beneath the veneer of social responsibility. “Anyway, it was Higgins who suggested the initiation. Hackett provided the gun. His family were of the huntin’, shootin’ and fishin’ variety.”

“So you shot him?” Lucy asked, shocked.

“Don’t be ridiculous, my dear,” Ulysses rebutted her. “I’m guessing that after a bout of heavy drinking the idea of the initiation was raised with this Marley – a game of

Russian roulette was it, Master?"

The older man nodded. He suddenly appeared to have aged ten years, the inconstant shadows cast by the fire giving him a haunted appearance.

"And Marley lost."

"I didn't know Higgins had actually loaded the damn thing! Marley's death shocked us all out of our youthful arrogance and taught us to value what we had more carefully. The Damocles Club was disbanded. We all went our separate ways."

"And yet, almost all of you ended up back in Oxford thirty-seven years later," Ulysses pointed out. "I wonder why that was. A sense of guilt? Unable to completely leave the past behind? Having discovered that you couldn't run from yourselves you all decided to confront your past in some pathetic, subconscious way?"

"So, what do we do now?" The Master raised his head and looked at Ulysses, his eyes glistening in the flickering firelight. "Are you going to have me arrested?"

"Arrested?" Ulysses laughed humourlessly. "But you're not the murderer, are you?"

"But..." Lucy suddenly put in, looking bewildered. "But he's the only one left on the list."

"Yes, but Nimrod and I came straight here, having just chased the killer out of the Botanic Gardens. The Master here is some years older than me and, if you don't mind me saying so Master, he's carrying a few more pounds and he wasn't even out of breath when we arrived. If he had been the killer I wouldn't have expected him to be waiting in his rooms when we arrived and, if by some miracle he was, I would certainly have expected him to be out of breath!"

"But I've just confessed our crime to you," the Master pressed. "I need to pay for the part I played, for being an

accessory after the fact.”

“If I didn’t know any better, I would have to say that I thought you wanted to be arrested, to be put into protective custody and save your own sorry skin.”

For a moment the Master was speechless.

“So who’s the Christmas Killer?” Lucy asked, completely confused.

“That is, what I suspect, we will all discover before this night is through,” Ulysses said, brimful of the sort of arrogant confidence that would have seen him fit quite well with the rest of the Damocles Club where the wretched Marley had not.

“So, what are we going to do now?”

“Now?” Ulysses said, a dark smile forming on his lips. “Now we wait.”

VII – SANTA CLAWS IS COMING TO TOWN

The clock in the Master's study was just striking the tenth bell of eleven when Father Christmas paid a call. He broke down the door on the second attempt, but by that time Ulysses' prescient sixth sense had already alerted him to the assailant's approach.

Lucy screamed as the doorjamb splintered and a hulking figure burst into the room. He was shrouded by a deep red cloak and hood, trimmed with white fur, and as he lurched into the study steel claws gleamed in the dying ember-glow emanating from the grate.

With a startled grunt the hulk hesitated, surprised to discover that the Master had company. But his hesitation lasted only a moment. Dogged in his determination, and apparently unconcerned as to the presence of potential witnesses to the crime he was about to commit, the ogre lunged for the Master with a savage roar.

But Ulysses and Nimrod were ready.

The brute was almost as broad as he was tall, built from slabs of muscle, as Ulysses soon learnt to his cost, the man-mountain hurling him across the room by one swipe of his arm, sending the sleigh bells ringing again.

The killer turned his attention back onto the Master who had backed away as far as he could behind his desk, until he was stopped from going any further by a wall of bookshelves.

"Sir!" Nimrod shouted over the furious bellows of the brute, casting an anxious glance Ulysses' way.

"Don't worry about me!" he shouted back, picking himself out of the remains of the side table on which he had landed. "Take him down!"

Nimrod's pistol was in his hands in an instant. Ulysses

looked from the muzzle of the gun to the ogre, batting Lucy aside, claws extended, as he tried to reach the mewling Master. Apart from the fact that there was a mad killer on the loose in the room with them, something wasn't right.

"I want him alive!" Ulysses shouted.

Nimrod's gun fired.

With a howl the brute slumped against the Master's desk as his right leg gave way beneath him, his kneecap a bloody mess.

