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Jesuit (Circa 2000 AD)
by William Bolton
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Mystery

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CH000

Acknowledgements.

As always, I must first thank my wife, Jean, for her ever-enduring patience as I wrote this novel. I spent many daily hours working on it and hogging the phone line with my PC, leaving her to sit alone.

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Thank you all.

William Bolton

CH001

PROLOGUE

The first body to be found is that of a pretty ten-year-old girl.

The way she died is a mystery, the bloodstream being full of Opium.

The girl has not been sexually assaulted and there are no signs of a struggle.

Detective Inspector Graham Sampler of the Metropolitan Police force has the task of solving the case, which becomes even more bizarre as further murders are committed and these are not confined to children.

During the lengthy investigation, he crosses paths with a mysterious Jesuit priest, Brother Ignatious Saviour. Brother Saviour is a truly remarkable man who has suffered hardship and terror in the jungles of the Amazon and who is now on a holy mission commissioned by the Pontiff.

He exerts strange and baffling powers and his influence on the investigation brings Sampler to a decision he has to reach -- the most awful and horrifying decision a person can be called upon to make.

CH002

CHAPTER ONE

Even at the tender age of ten, it was obvious to all who saw her that Kylie Johnson would grow into a beautiful woman. To those who knew her, a beautiful disposition would be added to the accolade.

The girl's healthy, dark hair cascaded around a pear shaped face in gently waving pincers ending just below the chin. The lips were already becoming full, the teeth perfectly white and even.

Kylie's eyes, an enchanting cornflower blue, stared unblinkingly at the clear, early summer sky as an occasional cotton-wool cloud eased its way sleepily across the expanse, reflecting in the glass-like iris.

She was positioned on her back in the warm grass of the meadow, white daises and yellow buttercups swaying in haphazard patterns in the whisper of a breeze. The red of an occasional poppy could also be noticed oscillating in its delicate majesty. A short distance from the town of Watford, in Hertfordshire, it seemed a million miles away from the rush and bustle of any township.

One of Kylie's legs was outstretched, whilst the other bent at the knee causing the dress to fall back and expose the full extent of her flawless thigh.

Kylie had always loved this dress; it was her favorite. It fitted to her blossoming frame, ending an inch above the knee. The white of the dress was patterned with scores of butterflies; blue, red, purple, yellow, brown.

The small blue was the one she liked best -- a Common Blue (Polyommatus Icarus). She didn't know its common name, let alone the Latin.

Didn't need to, enough that it was pretty and she liked it.

As if to compliment the design, a real-life, Green Veined White (Oragala Daps), settled on the dress, its wings opening and closing in neutral mode, the antennae probing all directions.

As Kylie lay in the pleasant June warmth, an ugly, squat bluebottle fly buzzed by. It first zigzagged over her head to a point a few feet beyond and then returned as though retrieving something mislaid. Landing next to Kylie's left eye, the ugly insect began to check its surroundings for any possible danger. Being satisfied, it walked jerkily over to the sweet wetness of the human eyeball. Another pause and then it walked onto the beautiful eye. Kylie didn't bother to brush it away.

Dead people do not brush away flies.

CH003

CHAPTER TWO

Detective Inspector Graham Sampler was feeling irritable. Before setting out for work this morning, he had grumbled at his wife, Bethany, for, of all things, the milk on his Shredded Wheat being too cool! In all their nine years of marriage, he had never complained about anything she did for him; she would have had every right to tell him to do it himself in future.

The complaint was petty, he knew, and pettiness was not one of his vices. It was this case. It was getting to him.

The death of a young girl, the murder of a young girl, was deeply worrying. Ten years old with her life in front of her and, by all accounts, a happy, friendly child, always anxious to please. Her parents adored her and her schoolteachers delighted in her.

Even at that age, she had been an attraction to many boys, from the age of eight at the lower end to sixteen at the top of the scale. She had been a very pretty child.

Her prettiness was of no consequence to the investigation; a murder requires the fullest, most thorough enquiry no matter who the victim or what the status. But a child? That did evoke strong emotions amongst any investigating officer, no matter how professional he or she may be.

Sampler was a father himself. He had a son, Nathaniel, aged five, who was attending primary school and showing all the cockiness and worldly knowledge befitting a person so mature. Nathaniel wanted to be a policeman like his dad, when he grew up. Or was it a Fireman ... or a Doctor ... or, yet still, was it an Action Man? It depended largely on what television program he was interested in at the time.

So, as a parent, Sampler could sympathize with the emotions the dead girl's family were experiencing. He quietly vowed to solve this particular crime, come what may.

Sampler had been pushed into a role, by a high-powered police "think tank," of investigating the more puzzling murders wherever they may occur within a sixty-mile radius of London. Lack of resources in general in the police force, meant that local police teams had difficulty in spending sufficient time on solving serious crimes in their area, leaving too many unsolved and thus causing unrest among the public. All credit should be allowed for the many that were solved, given the restricted resources, but Joe Public was not the most tolerant.

It had therefore been decided that a designated Detective Inspector of proven quality from the Metropolitan Police Force at Scotland Yard, should be appointed to take on such cases and have the authority to select a small team of men, not more than four, to assist. Sampler had been the one chosen and he had decided to choose just one assistant, the very able Detective Sergeant Clive Miller. The present case had been immediately identified as one that would drain the valuable finances allotted to the local force.

The autopsy had produced little of value, although DNA samples had been found and analyzed, from a single stray hair that had been discovered on the dress and shown not to belong to Kylie. There was nothing unusual in the DNA

strands; a common strain that could be matched -- if the killer was ever apprehended and tested.

A large amount of opium had been found in the victim's bloodstream and it was ascertained that that was the cause of death. How did it get there? No one believed the child had administered it to herself, and there were no traces at all on the body.

A thorough examination had been carried out but the only punctures found had been those administered by vaccination prior to a recent holiday with her parents, to South Africa.

Even signs of a struggle had been missing from the scene. Signs of activity were evident by flattened grass around the body, showing that two people had been there at the time but nothing to show a fight had taken place. Everything seemed to be in neat order, as if the victim had willingly complied with her attacker. Normally in such crimes, particles of human hair, skin, or blood even, could be discovered under the fingernails but not in this case. The one hair on the dress may yet prove vital but it had led to no known criminal. The whole thing was a complete puzzle.

Sampler read and re-read the statements obtained from parents, teachers, friends, relatives and the local priest, Father Cobb.

He could find nothing that offered help. Most confirmed the general opinion of the tragic victim and no one had a bad word to say about her. Her school friends were all very fond of her and, unusually, there appeared to be no jealousy harbored by any.

Relatives, especially males, had been closely interviewed and privately investigated. Apart from the occasional petty theft or motor offences, all were clean. None had a sexual history, nor were there any signs of illegal pornography hidden away. Searches had been permitted to all their homes, garden sheds, garages and places of work but they had yielded nothing. Sampler had much to do.

The deep misery that pervaded the home of Hugo and Philippa Johnson was a living thing; like a thick fog, to be swept aside if movement was required.

A week had passed since Kylie's funeral and the home was a shell without her bubbly presence. The couple had blamed themselves, unreasonably, for allowing Kylie to go out on that day. She had wanted to go into the nearby meadow to enjoy the sunshine and pick some wild flowers. Just because this was a nice, quiet village where crime was rarely a factor, they felt their guard should still have been raised. How often was it reported in the Nationals that this child, or that child, had been abducted and found some time later, horribly murdered? It was never one's own child that was in danger, always someone else's. Everyone felt deep sympathy for the parents and the victim but still, it wasn't in one's own family.

Hugo and Philippa never blamed each other, at least, and they would come to realize that no blame could be attached to them as a unit.

The funeral, through the anguish and upset, was quite beautiful. The vicar, Reverend Michael Gutteridge, had pronounced such lovely, meaningful words, attempting to give hope and some understanding of God's will. The strains of "Morning Has Broken," had floated softly over the congregation, causing men and women alike, to sob. Kylie's uncle, Hugo's brother, had read out with breaking voice, the emotional words of "Steps." The sobbing then became more prolonged and audible.

When Philippa threw a single red rose onto her daughter's coffin, she had felt like leaping on top of it and letting the gravediggers cover her too. She had wanted to bury Kylie in the dress she wore on that fateful day but the police would not release it. It had become a piece of evidence. Instead, she had been buried in her school uniform with the addition of an enamel butterfly brooch attached to a lapel. It was a small blue butterfly, a *Polyommatus Icarus* -Common Blue. And Kylie would now never know the Latin name.

After the service, the vicar had suggested they have a visit from a person who had just arrived in the village. The man was a Jesuit priest, Brother Saviour, and he came highly recommended by the nearby Catholic clergy.

Although the Johnsons were of the Church of England faith, in these days of closer liaison, the vicar had no hesitation in extending the hand of friendship and he thought it might be a good idea that the couple accepts the visit.

* * * *

Brother Saviour was due at any time now. Philippa had had her misgivings and wasn't really in the right frame of mind for religious instruction, especially from a man who represented teachings that were alien to her. More than once, she had picked up the phone to ask Reverend Gutteridge to cancel the appointment, but each time she had wavered and put the phone down again.

A knock at the door jolted her from the miserable thoughts once more beginning to take over and she rose from her chair to answer it. Her husband, Hugo, moved ahead, forcing his way through the invisible fog and grasped the door handle.

The cottage, in which the couple lived, was in a small rural area and was one of several similar buildings all placed in haphazard fashion, roughly fifty yards apart from each other. The picture they depicted was of a typical English village, with their thickly thatched roofs, white or pale-blue painted fronts, covered in various varieties of Ivy, Clematis and such, and surrounded by spacious gardens clad in dozens of colorful flowers. Each was enclosed in either a timber paling fence or a small brick wall, again painted in the color of the house frontage.

The only concession to modernization had been the introduction of double-glazing in larger than the original windows. The frames, though, were constructed from solid timber to give a traditional appearance.

Hugo opened the door and, for an instant, became rooted to the spot. The man who stood inside the thatched porch transmitted a feeling of awe; not dread, but humility, as if it were God Himself standing there.

It took several seconds for Hugo to find his voice. "You will be Brother Saviour," he said reverently, his knees automatically starting to bend. He recovered quickly, hoping the slight movement had not been noticed. "Come in."

"Thank you, my son," said the figure in an evenly modulated voice, as he stepped past Hugo and into the small passage. He walked confidently into the front room as though he was familiar with the house, yet this being his first visit. Hugo followed at a respectful distance.

As he breezed in, Philippa took a step forward to greet the stranger. She stopped in her tracks, seeing the fog of depression literally evaporate as though it were a tangible thing. Her mouth drooped and her eyes widened. God had just entered! Instinctively, she dropped to her knees before him, her head bowed and her hands clasped as in prayer.

Brother Saviour put a hand on her head and spoke softly. "Please, Philippa, stand up." He placed his hands beneath her elbows to assist. "No need for formality. I come to you as a friend; to help; to bring God with me. Please. Stand."

Philippa got to her feet, instantly feeling rather foolish. Hugo came alongside and placed an arm around her shoulders. They both stepped back from the priest, still somewhat in awe of him. The man was not at all as they had expected. They were envisioning a monk-like figure, late in life, clothed in a brown, woolen habit, full of seriousness and religion.

This man, however, was around 36 years of age, just over six feet in height, average build, suntanned of appearance, clean shaven with startling blue eyes; eyes that showed humor, excitement and kindness. The mouth, in contrast, was a little thin and made one think that a cruel streak could be hidden somewhere in there.

Surprisingly, he was dressed in modern gear: an expensive-looking cotton tee-shirt, light gray in color with a small 'Sacred Heart' motif high on the left breast, a fawn shade of cotton trousers, and wearing Reebok trainers! Even so, through all the modern appearance, the aura of God exuded from him. It was uncanny.

After accepting the offer of a cup of tea, all three sat down together, Saviour in a comfortable armchair and the grieving parents next to each other on the couch, slightly to one side of the priest.

The air of nervousness soon melted as the Jesuit regaled the couple with tales of his past experiences. He immediately told them that he was no angel having served time in his youth for persistent housebreaking and it was when in prison that a Missionary of the Catholic Church, his own forgotten religion, had visited him. After chatting to the Missionary for half an hour, he had requested, and been granted, further visits by the man. At the end of four visits, Saviour had returned to God.

On leaving prison, he had, with much help from the Missionary, taken extensive religious instruction and had later been ordained as a priest. Not content to simply serve mass and advise local residents, he had been allowed to join a Missionary with whom he experienced many and varied travels across the world. The sights seen, the people met and the dangers encountered made for a tremendous tale of adventure, gripping the Johnson's as never before.

Brother Saviour had suffered illnesses such as malaria, dysentery and other fevers but, clearly, had survived them all with no visible effects. At one stage, he had been captured by a remote tribe somewhere in the Amazon and tortured and starved. His friend, the Missionary, had actually been tortured to death, an experience that had left a huge scar on Saviour's mind. When asked how he had managed to get away, he simplified the explanation by saying: "I got up and walked off while they were sleeping."

He had also witnessed magic and, surprisingly for a man of God, had not discounted it as rubbish or superstition. He accepted it as fact.

At the end of the narrative, the Johnson's spirits had unaccountably lifted; Kylie was by no means forgotten, but the overwhelming grief had subsided considerably.

Brother Saviour then addressed the matter immediately in hand.

"My friends," he began. "I know you have suffered great sorrow. Probably the greatest sorrow imaginable and I have no doubt you have discarded God at times." He took in the silence and guilty hanging of heads. "This is quite understandable and God realizes it. God loves everyone; each person as the individual they are. He listens, He helps, and He forgives."

The Johnsons listened in silence. "Try to think of Kylie in a positive light. She was a beautiful child, both in appearance and in soul. This beauty will continue in the Heaven at which she will surely have arrived. She has been delivered to the Lord in her most pure state and she will be happy. Be certain of that; there will be no sadness in her new existence. She will watch over you, her beloved parents, and look forward to the day when you join her.

When that day arrives, you will find her as you best knew her; as she was on the day God took her. You will also be as you would be at your best stage of life. You will share His Kingdom together. Do not weep too long. Remember, she is happy and that is what we all would wish for her. Your sadness will be for yourselves for a time, due to the deep hurt you are feeling. However, you will quickly come to accept Kylie's new-found happiness and rejoice in it -- for her sake."

Both Hugo and Philippa felt a weight lifting as the charismatic priest spoke his words. The effect he had was incredible. The couple then knelt together before him, their hands clasped in prayer, this time at the request of Saviour. The feel of the Jesuit's hands on their heads sent warm impulses through their bodies, creating a peace within.

"We will say silent prayers, not necessarily the one's learned at school. It may be more appropriate to speak silently to the Lord Jesus in your own words; words more befitting the occasion. Let us denounce the Devil that certainly entered the body of the unsuspecting killer and pray that our Saviour prevents that Devil from finding a new source for his evil."

The trio remained motionless, their eyes closed and their prayers ardent. After many minutes, the hands lifted and Brother Saviour silently left. Hugo and Philippa stayed in prayer for a further quarter of an hour

before opening their eyes to find the holy visitor gone. Looking to each other, their thoughts married. They had received a truly divine visit and their burden was much lighter, their faith restored. Their lives began again.

* * * *

After leaving the Johnsons, Brother Saviour strolled to his motor home, parked in a lay-by close at hand. He felt uplifted and happy in heart that he had allowed God to enter the bereaved parent's home in person. Only He, The Almighty, could have lifted the gloom and despondency in that house and returned two precious members of His flock to the fold.

He then drove along to the Parish Church of St. Mary's, to speak with Reverend Gutteridge and assure him of the success of the mission to the Johnsons. Once there, he was received with friendly courtesy and a welcome glass of pleasant-tasting, red wine. He was not interested in the name of the wine or the area from which it came; he was not a connoisseur, nor did he wish to be. Wine was either pleasant or unpleasant and, if he liked it, he would drink red with white meat and white with red meat, quite contrary to the so-called experts', view. It cleansed his palate whatever the color and so served its first purpose.

Reverend Gutteridge was overjoyed at the result of the meeting. He had tried to talk to the couple at the time of the discovery of Kylie's body and had kept in touch on a regular basis since then. However, he'd sensed that his words of comfort were falling on stony ground. They were questioning the kind of God that would allow such a terrible thing to happen and he had begun to sense the possibility of an irrecoverable situation.

Brother Saviour was an instantly likeable person and he did somehow exude the quality of a holy being, even though inappropriately dressed for a man of the cloth. He related tales of his many adventures to the rector, leaving him stunned and enthralled.

He explained that the Catholic Church was attempting something new with him. They had decided that people were perhaps more responsive to a person who dressed in a less formal manner and, in that way, could be easier accessed. The Church was also concerned about the seeming proliferation of murders, especially those involving children, and felt that the bereaved families were not being reached. Less people now believed in God and were deserting their faith in unacceptable numbers. True, many were finding faith and opting for the Catholic Church but the balance was not being redressed.

So, with all his experience in meeting people from many parts of the globe and getting through to them, Father Gawain Hadleigh, as he was then known, had been selected for interview with the highest primate -- the Pope himself. He had been allowed to choose a suitable name, subject to approval from the Pontiff, and he chose Ignatious Saviour. He had been given more or less carte blanche to travel wherever he saw fit and to spread comfort and advice together with the Word of the Almighty.

He was instructed to dress in a manner suitable to the country in which he was to work and to arrange the purchase of a motor home. This would enable him to exercise freedom of movement and, at the same time, not impinge on the resources of any diocese or parish he might visit.

His first area of operation was designated as Great Britain and he was to pay particular attention to those families suffering from the horrors of murder and suicide.

It was late in the afternoon when Saviour took his leave; the vicar imploring him to stay for evening meal, so enthralled was he by his Godly visitor. Gutteridge was a little bewildered by the effect the man had on him; he was accustomed to religious people of all persuasions but he had never experienced this feeling of having been visited by the Christ himself. Reluctantly, he watched the motor home slip away and out of view.

Saviour was to find a spot in which to park, have some food, get cleaned up and visit Father Cobb at the church of The Holy Rood to inform him of the day's events. After that, he would hear confessions, seeking out anyone he felt would benefit from his words. The role he had been given by the

Pontiff was a new and exciting one and one that he intended to carry out with fervor and not a little enjoyment. He had originally intended to spend more time at the magnificent church of The Holy Rood and study it's fine architecture, but the day had become too full and he would have to leave that pleasure for another time.

His first meeting with Father Cobb and been short; mostly an introductory mission and to give a brief outline of his special duties. Even in the short time he was with the priest, he was aware that his aura had affected him in the same way as everyone else. The only person who had been unaffected by him since the experiences in the Amazon, was the holy Pope himself.

CH004

CHAPTER THREE.

The morning was beginning to form, a heavy mist clinging to the earth as the sun struggled to bite through the haze. A night of heavy rain and thunderstorms had prevailed, ceasing at around four in the morning, just in time for the early birds to gather the worms.

Gradually, the sun broke through; it was going to be another hot summer's day. The forest became alive with small animals of all kinds and birds hummed and swept their way between the branches, twittering in a never-ending chatter, warning others of dangers spotted and indicating sites of food. Butterflies awakened and began to flit over the sea of flowers, settling at random; insects crawled and burrowed, some becoming food for the various predators, while rabbits leapt and bounded around, reveling in the large quantities of grass and shoots. The busy hum of bees was ever-present. Life in the parish of Penn, Buckinghamshire, was beginning -- for most.

The body had been there overnight, death having been administered at around 7:30 pm the previous evening. There was no warmth in it and not a mark to be seen. The autopsy would later reveal amounts of strychnine in the bloodstream, that being the cause of a reasonably quick and unpleasant death.

Debbie Singleton had reached the age of seventeen years and five months; a happy life until two years ago when Debbie had found her father enjoying a loud and serious sexual encounter in his bed. The problem was that it was not her mother in the bed with him, but her mother's best friend, Gwyneth Pallister.

The divorce had followed eighteen months later with bitter recriminations, Debbie having suffered the tempers of both parents throughout the months following discovery and through the ensuing separation.

The day of her death had been spent browsing around the local shops, this being a Saturday, when she did not work at the local bakery where she was employed full-time. She had bought herself a dinky little top and a fresh pair of earrings to match the emerald green of the garment.

She was not to wear them that evening, feeling a more sober mode of dress to be suitable. She was meeting a man whom she had accidentally encountered in the park the previous day. He had approached her when she was sat, crying quietly, on a bench, an unopened book on her lap.

He had offered her words of comfort and drawn from her the sadness in her life. A total stranger, she had found herself so at home in his company that she felt able to confide her innermost concerns to him. He was a listener. The man had promised to help and to allay any fears she may have for the future; also that she would come to terms with her turmoil.

An arrangement had been made to meet the following evening; 'when the day is tiring and getting ready for bed,' was how he put it. The venue was to be a small forest situated on the outskirts of the village in which she lived, one popular for strollers, walkers, bird spotters and the like.

It had been Debbie's choice when the man had suggested an area close to nature, a place where solitude may be experienced and the smells and sounds of an unspoilt world could be found. How lucky she was to have met such an understanding and considerate man. She could think of no one in the village

with whom she could discuss her state of mind, not even the local vicar. Normally wary of strangers, Debbie found this one to be quite different. He made her feel confident, totally at ease.

After sharing evening meal with her mother, Debbie cleared away the dishes and attended to the washing up. Her mind was on the evening's meeting and hope that her torment was at last about to end. Looking at the kitchen clock, she was surprised to find that it had reached five minutes to six. Her heart began to pound: less than an hour before they were to meet. It was time to hurry along.

The evening was warm with only a slight breeze so she was comfortable in a white cotton top and knee length, navy-colored skirt. She opted for flat-heeled shoes, suitable for walking. Saying goodbye to her mother, she walked a hundred yards to the bus stop and caught the 6:15 that would drop her off at the beginning of the wooded area.

Her mind was in such a whirl, her heart beating faster, that it was like going on a first date. Yet romance was the furthest thing from her mind. She had found someone who was actually interested in her, in her well-being. He was attractive, though older than her, and he had the appearance of someone who had lived a full life, someone who could handle himself.

Alighting from the bus, she watched it move away and then set out for the well-worn footpath that would take her into the forest. When she was within twenty yards of the spot, she saw him. Her heart began to thud against her breast. He was casually dressed and leaning against a tall, concrete lamppost. On seeing Debbie, he eased himself upright and gave a beaming smile. "Hello, Debbie," he called. "Glad you didn't change your mind." It was then she realized she had never got around to asking his name.

Moving along the footpath, they chatted about mundane things, not broaching the subject that had brought them there. After some fifteen minutes, they left the main path and walked between the magnificent, old and sweet-smelling trees, their footsteps falling softly on the fern covered and cushioned ground.

Reaching a small clearing, they stopped and sat. The man reached across and held her hands in his, giving a warm, comforting feeling. He began to question her more deeply than on their first encounter, digging deep into her subconscious.

He was an expert questioner, never forcing the issue, giving her time to plunder her thoughts and always gently encouraging. So wrapped up in the man was Debbie that she would have confessed to him of having a pact with the Devil, had that been so.

"Now, Debbie, I want you to sit quietly for a couple of minutes and consider what you have just told me," he began. "Think of it as being another person's problem. Look at it in a cold light."

After the two minutes, she opened her now closed eyes and stared into her questioner's. Everything seemed so clear: she had problems, many problems, but they could be solved! She had never looked at it like that before; all had seemed dark and insurmountable.

As if reading her thoughts, he said: "Yes, Debbie. The hurt you feel, the dread, is not so great after all. You have surrounded yourself by nature. You must realize how minute we humans are in the grand scale of things. The tree will outlive us; the ferns will die and grow again, as will the tiny shoots of grass. We are insignificant."

He squeezed her hands tighter as he continued. "You have been looking at your hell and allowed yourself to become mesmerized by it. You have looked into it and seen only more hell. You have let yourself slowly slide into the morass. The more you have dwelt on it, the further down you have slid."

Debbie stared into his face in rapt awe. No one had ever spoken to her in this depth before. She was captivated.

"Kick it in the face!" he shouted loudly, causing birds to flutter suddenly into the air, twittering in fright and beating a path away from the noise. "Do not let it grip you any more! You are greater than this. You

matter! What has happened has gone -- forever. Never look back at the events or at your misery. Life is ahead of you, so take it, grasp it, use it."

The intensity in his face forced the words into her brain, into her soul. She was prepared to kill for this stranger! Without fully realizing, she found herself engaged in a bout of wild, abandoned sex with her mentor, and wanting it, wallowing in it, needing it. _God! Give me the strength to sap everything from this man. I must have every piece of him!_ she thought in her lust.

Finally, both being sated, they lay together in silence; she with her eyes closed and feeling absolutely all over at peace for the first time in two years; he with eyes open, deciding on the next move.

"Debbie," said the calming voice as his shadow fell over her. "To complete your future peace of mind, there is one final thing you should experience. After that, you will be completely at ease with yourself. No more nightmares, no depths of despair, no recurrence."

She opened her eyes slightly, peering through the mist that had formed in them. He was kneeling astride her prostrate form, holding something in his hand. "What do I have to do?" she murmured. Whatever it was, she would do it for him.

"In my past, I studied medicine," he was saying. "I discovered many things that the public have never been aware of. Things that can cure almost every ailment." The voice was calm, warm and persuasive. "I have carried this knowledge with me even though I am no longer involved in that profession and I want you to benefit from it."

A smile trickled across her lips. _You've already given me the benefit of your brand of medicine!_ she thought, naughtily. "Yes," she whispered. "Do whatever you like."

"Don't worry about this, Debbie. I am going to give you an injection of a certain fluid. It won't hurt you, just a tiny jab. Okay?"

Debbie stretched out both arms, her palms facing upwards, revealing a large portion of each. "Ah, there," he said, prodding a spot that had recently received some kind of immunization. "What was that for?"

"Oh, just a flu jab I had about a month ago," she replied, dreamily. She tensed ever so slightly as she felt the slim needle slide into the same minute hole made by the flu jab. She smiled as the fluid surged into her bloodstream.

The immediate reaction was dramatic in the extreme. Debbie's eyes flew open as wide as they were able and her lips parted in an involuntary snarl. Then the muscles began to jump. The man prodded her, savoring the response; with every touch, the muscle in that particular area refluxed wildly. This progressed into violent muscle spasms throughout the body, causing the victim to thrash and flail erratically, a strange moan escaping the restricted throat. It was an attempted scream but it came as a long, deep wail, the extreme pain hitting every fiber.

The man watched as a scientist may watch an important experiment. Debbie's skin began to turn blue as the quantities of de-oxygenated blood increased in the tiny vessels. She was unable to control the movements of her ferociously flapping limbs, and then she began to choke. Her eyes were still wide open, the pupils dilated. She saw, and did not see, the benign face of the man above her; her eyes were focused but effectively blind. It took only minutes for her to die, minutes that were absolute hell, but sheer pleasure for her killer.

He rose as the life lurched violently from his victim, who suddenly became peaceful and still. "I hope my advice and cure helped," he said looking into the open and lifeless eyes. "You will not be plagued by demons any more." After studying the girl for several minutes, dark, secret thoughts filling his mind, he bent to the body and slid her panties back up the legs, maneuvering them perfectly into their original position.

He then rearranged her skirt into a modest position before removing a small object from his shirt pocket and carefully placing it beside her left

thigh.

Being satisfied, he brushed the surrounding area with his feet to erase any footprints and walked away, his feet again using a sweeping action, as though flicking a football to a teammate.

CH005

CHAPTER FOUR.

As so often seems to be the case, a dog out on a walk with its master, discovered the body. The animal's keen sense of smell picked up something unusual in the air, something interesting. Tail wagging furiously, Rex, as was the dog's name, broke through a patch of gorse and trotted excitedly over to Debbie, sniffing all around her.

The owner, frustrated at Rex's refusal to obey his command of "Come!" reluctantly followed the pet's path, grumbling and cursing as he went. On arriving at the scene, he stared in numbed disbelief at the pitiful object before being violently sick and almost passing out.

* * * *

Graham Sampler had just completed his usual Sunday lunch, the traditional British kind: Roast beef, boiled potatoes, carrots, garden peas, and Yorkshire Pudding, all coated in a thick brown gravy. This had been followed by hot apple pie and Bird's custard. The sweet coffee and butter biscuits to follow rounded off the meal superbly. Ah! The delectation of wholesome food!

Bethany, his wife, had urged him to take a lighter lunch; a ham salad that would be ideal on a warm day such as this. She knew she was fighting a losing battle; he was a traditionalist where food was concerned. She enjoyed cooking and regularly prepared exotic and foreign dishes but, at the same time, she fed Graham the simpler British fare. It caused her no problem, even in today's enlightened times, she felt it was up to her to provide the meals and generally do the housework. It was a pleasure to her, so why change? He worked and she didn't.