Seizing the opportunity, Nimrod and Ulysses moved in together, Ulysses disarming the killer with a flick of his own rapier-blade. With the two of them pinning the thrashing attacker to the ground, Lucy pulled down one of the velvet drapes covering the windows with which to bind the captured killer, as the Master looked on in amazement.

"But I mean, Father Christmas?" Lucy repeated.

"Who else were you expecting?" Ulysses said. "After all, it is Christmas Eve. And from the look of the gift he was bringing you, Master, it looks like you've most definitely been a bad boy this year."

The Master said nothing, but continued to stare into the shadows beneath the obscuring hood of the cloak.

"But what kind of a disguise is that?" the reporter persisted.

"One that's kept his identity a secret and allowed him to kill four – possibly five – men," Ulysses stated grimly. "So," he said, approaching the chair to which they had bound the moaning brute with the curtain, "shall we see who it is before we inform Chief Inspector Thaw that

we've caught his Christmas Killer for him?"

Taking hold of the hood in one black-gloved hand he threw it back.

Lucy gasped in horror. As did the Master.

"Marley!" was all he could say, his voice a strained whisper.

Ulysses studied the face of the killer with clinical interest, as a lepidopterist might examine a moth pinned beneath a microscope.

The brute appeared to be a similar age to the Master – in his late fifties – but that was where the similarity ended. His head was entirely hairless and where the Master's eyes sparkled with a ferocious intelligence, behind the killer's eyes there resided a brutal and imbecilic child.

The reason for the former Oxford undergraduate's reversion to a state of moronic childishness was clear. It was as if his face had been sliced down the middle, from the top of his head to his cleft palette. A livid sunken scar had pulled the man's features into the middle of his face, pulling his eyes closer together, making him appear almost permanently cross-eyed. Saliva drooled continually from his gaping toothless mouth soaking the collar of the cloak with its stinking residue.

"The gunshot wound," Ulysses said. "The one that you thought had killed him, Master, all those years ago did this to him."

"I-I had n-no idea," Ashton-Griffiths stammered.

"Looks like your 'victim' is not as dead as you thought he was. By the way," he added, "what time of year did this –" Ulysses indicated Marley's face with a waving finger "– happen?"

"A few days before Christmas 1960," the Master replied, a distant look in his eyes.

"Well, Ulysses, you promised me an exclusive," Lucy

said, turning to the dandy, her own shock passing as her reporter's instinct for a good story took over again, "but I never expected anything like this. The Christmas Killer unmasked before my very eyes. Congratulations!" She put out her hand to shake his.

"Oh, it's not case closed yet, my dear," Ulysses remarked, somewhat condescendingly.

"It's not? But you've caught the killer."

"Yes, but look at him," Ulysses said, "he's an imbecile. Severely brain-damaged as a result of his attempt to become a member of the Damocles Club all those years ago. There's no way that he could have masterminded the murders himself, tracking down the perpetrators of something that took place thirty-seven years ago."

Lucy looked again at the pathetic creature bound to the chair before them. Ulysses was right. Marley was a blunt instrument, nothing more.

"No," Ulysses went on, "this poor wretch is merely the puppet. Someone else has been pulling the strings all along. And when we have this puppet-master, then we can consider the case closed."

"So, who's that then?" Lucy was feeling exasperated now. Ulysses flashed her a devilish grin. "You do know, don't you?"

"No – not at all!" he declared gleefully. His devil-may-care attitude was starting to grate on Lucy's nerves.

"But you know where to start looking," the Master suddenly said.

"I do indeed."

"It's the knife-fist, isn't it?" Ashton-Griffiths went on, focusing all his attention on the murder weapon that now lay on the blotting pad on his desk.

It was a rusted metal affair, not unlike a knuckleduster, with a bar that was held in the palm, and four sharp

blades that effectively formed claws in place of the wearer's fingers when it was gripped in the hand.

Ulysses nodded. "And I have my old alma mater to thank for that morsel of useful knowledge. After all, it was at those times when I was actually working towards my degree in Social Anthropology that I visited the Pitt Rivers Museum and saw this particular item for the first time."

Ulysses turned on his heel and made for the door. "Miss Gudrun, I would appreciate it if you would wait here for the police with the Master."

"But—" Lucy tried to protest.

"Don't worry, you've still got your exclusive, but you've done enough. Nimrod, you're with me."