Having many friends, she often had a few to afternoon tea and cakes, where all kinds of subjects would be discussed. She was also keen on ancient history and spent time at the local library. Her personal collection of books, many covering the enthralling history of the mysterious pyramids and Egyptology, were a source of wonderment to her.

It was Bethany who took the call. Not the Met! Not on Sunday! She felt irritated, knowing the call must be something of immediate importance. As soon as she heard the voice on the other end of the line, it confirmed her suspicions. "Graham," she called, resigned, "It's the Met." She held the phone at arms length waiting for it to be taken from her.

Graham dragged himself from the comfort of his chair and took the phone from Bethany, a frown creasing his brow. "Hello!" he barked, "You do know it's Sunday, I hope!" His thunderous expression deepened as he listened to the call, without comment. "Right. I'll be there as soon as possible," he said at the end of the message.

"Don't tell me," said Bethany, going to a corner of the lounge to pick up Graham's briefcase. "You have to go out right away." She brought the briefcase to him as he went into the hallway and lifted his jacket from the stand.

"Yes. Sorry, love. Can't get any peace can we?" He took the case from Bethany. "Thank you. Hope I won't be too long. Another murder, though, and it could take some time. It's in Penn this time."

Bethany looked concerned. "Not another young girl, is it, Graham?"

"Yes, it is. Not as young as the first but, well, seventeen or so and they think it may be connected." He leaned forward to take the usual kiss, then turned and left.

The drive down to the murder scene, in the locality of the beautiful village of Penn, took nearly an hour. Most delays were due to a heavy build up of traffic in London but once on the A40, better progress was made. Graham moved onto the M40 where, although busy, he was able to maintain a steady

seventy miles per hour, leaving at the junction that lead to Beaconsfield and on to Penn.

He had visited this area with Bethany on a few previous occasions, always enjoying the ancient beauty of the place and the unbelievable view of eight surrounding counties from the high position on which it stands.

Strange to think that this quiet, sprawling village spawned the famous William Penn who founded Pennsylvania in the USA and was, curiously for a man of the Quaker faith, a slave trader and owner.

Graham drove carefully along Springhill Lane, through the village, past the church of St. Mary and out into the approaching countryside. As soon as he left the site of the church, he spotted a collection of police cars and vans up ahead, with officers standing inside the blue-striped tape used to protect the murder scene.

Bringing the car to a halt close to the group of officers, he got out and introduced himself to the nearest policeman. "Good afternoon, sir," the man responded. "Sergeant Flint is here and he feels you should have a look at this." He turned into the wooded area. "I'll take you to him, sir. Follow me, please."

They broke through a flimsy thicket and entered a small area of grassed land moving towards another thicket some twenty yards further on. The constable turned his head to the following Detective, explaining: "There is a main path further along, which is probably the one taken by the victim, but this provides a shortcut to where she ended up."

Reaching the thicker brush, the two struggled through to come upon a clearing. In the middle of this, Graham spotted the body, surrounded by people in white, polypropylene overalls; these would be forensics and, possibly, the pathologist. A man dressed in a summer police uniform stood nearby, watching the proceedings. This must be Sergeant Flint, thought Graham.

His guess was proved right as the man turned to one side revealing the three chevrons on his arm. The police officer approached Flint and introduced Graham to him. "Ah, good afternoon, detective," he said, smiling and holding out his hand. "Thank you for coming so quickly. Sorry to have spoiled your Sunday."

Sergeant George Bernard Flint was a big, rugged man with eighteen years police experience, having joined the force at the age of twenty-two. His gruff exterior hid a caring and compassionate nature. He carried out his work with a determined efficiency, often using a persuasive manner rather than aggression with the various criminals who crossed his path.

Villagers, whether law-abiding or criminal, respected Flint and crime was generally low. This was the first murder to occur in these parts for six years, the last being an elderly man who strangled his equally elderly wife following a dispute over a television program.

"Good afternoon, Sergeant," Graham returned. "What's the story?"

Flint looked thoughtful. "Well, first of all, we got called out here by a local who had been walking his dog. The man was very shaken but he managed to get his story out. The body is as it was found. As you know, forensics and pathology will not spoil anything on the scene but they do want to remove it as soon as possible. Come. I'll introduce you."

First to meet Graham were the three men from forensics who merely nodded and grunted their greeting. Then came the pathologist. A woman of around 30 years of age, five-feet, seven inches tall, dark brown, short-cut hair and no make-up. Her complexion was clear and slightly tanned. A woman who did not need to use cosmetics to improve herself, she had large, brown, intelligent eyes with a neat, straight nose over full lips. Graham noticed a wedding ring on her finger. Small wonder she was spoken for.

"Hello, Detective Inspector," she said before Flint had chance to speak. "I'm Doctor Sallie Dunning, the pathologist. "Pleased to meet you," she smiled. "As usual, not the best of circumstances."

"No, quite. What have you got here?"

Dunning adopted her cool, working voice as she explained the facts as

found so far. "Well. The victim is a female of around seventeen years of age. There appears to have been sexual activity..."

"Penetration?"

"Yes. Penetration. However, it does not at this stage indicate force. I will know more when I get her back, where I can carry out a proper inspection. There appears to be some bruising around the vaginal area but that is normal following intercourse. There also appears to be a deposit of semen inside and on the upper thighs, so DNA should be no problem."

"What killed her?"

Dunning's brow creased and she placed a fist thoughtfully under her chin. "At this time, I cannot tell you. I've turned the body over and given it as thorough an inspection as possible without risking the destruction of evidence and I can find nothing particular except that, from the condition of the body, I would say that she has suffered a fit of some kind. It may be an unlawful death but the autopsy should give a clearer picture."

Graham uttered a short sigh. "Thank you. I know it's difficult out here but I would appreciate the results of the post-mortem as quickly as possible. There is no evidence present to link this with any other enquiry but I have a feeling that it is linked with a current investigation into a child murder."

Sallie turned her attention back to the work in hand as Graham studied the still figure. "What time did she die?" he asked Sallie.

She answered from her crouched position, without turning her head. "I can only estimate that, but I would say around eighteen to twenty-four hours ago."

Graham walked carefully around the body, noting the absence of signs of struggle and the clothing being in no disarray. This was too much like the scene of Kylie's murder not to be linked. Together with Sergeant Flint, he carefully inspected the surrounding area, seeking any possible clues but, after half an hour, nothing had been found. Even if the murder had been committed the previous evening, there could still have been footprints due to the fine weather with little breeze. However, the killer had been clever enough to erase any such clues.

Deciding that there was nothing more to be gleaned, Graham asked Flint to organize a thorough search of the lane leading to the clearing and to contact him when the pathology results were in. He said his goodbyes to Sallie and the crew and made his way back to the motorway.

The journey back took longer due to the increasing amount of traffic as workers began to make their way home and parents made their way back after picking up children from school. On arriving back home, he let himself in and went into the kitchen where Bethany was preparing an evening meal. They kissed in greeting and Graham set about organizing the drinks of tea and buttering of bread.

Over the meal, Bethany asked about the trip and if it had resolved anything.

"No, not really," Graham said. "I am certain that it's connected to the Kylie murder but there's no evidence available yet. The area was clean, just as with Kylie and there were no signs of a struggle. Another mystery, it seems."

* * * *

Three days later, Graham was in his office at Scotland Yard, trying to link the two recent killings, with the sparse information of the latest one hampering his attempts. All that there was to show, was the similar killing ground, the lack of struggle, the incidence of sexual activity, the relative neatness of the victims clothing, the suspicion of poison being administered and the failure to find out how. In the last case, even poisoning had not been immediately evident but Graham knew it would be so.

He opened the post on his desk and was pleased to find among it, the pathology report, together with the forensic report. There was also a memorandum from Sergeant Flint to say that the path to the scene had revealed nothing at all and that house to house inquiries had been carried out but had

been fruitless.

One good thing to appear was the DNA result taken from the semen found inside the girl's body and on her thighs. This could now be compared. Calling a WPC into the office, Graham instructed her to take the DNA report to the lab for comparison with the DNA record attached to the Kylie Johnson murder. He wanted the comparison to be done immediately and he told the constable to wait in the lab until it was ready. She was then to bring it straight back to him.

Graham turned his attention to the reports in front of him. Forensics had recovered hair samples from Debbie's body; body hair and pubic hair that had tested to be from a male person. It had been possible to check these with the hair taken from Kylie's dress and they had come up with patterns matching those of 'Unknown assailant in the murder of Kylie Johnson.'

So, the same person had carried out the crime. It was pleasing to Graham that his hunch was right but he was still no nearer to solving the crimes. Pebbles and samples of earth had proved only that Debbie had taken the footpath, as suspected, and that she had veered from that to the clearing where she was found. Again, as with Kylie, there were no other traces of her killer.

The motive, too, was elusive. Clearly, there had been a sexual element but it could never be described as rape, in the true sense of the meaning. The victim here had appeared to be willing. Of course, in the Johnson case, the crime of sex with a minor had been ruled out. Robbery was simply not a factor.

Graham then turned to the pathologist's report, knowing that it would yield little, if anything. Sure enough, the cause of death was diagnosed but not the method. A small amount of strychnine had been found in the blood stream -- so it was murder -- but even a small amount would be enough to generate a quick and agonizing death. Again, there was no visible point of entry, as of a syringe. The tiny punctures that had been found were diagnosed as being from a flu jab and they were beginning to heal and fade.

Just then, there was a knock on the office door and the WPC entered, carrying a thin, buff colored folder clutched to her chest. She handed it to Graham. "Is that all, sir?"

"Yes, WPC, and thank you," said Graham, offering a weak smile, before opening the folder. As the officer left, he looked at the brief notes, which were largely couched in technical terms. However, pictures of the two sets of strands, set side by side, were shown on the last page, with a third picture showing one sample placed on top of the other. He didn't need to read the result to know that they matched perfectly. The one on the left was taken from the hair strand found in the first murder while the one on the right was taken from the foreign hairs on Debbie's body.

Graham leaned far back in his comfortable, padded chair, hands held behind his head as he studied the ceiling for inspiration. He had an unaccountably nervous feeling in his stomach. In both killings, no anger had been shown, nor was any force used. The girls were left fully clothed, even though sex had taken place with Debbie, but otherwise untouched. There seemed nowhere to start; nothing to get to grips with. He knew that more murders would be committed before the killer made the fatal error that nearly all do. The thought worried and sickened him.

Rising and going to the metal cabinet in a corner of the office, Graham rifled through the files until he found the Johnson and the Singleton documents. Taking them to his desk, he inserted the new documentation in, placing them in proper, neat order. He then began to sift through the information feeling there must be something; some small matter that he had overlooked. The clever bastard must have been too clever for his own good -- mustn't he? The thoughts were more in hope than certainty.

He decided to study the locations in which the murders had taken place. Could there be a link there? The first discovery was in Watford, in a meadowed area on the outskirts of the main town. What did it have in common with Penn? Both have a proud, historic past, but then so do many other towns and villages in Britain. Both have attractive surrounding countryside, again as do many

others. Then, there are the churches. The splendid Holy Rood in Watford and St. Mary's in Penn. _What? What? The clue is there, but what is it?_ thought Graham. He racked his brains, reading and re-reading the files, desperately seeking a way into the cases.

An hour of deep concentration passed before Graham gave up. He rose from his seat and went to the door, peering at the team outside through the glass surround that framed his office.

Spotting Clive Miller leaning against a wall sipping a cup of hot coffee, he beckoned to him. Clive eased himself from the wall and hauled his big frame over. He was unmarried, even at the age of thirty-two, but had no shortage of female companions. They seemed to find his rather pugilistic features attractive and it also helped that he was a regular team member of the Met's rugby union squad. He was a tough, dependable assistant to Sampler and at six feet, four inches in height, was handy to have around in dangerous situations.

"Yes, guv?" he enquired as he entered the office and was told to take a seat. He sat facing his chief across the desk.

"Clive. As you know, I am involved in two murder cases at the moment. Cases that I have suspected to be linked."

"Yes. Any progress?"

"Not much," said Sampler, frowning. "The only satisfaction so far is that the latest DNA and pathology reports support my theory."

Miller smiled. "Well. That's good isn't it? What you wanted?"

Graham's frown deepened. "It's good to be proved right, but that is all there is to it. I have racked my brain and read the files over and again but I'm bowled if I can find a tenable link, apart from the obvious."

"Oh."

Graham patted the two folders on his desk. "These are the files, Clive. I want you to have a go. See if you can see something I'm missing. This bastard will kill again, you can be sure of that," he said with resignation.

Again, Sampler would be proved right, but not in the way expected.

CH006

CHAPTER FIVE.

The church of St. Mary's, Penn, was full to bursting for the funeral of the tragic Debbie Singleton. Flowers decked the coffin and covered the church exterior, all bearing sweet, poetic messages of condolence. The girl had been popular and the crime had shocked the village. The tears shed could have created a small river, such was the emotion engendered by the words of the parish priest, Father McGiven. Men, women and children wept as one.

The priest spoke words of compassion and forgiveness for the killer as well as extolling the virtues of the dead child. It was God's responsibility alone to punish the sinner, and he would at the day of reckoning. Any anger felt by the community must be curtailed. And there was anger -- much of it. Prayer was the answer now.

On reaching the end of the deeply sad internment, the crowds dispersed to their homes, heavy at heart. The parents, however, remained at the graveside, unwilling to leave their beloved daughter. Thomas Singleton had arrived the day before from his home in Brentford, Essex, and booked into the local public house for the night. He had had the good grace to come alone, leaving Gwyneth, the former best friend of Elizabeth, at home with their year-old child.

Father McGiven allowed a good ten minutes before walking to the bereaved couple and placing an arm around each in a gesture of comfort. "Come Mr. And Mrs. Singleton. It's time to leave Debbie to God now," he said softly, guiding them away from the open grave. "I know you will not feel like visitors just at this time but I would like you to receive a priest. A Jesuit. He is a much traveled and experienced man and he feels he can help you through this tragedy. I must say, he emits an astounding, what shall I say? Karma. He is a most holy man, as you will find if you meet him."

The couple walked along in a semi-numbed state, only half listening to the priest. However, Mrs. Singleton agreed to allow the Jesuit into her home and an appointment was made for three that afternoon. Thomas was to travel back to Brentford immediately following the funeral.