As the dandy and his butler exited the Master's study in a whirl of coat tails and well-bred arrogance, Lucy was left mouthing 'O's like a goldfish.

"Quicksilver's wasting his time," the Master said from the other side of the room, teacup and saucer in hand again.

"What do you mean?" Lucy asked intrigued.

"I mean, they won't find the killer's manipulator at the museum. They don't know who they're looking for."

"And you do?"

"I've a pretty good idea," the Master said, the steel back in his voice. Ignoring the curious gaze of the drooling idiot still bound to the chair in the middle of his study, Ashton-Griffiths moved for the door. "Wouldn't you rather come with me, now, and find out if I'm right, rather than wait here for the police with... with that?"

A moment later, Lucy Gudrun ran out of the study on the heels of the darkly determined Master.

VIII – SINS OF THE FATHERS

“This is most irregular,” the curator complained as Ulysses barged past him and into the echoing hall that housed the Pitt Rivers collection. Nimrod shot the man a look that silenced him and followed his master into the museum annexe.

Their insistent knocking had alerted a night watchman – saving Nimrod the bother of having to pick the locks – who had then fetched the curator from his attic apartment. The curator answered the night watchman’s summons in his pyjamas and slippers. He had not been best pleased.

The cavernous space of the museum rose for three floors above them in the darkness. Ulysses was aware of bizarre shadow-shapes looming out of the darkness all around him. As the curator trotted anxiously after the invaders of this sanctuary, Ulysses and Nimrod turned on their torches.

Ulysses gasped in delight as his sweeping beam illuminated the leering faces of a totem pole, suspended Eskimo kayaks and luridly-painted Balinese ritual masks. The place never failed to evoke a familiar thrill of wonder and joy.

Ulysses had been a regular visitor to the University Museum of Natural History and its Pitt Rivers’ extension, when he had been a student at Boriel College, sometimes for purposes of study, at other times simply to luxuriate in the eccentric, jingoistic glory of it all.

It was a magical place, a monument to the attitudes and explorers – like Captain James Cook – who had helped to make Magna Britannia great.

It was rumoured that the collection contained half a million objects, displayed according to type – everything

from masks and musical instruments, to fetishes, jewellery and weaponry. And it was the last of those things that had brought him back here on this dark Christmas Eve.

His own collection of esoteric and exotic pieces from around the world were almost a homage to this wonderful relic of the nineteenth century, but it couldn't compare to this collection gathered during Cook's expedition to the South Pacific and since donated by Lieutenant General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers.

"Most irregular, you say," Ulysses announced, suddenly turning on the thin-faced curator, shining his torch beam directly into the startled man's face. The curator threw up a hand to save himself from being blinded.

"So is murder, Mr...?"

"It's Doctor, actually," the curator bit back. "Doctor Brierley."

"Would you happen to know if there was such a thing as a Hootoo Clan fighting-fist in the museum collection?" Ulysses asked, turning his torch back onto the display cases full of shrunken heads and flint axes that surrounded him.

"Wh-What? W-Well, yes," the flustered curator flapped, "as it happens."

"Ah, I knew it! I was sure there was." He turned back to the curator who was still trying to knot the belt of his dressing gown about his waist. "Can I see it?"

"Er, yes... I-I mean no."

"Ah! And why not?" Ulysses pressed, leaning towards the curator, breaking the invisible barrier of Doctor Brierley's own personal space. Brierley took a nervous step backwards, only to find Nimrod there, looming over his shoulder, watching him with eagle-intensity. "Lost it, have you?"

"Oh, no. It's out on loan."

“On loan?”

“Yes, along with a number of other items, to the college.”

“Which one?” Ulysses said, his voice low and intense.

“Christ Church.”

Ulysses’ look of diffident arrogance began to weaken and his face began to pale. Things were not working out quite as he had expected them to.

“And in whose name was the agreement made?” he asked, his throat suddenly tight.

“The Reverend Havelock of the cathedral.”

IX – MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

“This is hardly the time, or the place,” the old priest chided, keeping his voice low as the lilting strains of the choir soared into the vaulted roof of the cathedral. “Can’t you see that we are in the middle of celebrating Midnight Mass?”

“Tell me then, Reverend,” Virgil Ashton-Griffiths rallied, “when *would* be a good time to discuss your son?”