* * * *

Brother Saviour guided his motor home along the macadam road, and parked it outside the address he had been given by the parish priest, number 11, Griston Avenue, a cul-de-sac of pleasant houses, built in the seventeenth century and now faced with modern brick.

Leaving the vehicle, he ambled up the path to the house, admiring the profusion of pretty flowers covering the small garden area at each side and taking in the wonderful mixture of scents.

He knocked firmly on the door, choosing to ignore the doorbell situated at head height in the center. On the second knock, he heard sounds of approaching footsteps from within the house. The door opened to reveal a healthy looking young woman, around thirty-four years of age, plain featured, with small, blue eyes set in dark circles. The face, at this time, was unusually lined, undoubtedly due to the strain of the recent weeks. The woman's hair was of a light brown shade and was brushed neatly back from her forehead and down to her shoulders. She wore make-up, now fading since its application for the morning funeral.

"Hello?" she said, not recognizing her visitor and cocking an eyebrow in a questioning way. "What do you want?"

"I'm Brother Ignatious Saviour, Mrs. Singleton," he said. "You agreed to see me, I believe." Ignatious smiled disarmingly and he saw the woman melt to his charm. He was fully aware of the effect he had on men and women. They looked on him in awe; saw him as something of a God -- and he enjoyed the misplaced adulation!

"Oh, yes, Father, -- er -- Brother. Please come in." She had not expected to see a priest, especially a Jesuit, to be dressed in modern clothing. She sought no identification; no stranger would know of the arrangement and, besides, this man exuded the power of a distinctly holy man. He was irresistible.

Ignatious followed Elizabeth into the cozy lounge, noting the days old dust covering the wooden furnishings and the untidy sprawl of newspapers and magazines lying about the room. It was evident that, beneath the present dirt and untidiness, there was a woman of pride and cleanliness. The death of her daughter had punched the spirit and enthusiasm from her.

She shuffled to a fireside chair and plunked herself into it, not bothering to invite the good Brother to take a seat. He sat near to her on the well-upholstered settee. No drink was offered. Ignatious looked at her sadly. It was a pity that a person had to endure such suffering. However, he was here to do a job; to lift her spiritual level and thus help her to come to terms.

Elizabeth spoke. "I don't really know why I agreed to this meeting," she said, dolefully. "God has not been very good to me recently. He is not my favorite person." She raised her eyes to look the priest in the face. "It might shock you, Father," she preferred to use the more familiar term, "but I am beginning to doubt His existence."

Ignatious smiled; a pleasant, comforting smile. "It does not shock me, my daughter. In your present circumstance, who would not feel the same way? Although I carry the Word of God and I live by that Word, I am a man, a human, and I understand the problems and emotions that go with the mortal form." Elizabeth's expression softened a little. The aura of the man was enveloping her, in the physical and in the subconscious.

"What I would ask first, Elizabeth -- if I may use your Christian name." She nodded. "Is that you think of Debbie as you last saw her. Don't let that vision upset you. Think of her as she was: bright? Cheerful? Lively?"

"Yes. She was all of those things before going out on that awful day." Mrs. Singleton was noticeably brighter in her manner of speech. "She was clean and sparkling. I felt she was going out to meet some young man she had met,

but she never mentioned anyone to me. It's just that she seemed brighter than of late and I caught the slight whiff of perfume as she passed. Her whole attitude was more bouncy."

Brother Saviour noted the new spark in the mother's eyes now. "Yes. There you are. Already your spirits have been lifted at the positive thoughts. I can tell you with all certainty, that is how Debbie will now be." His face lit and he stretched his arms out and to the sides, as a conjurer may after performing some astounding act. "You see, Elizabeth, she is with God. Think! Could there be a greater experience than actually meeting our Creator? Believe me. She is happy -- happier than she has ever been. She will be watching over you now, caring for you, loving you. She wants you to be happy for her!" His voice had risen as the words poured forth.

Elizabeth stared unblinkingly at the Demi-God before her. His presence, his word, was all around her, inside her body, inside her mind. She actually slid from her seat and fell to her knees, her head bowed in complete and utter reverence, her hands clasped tightly together. Her fingers disentwined and scrabbled the short distance across the dusty carpet until they touched the priest's shoes. She caressed them lovingly, moaning softly, unintelligible words spouting from her. After a minute or so, she forced her head up and looked into the benign face of her God.

The face she saw was the face of a crucified Christ, a cruel crown of thorns digging into His head, blood streaming down the pain-streaked face. Her heart lurched in profound pity before the illusion faded, to be replaced by the face as it was: again benign, still smiling but, this time, the man was naked and sporting a strong erection! This was not real, Elizabeth knew, but the picture was there and she wanted him! Take me now! Here, where Debbie lived. Enter me! Disgust me!_

Ignatious was aware of the mixed feelings showing in the woman's bewildered face, and he had some idea of the actual thoughts held within. He placed both hands on her head as she knelt. "Elizabeth. You now feel stronger; you can once again deal with your life, in the sure knowledge that Debbie is in her happiest place. God will protect her. You will not see her, that is fact, but you will know that she is with you. Think of it as though she was on a long holiday and that, one day, you will meet again. Let your new-found strength support you."

Elizabeth knelt in an upright position, transfixed by the words, by the aura, by the erection that was not really there. She was speechless. She heard, as if through a long tunnel, the priest beginning to speak once more.

"Elizabeth. God loves us all, each as an individual. Each and every person is known and loved personally by God. He gives us meaning and purpose in our lives. Let us pray."

As the holy Brother's voice resounded louder now, through the building and through the very soul of the wretched mortal, Elizabeth closed her eyes, joining in prayer with the passages that were familiar to her. When her eyes opened, the sinful vision had disappeared and so too, had Brother Saviour. He had left quietly, without her being aware even of his hands leaving her head. She rose and went to the window just in time to see the motor home disappearing around a bend and onto the major road ahead.

She sat down, feeling utterly exhausted by the experience, bewildered by the wicked thoughts that had invaded her mind, yet with a new awareness of the way ahead; a way without her beloved daughter. The sadness, strangely, had left, to be replaced with a pleasant satisfaction, a glowing of the mind and body. The wonderful, awesome visitor had taken but a few minutes of her life and given, in return, strength and faith.

CH007

CHAPTER SIX

Lawrence Maddigan was a schoolteacher -- and a damned good one. He taught at the local Grammar school in a hamlet encompassed in the sprawl of Penn. This was one of the few Grammar schools to survive the purge and change

to "Comprehensives," instigated by the old Labor political regime, under Shirley Williams, the then Education Minister.

The 'New Labor,' of the present day, appeared to support the same ideals but had proved hypocritical in that belief, the hierarchy choosing the more elite education for their own offspring. He was not to know that the policy of "Comprehensives" was later to be rescinded by the new Government, to the absolute surprise of all. Lawrence, as a firm believer in the old system of education as the proven best, was glad of the apparent confusion; at least it meant that his school was safe for the present.

Despite this, he was a troubled man. At the age of thirty, he had surrendered to his sexual penchant for boys. Up to then, he had suppressed the urge and attempted to hide his homosexuality from the outside world. He had enjoyed relationships with men, but these had been few and far between -- and in strict secrecy. Perhaps the deep lying frustration was the root cause of his desire for the younger element.

Lawrence was now thirty-four and had used many boys since the first awkward and frightening encounter. After that occasion, he had almost fallen apart, worried that the law may catch up on him, terrified that the boy would tell his parents, and he felt a deep shame. Work had been impossible. He spent days and nights crying, eventually visiting his doctor who diagnosed stress as his problem; it was difficult teaching in this day and age. The prescribed tablets helped calm Lawrence and allowed him to enjoy deep, untroubled sleep thus laying the foundations for recovery.

One morning, some six weeks later, he woke up feeling strong and purposeful, ready for the world at large, his demons firmly buried. The shame he had felt gave way to confidence in his sexual choice; had the boy not actually enjoyed the experience? He had shown no untoward reaction, no ill effects -- and he had obviously not told his parents.

However, over recent weeks, Lawrence had begun to question his own activities again. There had been so much in the newspapers about pedophilia that the public was extra sensitive to anything of that kind and, in his quieter moments, Lawrence felt so sorry for the poor victims he read about. He wondered how he, also, could do such things? Then, alone in bed with his thoughts; thoughts that aroused him, he ratified his perversion.

Even so, as a good Catholic boy, he had finally confessed to his parish priest in the confessional box, seeking spiritual advice. The priest, Father McGiven, had first pointed out the fact that, as he had only just brought this to confession, having been carrying out the abuse for the past four years, he had been living in permanent sin and, by accepting Communion, he had been systematically defiling Christ.

The admonition had not been what Lawrence had been prepared for, nor had been the following advice that he should go immediately to the police and report his crimes. The confessor had suggested that Lawrence must be aware that abuse of innocent, pure children was a most heinous sin, not to mention a crime against humanity itself. He told him that, until he purged himself by admitting to the police and suffering the consequences, he could not be accepted to the Kingdom of Jesus. The priest offered to help in any way he could and would be understanding and approachable. Lawrence was given five 'Our Fathers' and six 'Hail Mary's' to say as penance and then dismissed with the words: "Go in peace, my son."

He went back to the polished wooden pews in the main body of the church and knelt, quietly intoning his penance. In between the familiar prayers, his thoughts wandered, wondering why, if God was all forgiving, did he have to confess his pleasures to the police. Surely, on the Day of Judgment, his Creator would show pity. Not a single thought traveled in the direction of the suffering of his victims. By the time the penance had been completed, Lawrence had decided that the priest was wrong on this occasion; after all, whilst the Pope may be infallible, priests were not.

* * * *

Two days later, another hot, cloudless day, the boys were out in the fields,

enjoying an unseasonable kick-about with a football. Drenched in sweat, they stopped often to take in hefty drinks of pop before continuing with their efforts. The game was interspersed with friendly wrestling and chasing of the two girls who had joined them. A quick kiss when caught was magic -- for both parties.

After half an hour, the heat proved too much to continue the game of soccer, so it was decided that the group, half a dozen lads and the two girls, all between the ages of eleven and thirteen, would take a ramble through the adjoining trees and fields, earthen pathways intersecting at regular intervals.

They strolled along, chattering enthusiastically, enjoying the six-week school holiday of which they were in the fourth, not yet becoming bored by being at home. At times, one or two would scale gnarled and knotted trees, to see who could climb highest but none proved better than another, each reaching the same height. As usual, the girls endured being chased by the boys, somehow always getting caught even though much fleet of foot. One could be forgiven for believing it to be planned.

Far into the woods, the group decided to take a rest, coming upon a small clearing. They were thankful to lie down and chat about their various interests; pop music, their favorite artists or artistes, football, television programs, etcetera.

After a short time, one of the boys, after chatting earnestly to one of the girls, got up and escorted her from the group and into the nearby trees. The others smiled and gave knowing winks and rude signs to each other, knowing what the friends were sloping off for. Much giggling followed before the subject of pop music again took up the interest.

Andy and Paula, as the two young people were named, drifted deeper into the trees, cuddling and kissing as they went, Andy risking a tentative hand up Paula's T-shirt. Not having his hand or face slapped, gave him the encouragement he needed and he continued to fondle her firmness, albeit a little clumsily and over-vigorously. Although the experience was a bit painful, Paula allowed him to continue, basking in the pleasant tingling "down there." At thirteen, she was coming to terms with her blossoming sexuality and indulging in early experimentation.

With eyes misted and only for each other, the couple lay down on the fern-laden ground. "Have you ever done it?" asked Andy, coming straight to the point.

A blushing Paula answered: "No. Have you?"

"Oh, yes." Andy lied, "loads of times," inadvertently pushing out his chest. He was Mr. Experience.

"Will it hurt?" Paula asked, nervously, letting Andy's hand slide up her thigh. Her face and body were burning as never before. This was new, exciting and sinful. It was great!

Lowering his trousers, Andy slid between the trembling girl's legs, his lust raging. He pressed himself to her, realizing that she was still wearing her panties, but this was not going to be an obstacle at this fiery stage.

Andy had seen his teacher, Mr. Maddigan, every weekday over the past two years, holidays apart. He had always thought of him as rather nice but not very good-looking. He knew Sir was not married and he was not too surprised. There had been talk amongst some of the school kids that he was a 'faggot,' and had been with a few of the boys, but nothing had ever really come to light. However, it was good to be able to label someone of authority with a derogatory tag.

Andy had never noticed that Maddigan's eyes were blue, although the sparkle in them did draw attention. He had always seemed a good teacher; interesting and not too strict.

Today, though, Andy did notice the teacher's eyes, and that they were blue. However, there was no sparkle in them. They stared directly at Andy and Paula in their compromising position on the padded ground. The whitest face Andy had ever seen surrounded the eyes.

Whilst the young boy's passion instantly subsided, it was a full minute before his vocal chords began to work. "Sir? Sir?" he gasped, hoarsely, not expecting a reply from the man who was, so clearly, dead.

Hearing the word, Paula immediately panicked. '_Sir! A teacher from school? Oh, no! How could she live down the shame? What punishment could she expect? Oh, no!_' she thought, all in a microsecond. Her neck stretched as she slid the top of her head into the ground allowing her to look behind from her place beneath her shocked partner.

What Paula saw would live with her for many years to come, possibly for the rest of her life. Mr. Maddigan was completely naked and secured between two saplings, forming a bizarre 'X'. The body was covered in cruel wealds, criss-crossing over the chest and abdomen. The face bore a largely untroubled expression, seeming to be seeking an answer to some unknown question. Paula's eyes moved down the scourged body, pausing momentarily on the shriveled, and now useless, manhood. '_Curiosity at a time like this!_'

Then came the scream. It began with a silent hiss, teeth bared, lips curled as if in a snarl, raising to a hoarse, elongated cry before developing into a full-blown, nerve-jangling scream, the vessels on Paula's neck filling with blood until it seemed they would burst.

Andy got up quickly and readjusted his trousers. He was shaking like the leaves around him, now stirred by a gentle breeze. His hands clamped over his ears and he began to wail, mirroring the awful cries of Paula who had not moved from her uncomfortable position, and whose scream was continuing unabated.

CH008

CHAPTER SEVEN

The local police in Penn contacted Scotland Yard at four in the afternoon on the day Maddigan's abused body had been found. The call was put through to D.I. Sampler.

"Hello, Sir," the voice began. "This is Sergeant Flint, of Penn Constabulary. We met recently over the Debbie Singleton murder."

"Yes. Hello, George. Got something for me?" He smiled at George's voice: a pleasant man and easy to talk to.

"Well, sir,"

"Please, George -- Graham. No need for formality." Sampler interjected.

"Yes. Okay, Graham." He paused before continuing. "Hard to believe, but we have had another murder. In one of the hamlets this time."

Sampler again interrupted. "Christ! Not another young girl?" he barked.

Flint went on: "No. Not a young girl, quite the opposite. It's a man, a local schoolteacher by the name of Maddigan. Well respected, liked by his pupils, seemingly not an enemy in the world. The body was found today by a couple of school kids. Needless to say, they are both in shock."

"What stage are you at, George?"

"I've done nothing as yet except to get my lads to take statements from a group of kids that were with the couple who found the teacher. I've sent the two to hospital for now and informed the parents. I doubt if I'll be able to obtain their statements before tomorrow."

"Do you think it's murder, George?"

"Oh, yes. On first impressions, that is. The poor bloke appears to have been flagellated but I don't know if that's the cause of death." George paused. "Could be a sex game gone wrong, I suppose. Wouldn't be the first case, would it?"

Sampler's brain was working. "I take it there's nothing obvious then?"

"No, Sir -- er, Graham. That's what made me contact you first. It's tenuous, but it is a kind of link with the other murder."

"Just what I was thinking." Sampler made up his mind. "Okay, George. Do nothing more. Make sure no one enters the scene and I'll arrange forensics and pathology from here. I'm on my way."

"Thanks. I'll meet you here and take you to the scene. Goodbye." The

line was disconnected.

Graham called Clive Miller to his office and told him of the latest report. "What do you think, Clive?"

The Detective Sergeant pondered a moment. "As the Sergeant says, the link is a bit tenuous but, then, that would make three murders and each with no visible signs of what caused the death. If this one has poison in his blood stream, the link becomes a little more solid, eh?"

Graham nodded his agreement. "I can't see why our child-killer would turn to an adult but, somehow, I would be prepared to lay money on it that the cause of death will turn out to be poison in the bloodstream." He began to gather a slim sub-file from the drawer of his desk. This was a brief summary of the two murders at present under investigation, with salient points recorded. He then rang through to forensics followed by a call to the pathology department, giving them the Penn Constabulary address. The two men then left for the short journey to the picturesque village.

Graham let Clive take the wheel. It wasn't that he minded driving but he wasn't keen on motorway journeys, so it was prudent to let Clive take the stress. Under Clive's expert though rather reckless driving, they made it to Penn in forty-five minutes, despite the congestion on the way out from London.

On arrival, they were met by 'Big George,' who extended a friendly hand to Graham before being introduced to Clive. The two large men eyed each other in some mutual admiration, their bulk being similar. The firm handshake was crisp and dry from both; almost, but not quite, becoming a competition of strength.

George offered to take the detectives to the scene in his car and this was readily agreed. Leaving instructions with the constable in charge to direct the forensic and pathology teams to the site, the trio moved off.

Twenty minutes later, they arrived at the beginning of a narrow, natural pathway into a copse, leading to the larger woodland. Leaving the car, the Scotland Yard men followed Flint as he weaved his way through bushes and between trees until they arrived at the death scene.

Even the two hardened detectives, accustomed to shock, were taken aback at the sight of the naked man, suspended between the saplings, his body covered in long, raking marks, front and back, the blood having congealed in death.

Graham walked carefully around the body, searching the ground and inspecting the victim with concentrated study. Apart from the flagellation marks, there was no visible sign of a killer blow. The open mouth, with a slightly protruding tongue, showed no signs of poison when, normally, there would be some residue around the lips and on the tongue. Graham knew, instinctively, that this was the work of the same killer.

The three officers chatted about the possibilities of finding the murderer until the forensic and pathology teams arrived, some twenty minutes later. None of the theories put forward resulted in anything positive. Their only hope at present was that the murderer would have left some clue that would be picked up by forensics. Whoever it was, he had been very careful.

A further puzzle was the unconcerned leaving of DNA in semen or saliva in the other murder; clearly the person felt completely safe in this. Either that, or he was very stupid -- and that was not evident. The careful, but limited, inspection of the body had shown no obvious signs of sexual activity but, as Flint had earlier suggested, a sex game gone wrong could not be ruled out. There was nothing more for the detectives to do, so they wandered to Flint's car to be taken back to the police station.

Over a cup of tea, Flint promised to keep in touch over the local enquiries and anything that may arise that might give some clue as to the killer's identity. House to house enquiries had already been put into motion.

"I don't feel that we'll learn much from house to house," said Graham. "But, of course, it has to be tried. There's always the possibility that someone may have seen something."

George finished off his tea and put the chipped mug onto his stained

and worn old desk. "I agree but it is all we have at the moment. Don't worry, I'll be looking at every statement and, if there's anything at all, I will spot it."

Graham did not doubt that this genial man would not miss a thing. He had every confidence in him and told him so. "One other thing, George," said Graham, pensively, "Have you noticed any strangers around over these past weeks? It may well be someone from elsewhere."

Flint searched his mind, sliding back over the weeks, seeing pictures of faces, vehicles even. New faces? "Yes." He began, slowly, "There has been one stranger in town."

"A known villain?" interrupted Clive.

"No. Not a villain. Quite the opposite, in fact -- a priest."

"A priest?"

"Yes. And not one that you would notice to be in that profession."

"Why do you say that?" Graham asked.

"It was the clothes he wore. Modern. Normal. Well, normal for a younger person. I saw him in jeans, trainers and a T-shirt. At least, the T-shirt had some religious motif on it."

Graham pondered this a while. "Did he strike you as odd, in any way, George?"

George shifted to a more comfortable position in his chair. "Except that you don't expect a priest to be dressed like that, no."

"And did you check him out?"

"Oh, yes. I had a word with Father McGiven. It seems the man is a Jesuit and on some new mission."

"New in what way?"

"To travel around the globe, dressing in clothes appropriate for the particular area and bringing comfort and advice to people, with special attention to the bereaved." He shrugged his shoulders. "So the good Father informs me, anyway."

Again, Graham pondered before he spoke. "Did he visit Debbie Singleton's parents?"

"Only the mother. The dad is married again and lives in Brentford. I haven't met the Jesuit myself but, from what Father McGiven says, he has an aura about him -- a presence." Flint smiled, embarrassed almost, as if telling some ludicrous secret. "He has the effect on people -- even the priest -- of bringing God with him!"

Clive smiled. "Doesn't sound much like a murderer, then, does he?"

"The priest also told me that the Jesuit had visited the parents of the little girl murdered a few weeks ago, the Johnsons, following the death of their daughter."

"Did he do any good?" asked Graham.

"By all accounts he worked." Flint paused, "... Well.... Miracles." The embarrassed smile returned. "After receiving the Jesuit into their homes, they all completely altered. Instead of moping around, mourning, as you could expect, they became bright, cheerful, even. It was as if they had immediately come to terms with the deaths and accepted it. They saw their daughters as being happy in the hands of God."

The men exchanged glances. "Have you interviewed this Jesuit, George?" asked Clive.

"No. I had a good talk to the priest about him and I didn't see a lot of point in interviewing the Jesuit. It seems that he only arrived here, and in Watford apparently, after the deaths had occurred."

"Sounds an interesting character," said Clive. He drained his cup and placed it on the desk with an air of finality, ready to leave.

Graham took up the conversation again. "He does, indeed, sound an interesting character and I think I would like to meet him. Perhaps he was able to pick up something from the families. We have to explore every possibility; there's no way forward at the moment."

Standing, he motioned to Clive who joined him at the door, as they bade

their farewells to George. "I'll get the forensics and pathology to deliver a quick interim report," he said as he opened the door. "Then I'll be in touch and come over to meet the Jesuit, if you can arrange that, George. Okay?"

George picked up a file from his desk and began to study it. "Okay, Graham," he said without lifting his head. "I'll arrange it. 'Bye. Oh, and nice to have met you Clive." He continued to look into the file as the two detectives left.

* * * *

It was three days before the forensic report was delivered to Graham, together with the report from pathology. Full reports would follow but were expected to take some time. Graham feared the worst. _They haven't found how death was administered!_ He thought.

Sure enough, although the forensic team had done a thorough job, the only thing they had found was a lash made up from thin stems plucked from the hardy bushes and thorny briars that thickly populated the murder area. They had been bunched together and fastened by strands of dried grass that had been wound around the lower ends to form a handle. There were no discernible prints to be found. This time, not even DNA samples had been left. The enquiry was stuttering.

Graham then picked up the pathologist's report and began to read. It seemed, on the evidence, that the victim had been beaten front and back with the makeshift lash but this had not caused death. _Surprise, surprise_, thought Graham.

The length and depth of the lacerations showed that the beating had been administered in a heavy and brutal fashion, yet the victim had not appeared to make much of an attempt to avoid the thrashing. It was as if it had been consensual. It may well have been a weird sex game but it had not 'gone wrong,' as was the popular phrase; death had been caused by an amount of a lesser-known poison, Gelsemium, found in the bloodstream. Strangely, part of an antidote would have been to use Strychnine! Death would have been quick and painful, paralysis of muscles and choking being contributors. _Ah, hence the protruding tongue and bulging eyes._

Again, the point of entry for the fatal dose was not detected. The examination would continue, with a second eminent pathologist attending, Doctor Francis Wray, who would arrive from Oxford in a couple of days time.

Graham studied the rest of the report, couched in formal terms, but there was nothing of note. The only links were that the three murders had been committed in the same general area, the manner in which the fatal dosage had been administered was, so far, undetectable and that they had all fallen victim to poison in the bloodstream. It had to be the same killer. The motive, however, was unfathomable.

CH009

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brother Ignatious Saviour had driven to the village of Twyford, situated in the Thames Valley district. He intended to visit one or two of the churches in the area, particularly, and first, the Catholic Church.

Checking the list of priests that he carried, he read the name of Father Rafferty under the heading of Twyford. He pulled into a lay-by to study the details of the priest listed against his name. There was a photograph and a written description of the man, giving hair color, eye color, height, weight, complexion, even any scars -- of which there were none.

Aged forty-five, with a service of twenty years, four of them spent at Twyford, he was described as a dedicated and hard-working minister.

He had held four other posts, all in England spreading from the North, at Carlisle, to the Southeast at Canterbury. There were no "misdemeanors" noted. Obviously, a good man, dedicated to his role in life.

Ignatious started up the engine and continued on his journey, arriving at the church of St. Thomas More some forty minutes later. At that time, there were no services to be conducted so he walked into the church, noting three or

four people in there, praying with heads bowed for whatever their particular purpose.

Seeing an elderly lady, working robustly with spray polish and a bright, yellow duster as she rubbed and polished the solid oak communion rail set before the altar, Ignatious went over to her and enquired the whereabouts of Father Rafferty.

The lady ceased in her administrations to take in this stranger. Her breath caught as she surveyed the man, a strange sensation of reverence striking her. Without asking who he was, the woman instinctively knew that this was someone holy. Again, as with others, Godliness had entered.

"Er ... er," she spluttered. Unable to speak, her throat feeling constricted, she pointed a wavering finger to a point to the right of the altar. "In the ... vestry," she managed to croak.

"Thank you," said Ignatious, smiling graciously. "I'll go through if that is okay." The woman did not answer, merely nodding her head by way of assent. Another smile and the priest followed the direction indicated until reaching a noticeably polished wooden door -- the lady had clearly given it her recent attention. He knocked politely and entered on the word "Come."

As he opened the door, he was impressed by the file description of Father Rafferty; it was spot on. How long ago the file had been updated, there was no way of knowing but, somehow, Ignatious perceived, this priest had not changed probably in a decade.

"Good morning, Minister," began Ignatious. "I am Brother Ignatious Saviour of the Jesuit corps. I'm sorry to trouble you."

Father Rafferty swung around from his desk, on an ancient wooden swivel chair, where he had been preparing the sermon for Sunday's service. He was to speak on the subject of neighborly love, expounding the virtues of selflessness and the giving of aid and moral support to friends, neighbors and relatives. He would also be including strangers, though with caution.

Ignatious recognized the expression on the good priest's face, the one that showed an amazed awe. He was so accustomed to the effect that he had become to feel a real holiness about himself. He extended a hand in greeting to the seated man, feeling a warm crispness in the grip.

Father Rafferty stood, at last recovering from the immediate impact of the Jesuit, and shaking the strong hand proffered. He, too, liked the firmness of the handshake, confirming his long-held belief that a lot could be drawn from the simple, timeworn greeting.

"Hello, Brother. What brings you to this part of the world?" he asked.

Ignatious told him briefly about his mission within the new role the Holy Pope himself had ordered, and that he was here today to seek out anyone who may benefit from his brand of counseling. He also offered to hear confessions and, if required, administer Holy Communion on the Sunday.

Father Rafferty was delighted with the visit and the intriguing mission. No doubt there were several parishioners who would benefit from a meeting with the Jesuit. He immediately invited Ignatious to stay for a light lunch and evening meal, giving them a chance to talk.

Ignatious readily agreed. He looked forward to a decent meal, which he felt certain the priest would be able to offer -- prepared and cooked by someone else, of course, -- perhaps the industrious lady earlier encountered. Father Rafferty led the Jesuit through a connecting door and into the recently built accommodation attached to the church.

Salad sandwiches were soon provided for lunch and they were, indeed, supplied by the cleaning lady, who turned out to be a Mrs. Bertha Collingswood, personal help to the good Father, who sorted his mail, cleaned, laundered and cooked for him.

A widow, she had lived through a childless marriage to Kenneth, who had died from cancer of the bowel two years ago. Although she'd dearly wished for children, she had enjoyed a mostly happy life with Kenneth, none-the-less. Her memories remained with her and helped to sustain, as did the work she happily carried out for the priest, free of charge. She would be preparing the evening

meal, pleased to have a guest, especially one such as this.

The parish priest quickly warmed to the Jesuit, still bathed in the "glow" of the holy man, and suggested he take some confession this very afternoon. The confessional times were posted as being from 2pm to 3.30pm, and there were usually a reasonable number of people attending, normally around twenty or so in total. Ignatious graciously accepted the offer.

At five minutes to two, the priest escorted Ignatious into the church where they observed a gathering of around a dozen people knelt in the pews awaiting confession. As always, women outnumbered men; on this occasion there were nine females and only three males. Of these, there were five schoolgirls and one schoolboy. It wasn't as though women sinned more than men, it was more a case that women were more open with their sins and problems and were also able to admit to themselves that they had transgressed. Males seemed more obstinate and ready to pretend that any sinful behavior was not really sinful.