Lucy looked from the Master to the old priest and back again, her mouth agape in appalled amazement.

The old man hesitated before answering the Master’s challenge. “What are you talking about? What is this talk of a son? I have no son!”

But he had hesitated too long before responding to the Master’s accusation.

“You and I both know that you do have a son, Reverend, and that he’s alive and – although I wouldn’t go so far as to say well – abroad in Oxford!”

“This is outrageous!” the old man hissed. He had to be in his eighties – his late seventies at least – Lucy thought as she studied the quivering wattles of the old man’s neck and the liver-spotted scalp visible beneath the few wisps of white hair. He was turning an extraordinary shade of purple. “How dare you come in here, on today of all days, making such wild claims!” he fumed.

“I dare because it’s the truth!” the Master snarled. His steely gaze locked with the rheumy eyes of the old man. “We all knew even when we were at University, the first time we met Marley – the priest’s bastard!”

Fire leapt in the Reverend’s eyes at that but it seemed that the Master’s brow-beating persistence had paid off; the old man was no longer able to avoid the younger

man's glaring gaze.

"I feel like I have the blood of enough men on my hands as it is," Ashton-Griffiths went on. "I need absolution, I'm fully aware of that, but your need is greater than mine."

The Reverend seemed to visibly shrink before Lucy's eyes, his shoulders sagging, his stick-thin scarecrow frame shrouded by his plain black cassock.

"Very well, he said," his voice softer now. "Come with me."

The old man turned and led them back towards the entrance of the cathedral, away from the candle-lit nave and the host of the Christmas faithful.

Oxford's cathedral was packed. The building was small by the standards of other cathedrals, no bigger in reality than many ordinary churches, and it was never fuller than at Midnight Mass. It was only a matter of minutes now until Great Tom tolled twelve and welcomed in Christmas Day.

Her heart thumping in her chest, Lucy followed the Master as the Reverend Lemuel Havelock led them with faltering steps towards the shadows beneath the raised organ loft.

The choir concluded its anthem and there was the rustle of carol sheets as the congregation rose to their feet, with an accompaniment of coughs and throat-clearing. Then the strident tones of the organ began to sing out, breaking into the tune of 'O Come All Ye Faithful'.

"Here, there's something I should show you," the old man said, still with his back to them. Lucy couldn't be certain in the gloom at the back of the church but it looked like the priest was fumbling for something within the sleeve of his cassock.

He spun round with surprising speed, the carved wooden blowpipe already to his lips and gave one short

sharp puff.

The tiny thorn lodged in the Master's neck. Ashton-Griffiths gave a brief cry of surprise and fell to his knees, one hand to where the thorn had entered his flesh. A second later, he fell face first onto the cold stone-flagged floor.

Lucy froze, a stifled scream caught in her throat, as the old man turned to her, a second thorn ready between his lips.

Some of those at the back of the congregation turned and looked back, peering over their shoulders into the shadows beneath the organ loft, uncertain as to what they had heard over the stirring refrain of the carol.

The west door banged opened, the resounding crash reverberating throughout the cathedral. The organist played on, but by now many among the congregation had stopped singing and were exchanging comments and glances instead, as they craned their necks to see who had invaded the sanctity of their Christmas celebration.

"Reverend Havelock! Stop right there!" Ulysses Quicksilver bellowed.

The old man darted a glance the dandy's way, caught completely off-guard by his arrival. The blowpipe still to his lips, the old man puffed again and Ulysses – reacting to the sudden lightning burst of his heightened sixth sense – ducked in time to avoid the dart that came propelled by the breath. He fancied he felt, or heard, the thorn-dart whistle past his ear before being stopped by the door of the church swinging shut behind him.

And then, as Lucy stood rooted to the spot in terror, standing over the body of the Master of Boriel College, with a surprising turn of speed, the priest was away, up the cast-iron spiral staircase to the organ loft.

Ulysses followed, scaling the twisting staircase as

quickly as he could. He reached the loft only a moment after the old man and came face-to-face with the priest's puff-cheeked face.

The merry playing of the organ broke off in a cacophonous crash of registers and pedals as Ulysses threw himself sideways onto the startled man, barely avoiding a second poison-tipped missile.

By now, even the choir had realised that something was wrong. All had ceased their singing and were craning their heads to follow the progress of the two combatants above them.