"Parishioners," Father Rafferty announced to the smattering of people. "I would like your attention please." His words echoed around the spacious building, the design accentuating the acoustic value.

"I would like to introduce to you an eminent visitor to our humble parish." Ignatious cast a sidelong glance at the priest at the description of 'eminent.' "He has traveled the world to spread the word of God, visiting many unknown and dangerous areas in the past, being undaunted by his task. A Jesuit priest, he is named Brother Ignatious Saviour. The name Ignatious is a truly venerable one, being the name of the founder of that fine and dedicated branch of Catholicism. The good Brother has graciously offered to take confessions this afternoon and you may visit him in confessional box two. I urge you to attend for his special brand of advice whilst receiving the Lords penance."

Father Rafferty then raised his arms wide and pronounced: "Go in peace and may the Lord God bless you all." With that, he turned to Ignatious, smiling. "Please, Brother, take booth two; I will take booth one as is my usual custom," he said in a whisper, the words carrying over the intently listening congregation. The men of God walked briskly to their respective confessional boxes and closed the doors.

For several minutes, the parishioners sat, looking in the direction of where the two priests had stood, each feeling the strange compelling aura of Brother Saviour. Then, one of the women stood and, with head bowed respectfully, shuffled along to the narrow benches arranged before the booths.

She went immediately to booth two, entered and knelt. In front of her was a crucifix bearing a plaster model of Jesus, draped with injured hands nailed to the cross, crown of thorns above thin trickles of blood that covered the forehead, an incredibly sad expression in the eyes; eyes that looked into the very soul of the sinner before Him. The cruel, open wound in the side looked so real, it was sure to bleed soon.

Mary Stewart, bowed her head again, unable to take the penetrating eyes, as she clasped her hands, leaning them on the small shelf placed beneath the crucifix. She was a wicked sinner, not fit to be in the presence of her Saviour. Her eye caught the slight movement of the shadowy figure to her right, behind the gray, closely meshed screen. Another presence began to flow through her, an almost tangible sensation. Brother Ignatious Saviour had turned to her, unable to see the miserable woman clearly, but his effect a touch more pronounced than that of the plaster figure on the wall. Father. Father. Please. Take me! Do as you will! Rape me! Scourge me! Cover me with your blessing!_ Mary was shocked at the terrible thoughts that had entered her mind - without knocking!

"Yes, my child." The warm, comforting voice of the Jesuit floated to her. "I will hear your confession."

Mary clutched the string of Rosary Beads tightly, so much so that they were in danger of snapping. She blessed herself, making a hurried and practiced sign of the cross, kissing the small silver crucifix that dangled from the end.

"Father forgive me, for I have sinned," she began, using the words

drummed into her from early childhood. "I am a sinner, an unworthy and wretched person."

"We are all sinners, my daughter. God is all forgiving. You should not fear his wrath; it will not touch you. He has knowledge of all the frailties of Man." The soothing voice melted over Mary. "Tell me now; in what way have you sinned?"

Mary had never before felt so able to speak; to confess her innermost secrets. "Father, I am 40 years old and am happily married. Married for twenty-three years -- no children, unfortunately. I have never been unfaithful and, as far as I know, neither has my husband, Michael."

"As it should be," interposed the Jesuit.

"Yes, Father. Quite. But.... but." Mary paused. It was a struggle to admit her sin. She took a deep breath. This man would wring everything from her. "Well. Last week, I had a visit from an old friend. Someone I had worked with in a Bank before she left to go with her parents to live in Worcestershire. We were always very close; she sometimes would come out dancing or whatever, with Michael and myself."

"Go on, child."

Outside the confessional, the short pew had filled with five other persons, four of which were female, waiting patiently to tell the holy man of their transgressions. Under the pretext of deep prayer, eyes closed, heads bowed, hands clasped, to a person their ears were straining to catch the low but audible words of the unsuspecting Mary. What unspeakable thing has she done?

Mary went on: "Last Wednesday.... no it would be Thursday; I know it was Thursday, as that's the day I check my Lottery ticket. I don't want to know immediately, if I'm a winner. I'd checked it with Jacqui, that's my friend, and I didn't win. Someone wins every time so..."

"Yes. But what do you wish to confess?"

"Sorry. I do tend to go on a bit." Mary continued: "Well. We had had a couple of glasses of red wine - just two each and were sitting close to each other on the settee, when Jacqui put an arm around me and hugged me to her. I thought she was just being naturally affectionate, us being old friends and that." She paused, getting to the nub of the matter. "When I turned to her, she ... she ... well, she kissed me!"

"In what way did she do that?"

"In a more than friendly way!" Mary swallowed. "She, well ... you know ... she gave me a ... a lover's kiss. Yes. She pulled me to her and ... Oh, I feel awful telling you this."

"To obtain God's forgiveness, you must tell all. You cannot hide anything from Him. He already knows but it is necessary for salvation that you admit it to Him, through me, His humble servant." The warm, soothing voice sounded totally calm, completely unshocked.

"She pushed her tongue into my mouth," she mumbled.

"Speak up, please." Mary repeated the sentence.

"She pulled me to her and began to fondle me, Father. Fondle me in private places."

"Well, my child, you cannot be seen to have sinned when this act was committed by your friend, against your will and without warning."

The poor woman blushed crimson, her cheeks aflame. The eyes of the Saviour bore into her. "But, Father. I responded!" She allowed a silence, waiting for the bellowing admonishment.

"When you say you responded, did you do back to her what she was doing to you?" came the calm response.

"Yes, Father. I responded in kind. And, the thing is, I enjoyed it!"

The Jesuit spoke, still calm, unhurried: "You are forty years old, my daughter, and you will have looked back on your life. No matter how contented that life may have been, you will have felt that your freshness is beginning to pass. You will feel less attractive to the male; not quite as active as you used to be; not as quick of mind and nimbleness."

Mary listened attentively, as did the awaiting sinners, straining their ears to the limit.

"This is a natural reaction when women reach that time in their lives. You are in the company of thousands in the same turmoil. It is like starting to - what term would you use? Court. Is that it?" Without waiting for a reply, he continued: "You would be courting again. Young love: fresh, open and pleasant. My child, good though that may now feel, it is probably not your true self. You are human and simply reacting in a human way. God will not punish you for that. However, this is not the place to receive my fullest advice." The Jesuit then lowered his voice a tone, effectively preventing the listeners from hearing what he now said.

"I would like to meet you privately, my child; away from here. Somewhere where your mind can relax; take in the surroundings of nature."

Mary's interest was aroused. "Yes, Father?"

The voice came to her like a soft breeze whishing through a tunnel. "Is there a place nearby where we can meet? Somewhere in the countryside," he said. "With the sounds of birds, the breeze and the scent of flowers? God's little trinkets."

Mary knew just the place. "Yes, Father. About three miles south of here, there is a beautiful little copse." She spoke in a voice little above a whisper. "It lies a little off the main path and the area is well signposted. It's called Bluebell Dell. It is gorgeous." Mary's eyes were alight her embarrassment now vanished. "I could go there on Wednesday next, if that's okay with you. I will have a free day then."

"Yes. That will be fine. Could we make it around nine-thirty in the morning?"

"Yes. Yes. Whatever time is best." Mary was now eager - another courtship, a secret tryst!

"Do not let anyone know of this, my daughter. Unfortunately, in this day and age, people are overly suspicious; see bad in everything."

"Oh, Father, I won't. No, no I won't!" She wanted to please. She wanted to feel again the holy experience that was even now cocooning her body. Take me! Rape me! Abuse me! Scourge me! The thoughts flashed through her mind again - and she was not ashamed. Through the near-trance, she heard her penance announced. "Four Hail Mary's and the Rosary once. Go in peace."

Mary now looked fearlessly at the plaster crucifix. It's eyes were still sad, but no longer searching her soul. She blessed herself, noting the tiny trickle of blood that seeped from both her hands where she had gripped the beads too tightly, and left the confessional.

As she shuffled past the waiting people, she was smiling. A great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. As she passed the first person, a woman in her sixties, she was acutely aware of the steely glare, the unyielding look of condemnation. The woman rose, almost pushing Mary onto the wooden seat, as she entered the booth. The next person, a woman around her own age, craned her head to glance slyly, a look of disgust in her expression. Mary continued along the row. The next person was a boy of around twelve, who, red-faced, smirked as he attempted not to laugh aloud. He would now have a further sin to confess!

Mary then passed an attractive woman, clothed in a rather inappropriate red dress that clung to her, pronouncing every curve. She would be around thirty years of age. The lush, dark hair swung to one side as she looked Mary full in the face. The woman was smiling and looking deeply into her. The look was unmistakable. She was interested in the same way as had been her friend, Jacqui.

Squeezing past the woman, undeniably enjoying the closeness of the flesh as their bodies were pressed together, Mary at last reached the aisle. She moved to a vacant pew and knelt to carry out her penance.

CH010

CHAPTER NINE.

That evening, back in his motor home, having enjoyed a thoroughly satisfying meal with Father Rafferty, Ignatious settled down to ponder the words of wisdom and advice he was to give to the wretched sinner whom he had arranged to meet. He lay, fully clothed on the comfortable bed and closed his eyes.

He would listen again to the woman's feelings and obtain the real truth from her. Her experience would be lodged in his brain, filed in its own compartment, contributing to the unending dossier of life that he had assembled through the years. His advice would be absolutely correct; he never made mistakes in that department. His holy presence would render the sinner incapable of any resistance to him or his words. She would be comforted, forgiven, absolved. He would suggest that, as she had encountered lesbian feelings, she should make contact with the holy Virgin Mary; confide in Her, accept Her embrace. Then he would send the woman to Her!

After an hour of pondering and considering options, Ignatious undressed and lay, naked, beneath the single cotton sheet. The night was sultry and sweat broke out over his body. Again, he closed his eyes, tenderly squeezing his manhood, enjoying the pleasantness. He did not see this as sinful, it was a natural action and not to be degraded into such a category, as The Church so easily did.

He did not sleep immediately as his mind wandered. Back, back in time to the Mission he had been selected for, under the guidance of the experienced priest, Father Jonathan Peter Christian, a tough, 43 year-old veteran.

Arriving in Brazil by air, the small group, consisting of four men and two women, were welcomed by a priest, Father Vincento Aloise, who drove them in a rickety, ancient truck, to his church nearby. They sat on roughly made wooden benches that had been fitted down each side of the vehicle, and the canvas covering flapped about wildly as they traveled, due to it being rotted with age and years of heavy rain. The amount of canvas remaining would offer no protection against the elements and would have been better removed.

After being introduced to the two other priests of the parish, whom they met lounging against the church entrance, both smoking long, dark colored cigarettes of an unknown brand, they were ushered into Father Aloise's private quarters. The group was a little surprised at the good size and cleanliness of the place, somehow expecting wooden seats on a straw and dirt floor. Why, no one could have explained. The exception to this view was Father Christian, who had visited this church on four previous occasions.

After a very good, wholesome meal, the accommodation was sorted. The men shared an adequate apartment, situated in the rear yard of the church, whilst the two nuns were placed in a smaller apartment in the same courtyard.

The two who formed the group apart from Christian and Saviour, were Father Thomas Lassiter, a young man of twenty-three years, who hailed from Australia, and Father Gerard Ottomier, an American, thirty years of age.

Sister Evangelica, a young Englishwoman of twenty-five, had been a nun for five years and this was her first sortie abroad. She had learned comprehensive medical skills and was considered to be a useful asset in the remote areas into which she was to travel. She was looking forward to the venture with eager anticipation.

Evangelica's companion, sister Dolorita Vasquez was a nun with two years full experience. Under the severe habit, she was a pretty, dark-skinned Brazilian, 24 years old, who had gone to England for training in nursing and languages. She had passed the courses with flying colors. Like Evangelica, she was excitedly anticipating the task ahead.

At five-thirty, the following morning, a raggedly dressed young boy of about eleven years of age, ran around waking up the group so that they would not be too late in setting off on their mission up the Amazon. The boy entered the female accommodation quite unabashed and shook the ladies vigorously until their eyes shot open. Yelling something unrecognizable to them, he shot out like a rabbit and disappeared through the now open courtyard gates.

Ignatious's eyes opened wide but saw nothing. His body functioned but

his brain was locked in a time past, in a world far away. The eyes closed again, aiding the restful period.

After a much-obstructed journey lasting half an hour, the group was aboard the ancient passenger boat; steam driven and cruising gently down the calm waters of the awesome Amazon River. So near to the port, the river traffic was bustling in a seemingly disorderly fashion. The fact that there were no collisions made it clear that some semblance of order existed.

Some twenty minutes later, the party was making headway, the traffic now much lighter and the current flowing more strongly. The pilot of the craft steered into the middle of the river as it widened, giving a mini-commentary on the various sights on shore and the abundant and varied wildlife that paraded on land and in the water.

The pilot was the owner of the boat and very proud of its smooth-running engine and its well-painted exterior. A native Brazilian, Palermo De Gatzca, he was a married man who boasted twelve children and eight grandchildren. At the age of sixty-two, he was an active man in every way. His skin was a deeply burnt brown, with a majestically lined face, giving character and reflecting the experiences of his lifetime. The nut-brown eyes shone alertly from folds of flesh that, with age, were threatening to completely obscure them.

Ignatious remembered the face well; he had studied it on many occasions during the journey, trying to fathom what kind of man lay behind. The face was like an impenetrable wall. He inadvertently groaned, rolling onto his side and instantly back again, as his mind shot past the early part of the adventure, moving to the second day along the river.

They had moored against a bank protected by thick, overhanging trees overnight, sleeping under fly nets to keep away the many buzzing insects and the quieter moths.

The clouds had been building up since the early hours, it was now eleven-thirty in the morning, and had accumulated as if gathering for war. The hitherto absent wind began to blow a little stronger, then gust, then settle into a strong breeze. The clouds covered the sun and the day became dark, with a kind of greenish hue.

The small boat meandered along, still taking a middle position, as the group looked nervously at the ever-threatening sky. Thunder began to rumble, sounding many miles away and the wind picked up. The gentle rippling of the river was now choppy with larger waves rolling along intermittently. The boat began to roll with the comparatively small swell.

To the questions put to him by the more forthright of the crew, Father Lassiter, the Australian, De Gatzca would only insist that there would be no problem - the clouds would break and disperse soon and the best position for the boat was out in the middle rather than hugging the bank, where danger lurked in the form of tree roots and obstacles thrown into the water by irresponsible people.