Having untangled himself from the shrieking organist, Ulysses turned to find the old man gone.

"He went that way, sir!" Nimrod called from below, pointing to a narrow stone archway and the tight spiral stair that lay beyond it.

"Give yourself up, man!" Ulysses shouted across the void of the tower. "There's nowhere for you to run!"

He glanced from the withered form of the Reverend Havelock, scrambling unsteadily between the arches of the colonnade beneath the high stained glass windows of the cathedral tower, to the body of the church far below them. He could see pale faces peering up at them from between the myriad nimbuses of candlelight that formed their own constellation of Christmas stars below.

"Never!" Havelock shrieked back at him. "You really think I'm going to give myself up now?"

Distracted, the old man lost his footing. The congregation below them gasped in horror as one. The Reverend Havelock lurched forwards, making a grab for the next stone column as his right foot slipped off the

precarious ledge he was attempting to negotiate. Ulysses' breath caught in his throat.

"But you're going to get yourself killed!"

"What do I care? I'm an old man. I might die in my sleep this very night! And my son's life ended thirty-seven years ago. What have I to live for?"

Deciding that actions, in this case were definitely going to speak louder than words, Ulysses gave up attempting to talk the old man down and instead set off in pursuit, swinging from one columned archway to the next, using his unnaturally strong left arm to aid him in his gymnastic endeavour.

Havelock might think he had nothing to live for, but Ulysses wasn't going to let him get off that lightly; he wanted to see him brought to book for what he had engineered. He wanted to see justice served.

With one last death-defying swing, Ulysses cut the last corner of the tower and threw himself into the colonnade opposite the spot from where he had commenced his approach on the old man.

Preternatural senses flared and Ulysses doubled up as the warning bolt of prescience shot right into the middle of his brain. The old man was ready for him. A vicious kick to the shin brought Ulysses down hard and he almost lost his grip on the stone pillar he was still holding with his primate hand. The priest bore down on him, blowpipe to his lips once more, and this time, if he threw himself out of the way Ulysses would be throwing himself to his death on the stone-flagged floor at the bottom of the tower.

Grabbing the other open end of the carved wooden blowpipe, Ulysses tugged it forwards and put it to his own lips – and blew.

The old man dropped the primitive weapon immediately.

He stumbled backwards, palsied hands reaching for his throat, a choking rasp escaping his gaping mouth, his failing eyes wide with the shock of it. As Ulysses pulled himself to safety between the arches, the priest's faltering steps carried him to the edge of the ledge – and beyond.

Screams rose from the appalled watchers below, but the old man made no sound as he plummeted to his death. He was dead even before his skull cracked like an egg on the stones below.

X – IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE

“So, you’re done here, are you?” Lucy asked Ulysses as he walked out of the police station. His shoes crunched on the ice-crusting snow covering the ground.

“Yes, we’re done here,” he said, pulling up the collar of his coat against the cold and adjusting the scarf at his neck. He had a wide-brimmed hat pulled down firmly over his ears as well.

The Silver Phantom was pulled up next to the kerb, Nimrod at the wheel, the engine ticking over to warm the interior of the car.

“So, what’s the story? Why did this all come to pass at this moment in time?”

“You mean, when the wrong done to the Reverend Havelock and his son occurred thirty-seven years ago?”

“Yes.”

“It was all down to Doctor Lacey.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It all started when he took up a new post at the Saint Ophelia Sanatorium for the Mentally Infirm. Marley was one of the residents there.”

“That’s something else, I don’t understand,” Lucy said, interrupting Ulysses’ explanation of the events surrounding the Christmas Killings. “Why did Reverend Havelock let everyone think that his son was dead?”

“I would have thought that was obvious.”

“Humour me,” she said, nudging Ulysses in the ribs.

“Embarrassment. Marley had been a scholar, accepted to study at Boriel College, Oxford. It was all about intelligence, as far as the old man was concerned. And then his boy went and shot himself. He didn’t know it had been part of some ridiculous college club initiation. The

Damocles Club members covered that bit up, remember?

“Havelock thought his son had attempted suicide, and suicide is a sin against God. As if that wasn’t embarrassing enough he didn’t have the common decency to die but instead survived, with the mental state of an idiot child, and with a Father Christmas fixation to boot. As far as the Reverend was concerned it was better that he kept his son hidden from the world, and let the world think his son was dead.”