Again Ignatious stirred, asleep but restless as the memories traipsed across his mind.

Plop! Plop! Thud! Plop! Spots of rain descended onto the dry wooden flooring of the boat as it bucked more violently now, the river becoming alarmingly hostile Plop, plop, plop, plop, thud, thud, faster now, heavier.

At last, De Natzca realized the vulnerability of the craft; it was like a twig thrown by a child into a fast moving stream. He decided that now was the time to steer nearer to the bank, taking note of the frightened and anxious expressions on his passenger's faces as he turned the wheel.

At that moment, an almighty clap of thunder rent the air, quickly followed by a flash of sheet lightning that lit up the boat and the cringing people hanging desperately onto the brass side rails. The screams of the females were immediately drowned by a roll of thunder, even louder than the last as the Gods screeched their venom at the audacity of the feeble humans who were daring to challenge their great power.

The bolt of lightning that spat at the boat crackled down in a vicious

hiss. The head of Palermo De Natzca literally turned to stone as the charge speared through his body, striking at the tiny bald patch at the rear of his head; a patch that he took great lengths to hide with a skilful combing of the tightly-curved hair. The hair disappeared in a puff of smoke.

The shocked missionaries looked on, mouths agape, taking in the electric smell that pervaded the air around them. Palermo's lifeless body was draped over the wheel, arms encircling it as if in protection, holding it in its turning position. The curve of the boat's route took it broadside on to the freak weather, the wind gusting mightily in gale force with rain hurtling horizontally. In a visually stunning movement, the boat rocked violently, righted itself and then flew from the broiling water, flying six feet into the air before spinning like a barrel and crashing into a clump of trees on the river's edge and smashing into pieces.

In fleeting seconds, Ignatious saw the figure of Sister Evangelica, the English girl, hurtle back into the broiling river, hitting it with force and being carried quickly away. Almost at the same time, he saw Father Lassiter fly past his entangled position, trapped in sturdy branches, to become fatally impaled upon a broken limb just a few feet away, that jutted out like a spear. The point of the branch entered the open, screaming mouth of the priest exiting in the middle of his left foot, skewering him like a pig on a spit.

Shocked but aware, Ignatious saw the good Father Christian clinging to a gnarled tree root as the water beat about him, trying to drag him to his death. Then, in one quick movement, Christian rolled from the river and huddled into the widespread roots, curling into a ball.

Looking around, Ignatious made out the frail figure of Sister Vasquez trapped in branches some six yards from his own position; she appeared to be either unconscious, or dead. A further sweep of the area revealed Father Ottomier wriggling into the foliage, seeking refuge from the near-hurricane that was all about them. As he watched, the shattered body of a squirrel monkey, its white face covered in blood, crashed into the dense branches near to Ignatious's head, where it stuck for a few moments before hurtling out into the raging river to be swept into oblivion.

With a start, Ignatious awoke, jerking upright in his terror. Bewildered for minutes, he gradually regained his senses, realizing that he had awakened from the deep trauma that had bedeviled him since returning from that fateful expedition.

He rose from the bed and towed away the sweat, a combination of the night's heat and the terrible memories. Before returning to continue the sleep, hopefully without dreams, he removed the saturated sheets and replaced them with clean, dry ones. Fluffing up the pillow, he slipped beneath the fresh cotton sheet and went immediately to sleep. This time, it was untroubled.

CH011

CHAPTER TEN

Surprisingly, perhaps, most murders are solved quite quickly. There are some, however, that take years to solve and some, of course, that never reach a conclusion. The three cases being handled by Graham Sampler were moving in the direction of the 'never solved' as there was absolutely nothing to go on. If a person were to be apprehended at some stage, guilt or innocence could be easily established by comparing the DNA. However, it was always necessary to be able to produce further damning evidence in order to really have a case that would succeed.

Although the killings bore the same identity - poisons mysteriously administered to the victim, there was no other obvious connection. Even DNA would only be able to show that a person had been at the scene and even, possibly, that the person had had sex with the victim; none of these proved murder. Sampler had pored over the reports of each and looked endlessly at the photographs, but nothing had sprung out at him. The report on the death of Lawrence Maddigan was expected from Doctor Wray this morning, so maybe that

would shed some light.

Expecting nothing, Graham moved to the far wall of his office, where blown-up photographs of the victims, taken at the scene, were arranged. Each time he had looked, he had felt that there was something similar; something he should spot.

He looked hard at the bizarre pictures of the naked Maddigan. This was the only male - so far -- and it was the only body that showed marks of violence. Even the violence appeared to have been consensual. His eyes slowly roved down the body, from the hanging head to the feet. He studied the surrounding area, taking in the unremarkable ground, with its grass shoots, wild flowers, weeds and sprinklings of moss.

He began to walk to the next set of pictures, the ten-year old Kylie, when he suddenly halted, a small opening of his mind. He had noticed something! Slowly, he returned to Maddigan and looked at the dead man's feet. For several minutes, he studied, silently, a hand stroking the smoothness of his chin, absently noting the pleasant smell of the after-shave on his fingers.

Going back to the desk, he opened a drawer and withdrew a powerful magnifying glass. Yes! Detectives really do use them! Focusing it at a point on the outside of Maddigan's right foot, he examined the area carefully. Something was protruding from beneath the foot but, even with the glass, it was difficult to identify.

Keeping the picture in mind, he moved to Kylie, very slowly sweeping down with the magnifying glass over the sweet figure in the bright summer dress. Just by the girl's left thigh, he spotted it. No wonder he hadn't noticed it before; the busy pattern on the dress deflected the attention from such a tiny object. Trying to keep his excitement down, he went to the pictures of Debbie Singleton. Again employing the glass, he carefully examined the area next to the body. First, down the right side where he failed to find what he was seeking, and then slowly up the left hand side. By the thigh, he found the item in plain view - a small bunch of colored bird feathers. Now, here was a clue - a clue of some kind; small but a clue, none-the-less. That all three entertained a bunch of feathers next to their bodies, and the same iridescent hue at that, was too much to be coincidence. His policeman's nose told him that this was significant. In what way, Graham was not yet sure but significant it was.

As he turned, intending to call his detective Sergeant in, Miller entered the office. "Sir," he began, "There's been another murder. A woman again and in Watford!"

Graham stopped in his tracks, his elation dwindling. "Oh, God!" he gasped. "Not another, and so soon. Do we know it's the same killer?"

"Well, no, sir. The local police have asked us to go down there and take a look. They can't see a means of death."

Sampler's heart sank. This again fitted the modus operendi. _How many more before we get the vital break-through?_ he wondered. "Christ!" he spat, "Is this guy on a spree, or what?"

"We need to catch him soon, sir," said Clive, unnecessarily.

Graham looked at his colleague. "We will catch him, Clive, I've no doubt of that. It's a question of how soon - or how long!" Remembering his discovery, he caught Clive's arm. "Ah. Take a look at this, will you?" He guided Clive to the photographs. "I have just spotted something that may be of help. I don't know how as yet, but I feel that it's a small light in the tunnel."

Handing the glass to Miller, Graham pointed out the tiny bunches of feathers next to the bodies. His friend studied for some moments before he spoke. "Yes. I see what you are saying. It is more than coincidence to find little bunches of feathers near to the victims in each of the cases, I would agree with that. What it tells us, I am not sure. However, I feel pretty certain it will become part of the evidence and, who knows? It may lead us to the killer. I suppose we should give it some thought when we get back."

"Right, Clive. Come on. Let's go." The two moved off to leave the building and motor over to Watford.

Once again, the siren needed to be used whilst in the Metropolis but, once away, the progress went unhindered. Arriving at the local police station, the detectives were led to the scene. The similarities began to build: within the London outskirts, a mile or so from the main town, along a rough dirt path, through bushes, past trees and into a small clearing.

The body lay in the open, directly at the foot of a mini-cliff, which Graham estimated to be about seventy feet in height. From several areas on the cliff side, jutted stringy bushes of some kind. In a rough line from near the top, branches of these were broken, their fresh, white limbs bright in the sunlight. Clearly, the path of the body, which must have fallen, or been dumped, over the edge after being murdered.

Sampler and his assistant moved over to the body as it lay on its back, arms spread wide, one at a crazy angle, broken in three places. One leg was out of sight, under the woman's back, again severely fractured, with the other bent at the knee, the foot turned inward and also at an abnormal angle. She would be around thirty-seven years of age and, beneath the cuts and lacerations to the face, it could be seen that she wore no make-up.

As the men from the Met. had been traveling down, a forensics team had arrived from the local police station, together with a pathologist, a Doctor Bernard Bracewell. It was he who had been examining the body and now he gently eased it onto its right side to feel and prod at the rear part, expertly diagnosing the multiple fractures to the spine.

Completing his task, the doctor straightened then turned to the new arrivals. "Good morning, gentlemen," he began. "I am Doctor Bernard Bracewell, the pathologist." The detectives returned the greeting. Bracewell continued: "Well, I'm afraid you have had a wasted journey here. Why you were called before I had had a chance to see the body, I can't imagine. This unfortunate young lady has not been murdered, she has suffered a massive heart attack."

"Heart attack?" thundered Sampler. "Heart attack?" Then dumbly: "Are you sure?"

The pathologist put on a tolerant expression and said, calmly. "Yes, detective. I'm quite sure." Looking up the rise of the cliff, he spoke his thoughts. "I imagine she has simply come out here to enjoy the summer's air and the captivating view from up there. Maybe even on a picnic. She may have stepped near to the edge and that's when the attack came. She would know very little of it. The bodily damage, I would say, was all caused by the fall."

Graham and Clive were astounded. "Has anyone checked the top?" asked Clive, knowing the answer.

"No. Not yet. But a constable should just about be there now." As he spoke, a uniformed policeman appeared at the edge of the drop, holding in his outstretched arm so that all could see, what was plainly a wicker picnic basket. "A cloth and some food laid out here, sir," he called. "And none appears to have been eaten."

A false alarm! Graham did not know whether to be angry or pleased. At least his killer had not struck again. A voice broke into his thoughts: "Sorry about your wild goose chase, gentlemen." It was the pathologist. "I think the officer at the scene panicked a little, being aware of the recent murders, and so he called you in."

"Where is he?" asked Graham.

"Oh, he left about ten minutes before you arrived. Had to get back to the station."

I'll bet he did! Thought Graham. _Too embarrassed to face us!_ What an utter waste of time and what a letdown. "Okay, doctor," he replied, "These things happen. Better to be sure." His comments belayed his true feelings. Even so, Graham had a quick look around the body, in case there was a small bunch of bird feathers in the vicinity - there wasn't. There being nothing more to be done, the detectives left for the Met.

On entering the CID offices, Graham was asked to visit his boss, Chief

Superintendent Trevor Longfellow, and to take Clive along with him. First stashing his briefcase in his office, Graham rang through to Longfellow to ensure that he was free and being told that he was, set off down the corridor to the spacious office of his Superior, Clive walking alongside.

Knocking first before entering, the detectives were asked to take a seat, being motioned to two leather backed chairs at the front of the CS's desk. A man was seated next to Longfellow and Graham instantly recognized him as the eminent pathologist from Oxford, sent to take a second look at Lawrence Maddigan, Doctor Francis Wray. The two men smiled in recognition, greeting each other with a warm handshake before introducing Wray to Clive.

Once all were settled, CS. Longfellow began: "Thank you for coming in," as though there was a choice. "Doctor Wray has carried out a careful examination of Maddigan - he was a homosexual, you know," he said with distaste.

Longfellow had been in the force; rising through the ranks, for forty-two years and his progress to the present position was to be admired. However, he was of the 'old school' and not at all understanding of gays, ethnic minorities and those of simple mind. "I will let Francis bring you up to date with his findings." Turning to the pathologist, Longfellow waved his hand, inviting him to speak.

Firstly, the pathologist handed three sheets of typewritten paper to each, and these showed the officially couched words of the full pathology report. "We can skip the first two pages, gentlemen," he said. "You will see my summing up on page three." The men dutifully turned to the last page.

"I have carried out a meticulous inspection of the body," he continued, "and I have found the method used to administer the fatal dosage." He paused to straighten the papers before him. "As you will see, the poison used was, perhaps, a lesser known one: Gelsemium. The death would have occurred within two minutes and would have been extremely uncomfortable and painful. The two minutes would seem like a lifetime - which, in effect it was!" No smile at what may have been perceived as a sick joke; the man was stating facts.

"Finding the method of administration proved to be very difficult. Indeed, I had to make use of an exterior probe, affording well, let's say, extreme magnification. An assistant traversed the probe over the body in minute degrees, every millimeter being inspected. The technology never ceases to amaze me," he said, shaking his head. "The pictures were transmitted to a monitor placed nearby at which I was able to study in detail."

Wray's audience listened with quiet respect as he outlined his findings.

"At first, there appeared to be nothing untoward on the body, apart from the obvious damage from the pre-death treatment, but then, as I examined again the scourge marks on the victim's body, I spotted something."

Graham and Clive straightened in their seats, fully attentive. Could this be the break they were looking for?

"It was so minute, it was not very obvious even under the equipment," Wray continued. "But, sure enough, one of the lacerations showed the tiniest hole imaginable. Definitely not as the result of the beating; the puncture was too perfectly round, too defined. Only the merest fragment, but there it was, without a shadow of a doubt. Enough to prove that something new had been inserted into the wound - most probably a hypodermic needle - and an extremely fine one at that. To the naked eye, and probably even under normal magnification, this would not have been seen. Whoever did this, is no ordinary person; they will have had to have some kind of medical experience. To do what he, or she did, required a great amount of skill."

Doctor Wray leaned back in his chair. "So, there you have it, gentlemen, poison was administered by use of a hypodermic syringe. The poison was gelsemium and it was administered by someone with medical knowledge."

"So, doctor, do we take it that we are looking at a doctor, or a nurse?" asked Graham.

"No. I cannot say that. The killer may well be a practicing physician

but it may just as easily be a struck-off practitioner, or someone who has failed medical exams, or someone who has retired from the profession for whatever reason."

"What is your opinion, doctor?"

"My opinion is as I have just stated," answered Wray, matter-of-factly. "I cannot guess, if that's what you want. All I can say is, that whoever did this, has some expertise. It is not an easy task to perform."