“But that’s terrible.”

“That’s as maybe but then of course the Reverend didn’t know that his son’s condition wasn’t a direct consequence of a suicide attempt.”

“Yes, how did he find out?”

“Lacey wrote to him. The police found the letter at the Reverend’s place. It was effectively a confession and suicide note all rolled into one. Lacey was manic depressive, you see, which meant that he understood what it was like to be mentally ill and so wanted to help others in a similar condition. But when he discovered that his one-time paramour was a dribbling infantile retard he was overcome with guilt and remorse, and started on a downward spiral of depression from which he never recovered.

“Somehow, the letter came to be posted after Lacey’s death and when Havelock read it, it brought back all the memories – the hurt, the guilt – which soon turned to anger. And so he planned his revenge more for his own benefit than for his wretched son. But he was old, he couldn’t accomplish what he wanted to himself and so we come to his crowning achievement; he used his own brain-damaged son as the instrument of his vengeance.

“He checked Marley out of the asylum, equipping him to fulfil his own dark designs, while he tracked down the

surviving members of the Damocles Club, who Lacey had so helpfully listed in his confession. Chief Inspector Thaw and Sergeant Whately found evidence that Marley had been living with the Reverend Havelock in his quarters at the cathedral.”

“Incredible,” Lucy said, dumbfounded by the immensity of the reverend’s plan. “So what will happen to Marley now?”

“I believe he’s been returned to the asylum where he has spent the last thirty-seven years of his life, to live out the rest of it, in the maximum security wing.”

Ulysses looked thoughtful for a moment as he studied the patterns the snow had made on the toecaps of his shoes. “It’s ironic really.”

“What is?”

“This all began because Marley wanted to join the Damocles Club but failed the initiation. And in the end, all the Damocles Club members are dead, and Marley’s the only one left alive.”

Ulysses turned from his musings to his waiting car.

“I can’t tempt you to spend what’s left of Christmas Day here, in Oxford?” the young woman asked, looking up at him from beneath the brim of her beret.

“Aren’t you spending Christmas with friends or family already? Surely your life isn’t all work, work, work. It’s not good for you. You must have plans.”

“Nothing that couldn’t be changed,” she said, her cheeks reddening in embarrassment. “I don’t know about you but I could quite happily spend the rest of the day in bed, catching up, having not slept at all last night.”

Ulysses grinned.

“Thank you for the invitation, my dear,” he said, smiling wryly, “but Mrs Prufrock’s coming in especially and will doubtless already have the turkey on the go. And besides,

my brother Barty would cut a very pathetic figure if I wasn't there. You can't pull a cracker by yourself, can you?"

"You've managed," the young woman smiled coyly.

Ulysses took a deep breath. He gazed up at the clear cerulean sky, savouring the honeyed sunlight and the crisp cold air on his face. And then he turned from the car and returned to Lucy's side.

"Tempting as your offer is, and I may well live to regret this, but if I have learnt anything from the Case of the Christmas Killer it is that the rash actions of your youth will inevitably come back to haunt you one day, so, Merry Christmas, Miss Gudrun."

He lent forward and kissed her on her heat-flushed cheek.

"Well, you can't blame a girl for trying," she said, returning the kiss. "Merry Christmas, Mr Quicksilver."

Back in the security of his own cushion-walled room, he opened the jotter on the table in front of him and creased it flat at a clean page.

For the first time in as long as he could remember, he hadn't written a letter this year, but he hoped it wouldn't matter. Father Christmas would understand.

Pulling a bright red crayon from the box beside the jotter, clenching it tightly in the fist of his right hand, the tip of his tongue protruding from between his lips, he began to write.

Dear Farthr Krissmus,

I'm sorry I not wrote my letter in time

this year but I was on holiday with my Dad. It was a lot of fun. I haven't seen my Dad in ages. And I was a good boy, like he said I had to be. I always did as I was told and ate up all my greens, even though I don't like greens.

So now you know I bin good this year and said sorry for not writin in time can I have my present anyway?

I really liked seeing my Dad again so this year for Krissmus I dont want any more crayons or a puppy or nothin like that. I would like to go and stay with my Dad again. Do you think I could do that? I hope so.

Happy Krissmus

Love Marley

THE END



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