Well, thought Graham_, at least we now have two clues: one the medical expertise and two, the feathers. Not a lot, but twice as much as before!_

Before Graham could ask about the other murders, Wray broke into his thoughts. "Whilst here, I have also had a look at the photographs of the other victims. Again, I used the magnifying equipment on them, looking at the monitor, as with Maddigan's body. Sure enough, after painstaking work, I found the same minute perforations on the others; the difference being that these had been inserted into existing puncture marks caused by previous immunizations. Thus, they were all killed in the same manner and, it would seem, by the same person."

There was much food for thought and a re-examination of the files. It would also be necessary to check on the National Computer to see if any similar methods were on file. The meeting broke and the detectives returned to Graham's office to study more, a measured excitement being evident.

CH012

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After having enjoyed a fatty breakfast of bacon, two eggs, sausages and grilled tomato, Ignatious was ready for the day ahead. This was Wednesday, the day of his assignation with Mary Stewart, the sinner.

Since the day of the confessional, Ignatious had visited the local area Girl Guide group, in Loddon Hall Road, where he met and chatted to several of the girls. At the ages of ten to fourteen, he had confidently expected one or two trauma sufferers, or girls with what they saw as behavior they could not tell their parents of, but what he found was a bunch of normal, healthy and well-balanced girls, who seemed to need no more than the knowledgeable and understanding advice of their Guide Mistress, Mrs. Juliet Penwortham, or Heather, as was her chosen group name. Although disappointed with the result, Ignatious was pleased with the lasting impression of holiness that he left behind. The Guides and their Leader were bewitched.

Whilst in Twyford, the Jesuit was mildly surprised at the number of community bodies and events there were. He had gone along to watch an open-air display of hand-bell ringing, which he found perfectly enchanting, and a boisterous round of Folk Dancing performed by a local group. A visit to the United Reformed Church revealed a female Pastor who, he was puzzled to find, did not appear to have fallen under his holy spell. Had there been more time, he would have dearly loved to visit some of the many women's organizations but the days were passing all too quickly and he had much to do.

Motoring casually along to the vicinity of Bluebell Dell, he parked up in a convenient lay-by, taking up most of the small area afforded. Alighting from the vehicle, he took in the already warm climate, delighting in the summery sounds of insects buzzing around, birds chirping busily, with a Lark on high, wings fluttering at an incredible speed, warbling happily as it searched for prey.

The sounds of the township carried dully on the heavy air as he locked up and walked through a small clump of gorse and into a small thicket. Breaking through this, some sixty yards from the road, he came upon a small, well-hidden clearing. Peering through the thickly surrounding trees, he observed a foot-worn path just a few yards away. In seconds, he was past the trees and leaning nonchalantly against a sturdy Yew, looking down the path, awaiting Mary. He was confident that she would come this way, there being no other.

To his left he saw, further along the downward slope of the footpath, what must be Bluebell Dell. Even from the distance, it offered a truly pleasing sight, with a virtual carpet of bluebells swaying gently in the light breeze with small, grassed areas peeping through.

Rounding a bend on the footpath, Mary saw the Jesuit. Her heart missed a couple of beats. He was here! He had actually turned up! Why shouldn't he? She thought, It's not as if we are intending any wrong. I am here to seek solace and advice. My wrongdoings are in the past -- but yet, why have I recently begun to touch myself in naughty places with the thought of the woman in the church in mind?

She was now but twenty feet from him, her previous nervousness slipping from her as she observed his warm, embracing smile. His hands were reaching out to her in welcome. No, nothing wrong in this: after all, I prefer women, don't I? Their hands met and clasped. Take me! Scourge me! Rape me! The thoughts impacted on her mind.

The warm, Godly voice was speaking: "Thank you for coming, Mary."

He remembers my name! "Before we experience the Dell, I wondered if we could have a chat just through the trees here, behind me. It is quiet and private - perfect for contrition." She allowed him to lead her, their hands still clasped. He walked backwards, perfectly certain of his step, even though this was his first visit to the area. She stumbled on, mesmerized by his gaze, unable to drag her eyes from his. Take me! Take me! Whip me for the sinner I am!

They reached the small clearing and he induced her to sit. Remaining in a standing position before her, Ignatious placed both hands onto her head. "Have you given my words some thought, Mary?" he asked softly. She nodded quickly. "And what is your conclusion?"

Mary croaked the words. "Well. W-well, Father, I agree that it is most probably due to reaching mid-life that I am experiencing these feelings. But..." She paused.

"Yes, my child. Continue."

Mary quivered as the eyes of The Creator seeped into her; the warm aura had returned. "I am still thinking about women, Father." She bowed her head in total abjection.

"And what is it that you are thinking about women?" The voice was still warm, soothing, comforting.

"Sex, Father. Having sex." Unaccountably, tears had begun to trickle from her eyes.

"You must not cry, Mary. You have done nothing wrong. Don't forget, God knows all. He is prepared to forgive, as long as you love Him. And you do love Him, Mary, don't you?"

Mary hurried her reply. "Yes. Yes. Oh, yes, Father, I do love Him. I do. I really do."

"Mary. You have recognized that you are suffering from a mid-life crisis and, as I have said, this is not at all uncommon. It affects different women in different ways. You are simply behaving in a human way." He smiled benignly. "Even so, you recognize also that you are not happy with your present feelings. Therefore, reject them! Remember how you were before. Be happy in what and who you are. You are no less the person because of your age. In fact, your age is an asset, Mary. Be content with it. Think of the experience; the knowledge you have gained in your years of life. You cannot go back and, if you could, would you? Really? Would you want to be a younger person in today's difficult world? Think, Mary. Think. Are you better now than you were? Yes! Of course you are! You may feel you have missed out on something but imagine if you had had those things, where would you now be? Happier? More contented?" The Jesuit allowed a long pause for thought. "Kneel, my lovely child," he then said. "Open your eyes. Look at me. Can you not tell me that your demons are now gone?"

Mary raised herself to a kneeling position, looking up at Ignatious with absolute devotion in her eyes. It was as though she had been carrying a

group of acrobats on her shoulders over the past months, but now, now they had tumbled! She felt strangely free, strangely contented. She no longer desired females, of that she was fully certain. This man, this God-like man, had exorcised the devil from her! She smiled as she met those eyes. They entered her whole being. Take me! Scourge me! Rape me! I'm yours!

Ignatious continued to look down on the wayward woman as his hands once more settled on her head. He could feel his pulses racing through her. Her hands moved to the cotton blouse that she was wearing and began to unfasten the buttons. Completing the job, she slid it from her and unclipped the bra, letting it fall onto the floor. Her breasts stood proudly, the nipples erect. Mary then began to unfasten the skirt as Ignatious watched silently.

When naked, she remained in the kneeling position awaiting her mentor's instructions. He lowered the cotton trousers he wore, to expose his earthliness to her. Mary took the movement calmly, totally at ease.

"To complete your path to normality, my child," The tone was as before, unruffled, warm and soothing. "You must accept the staff of The Lord, after which you will be elevated to another plane. Then we will complete your journey."

The spellbound woman moved her head to her master as she ministered to his desires. Minutes later, she was engaged in frenzied lust, the like of which she had not been involved for many years. At the end, she lay with her legs unashamedly apart, her face flushed and smiling, her mind truly on another plane.

Ignatious stroked each arm in turn, feeling and looking for the telltale signs of immunization. The only one he found was high on the left arm, an ancient smallpox scar, too closed for his intended purpose. Unfazed, he raised his trousers from their position around his ankles and fastened them in place. Reaching into a pocket, he produced a slender, squat implement into which he poured a substance from a small phial. Replacing the phial, he bent to Mary. "You are now prepared for the final phase," he said to her. "And, Mary." She did not respond. "No matter, but you should refer to me as Brother, not Father."

Through the mists of her mind, the words clicked into place. "Yes, Father. Take me where you will."

"The Virgin Mary is awaiting you. She is the one woman whom you can truly love, with a love transcending that which you have experienced here in this miserable world. Go to her!" With that, he pressed the slender object to the scar and pushed on a square knob at the top of it. It traveled only half an inch with a sharp snap, injecting the fluid into the bloodstream with a burst of compressed air.

Mary's eyes fluttered open, as did her mouth, saying or doing nothing for several seconds. Her eyes then took on a dark hue and she looked with lasciviousness at the holy Brother, seeing him again as a sex object. Her tongue rolled around her lips as she began to smile. Then, suddenly, her body arched upwards, supported on feet and shoulders, and the dark eyes rolled back beyond the eyelids. The tongue protruded in a bizarre rasp as Mary's breathing became fast and labored. She uttered a weird snarling sound, then collapsed to the ground, her body shaking from head to toe. She died in minutes from Opium poisoning.

From the top pocket of his shirt, Ignatious gently lifted out a perfectly preserved bunch of humming bird feathers and placed it next to her left thigh. He then replaced the discarded panties and closed her legs, resting the tip of the feathers beneath the thigh, holding it in position. Before leaving the scene, he said a prayer over the body, ending with: "Good Mother of God, receive your sinner and keep her safe."

Once back inside the motor home, Ignatious brought out one of two animal skin pouches. This contained sixteen well preserved bunches of humming bird feathers, all the same iridescent colors. The other pouch held a total of twenty. Ignatious never tired of looking at the collection; the mysteries of this particular bird's flight patterns, studied when in the Amazon, left him

in excited awe.

CH013

CHAPTER TWELVE

Apart from the morning's activity, Ignatious had spent most of the time familiarizing himself with his surroundings, enjoying the summers' day. He had eaten sparsely, his appetite diminished due to the heat. Now it was night and he had gone to bed, slipping easily into a gradually deepening sleep.

As in a serial, dreams, if dreams be the right description, begin where they leave off, each episode a continuation of the last.

In flashes of wakefulness, Saviour opened his eyes and took in the scene around him. The storm was still raging; the howling wind, the slanting rain and the roaring thunder ferociously attacking his weakened and damaged body as he lay helplessly entangled in the thick tree branches that offered him support. He shook with fear as a blinding flash of lightning seared through a thick branch, not six feet from his position, the wind hurling it into the air above to be swallowed into it's insatiable belly. He managed a fearful look to his right and saw the figure of Sister Vasquez, her clothing flapping like a hummingbird's wings, suffering the storm as he. He noticed a deliberate movement from her; a quick shift of position, a huddle deeper into the protective foliage - she was alive! Try as he may, Saviour could not see his other comrades, Fathers Christian and Ottomier. Suddenly the screeching hurricane reached a crescendo; Saviour's head began to swim, his eyes blurred and he fell into unconsciousness.

* * * *

The jungle tribe that found the strangely attired people had a history going back many centuries. They had not developed as in the sense of the western world but their particular skills were finely honed. The men and boys were highly skilled hunters and clever at producing the necessary items of their existence, whilst the females of the tribe worked hard as farmers of the lands, cooks, nurses, weavers and, of course, mothers.

They set about releasing the victims from their entangled prisons, checking that they were still alive before carrying them not too carefully back to the village on contraptions made from stout poles and animal hides, formed into elongated stretchers. Two men rested the front poles on their shoulders and, maintaining a strong grip, dragged the injured people at quick speed behind them.

Saviour awoke several times during his fever but was only vaguely aware of what was going on around him. His senses told him that he was being cared for, there being a feeling of comfort and the occasional suspicion of a young, deep-coffee-colored face swimming in and out of his view. Then the demons arrived again to extract their fun at his expense. He screamed in terror but it was not heard by the carers, the only sign being the renewal of the violent shuddering, coupled with unbelievable perspiring, as the fever bit forcefully.

Fifteen days passed before Saviour finally awoke. Although his head ached, he was in command of his faculties once more. He lay still for a short while, gathering his wits, appreciating the pleasant smell of something burning - like smoldering cork. There was also the mouth-watering aroma of food being cooked; fish and beef it seemed. He found that he was lying on a comfortable bed made up of some kind of vegetation, covered over by a smooth cotton blanket with a sheet of the same material draped loosely over him. The air was warm and the summery sounds of carried voices and buzzing insects came to his ears. Looking around, he found that he was in some kind of primitive hut, the only wall decorations being various types of animal heads and two or three brightly colored blankets placed in haphazard fashion.

Forcing himself to move from his comfort, Ignatious rose unsteadily to his feet. Leaning against a wall for support, he rested for a couple of minutes before venturing forward to the entrance - the single opening in the hut. He found he was walking with half-closed eyes and he shook his head to

clear the somewhat self-pitying feelings in which he was ensconced.

His heart leapt alarmingly as he left the building and he had to grab at one of the thick bamboo poles forming a part of the structure's entrance to save himself from crashing twenty feet or so to the ground below. The huts had been built on stilts! Quickly scrambling back inside, Ignatious knelt, looking forward out of the building at the camp below.

There appeared to be no men around, just a few young boys. However, there were many women and girls to be seen, all busy at some task or other. Like ants, they seemed to be scurrying around, to and fro, bringing, fetching, and carrying. It was obvious the main job was cooking; hence the delectable aromas abounding.

Looking to the Sun, Ignatious estimated the time to be around eleven in the morning. He was feeling ravenous. Clearing his head once more, he gingerly sought out the flimsy looking ladder with his foot and descended the almost vertical piece, holding tightly, body flat to the rungs, taking one slow step before the other. He began to sweat. The view from the top would have been quite magnificent had he been able to enjoy it, but his main concentration was surviving the journey to the ground, some thirty feet below!

At last, he arrived on terra firma, his naked feet appreciating the warm earth. He turned to face the camp and was surprised to see that all the activity had ceased and all were staring intently at him. Standing at the foot of the ladder, he leaned against it, not certain of what to do next.

To break the deathly silence, he waved an arm lamely, smiling at the onlookers. Nothing. He began to move slowly towards the group feeling foolish and embarrassed. For some unknown reason, and quite unnecessarily, he limped.

The group finally moved - backwards and slowly, taking an equal pace to Saviour's, their eyes never leaving him. He began then to worry about his comrades. If these people were so suspicious of him, it lent thought to the fact that the others had not survived or, dread the very thought, had been murdered!

In the midst of this impasse, a strong female voice came from behind the huts at the side of the first group. It spoke in Portuguese. Ignatious had a smattering of knowledge in the language and was able to get the gist of it.

"Stay where you are, man," it said, as the bearer broke from the group. She was clearly one of the tribe, though taller than the others, none of who exceeded five feet in height. The speaker was around five-feet seven inches. Unlike most of the rest, she was clothed in a loosely -fitting sarong, they being naked from the waist up, with the younger ones completely unclothed. It was only then that Ignatious realized that he, too, was naked! In his confused state, he had completely forgotten to search for clothing.

"My friends are afraid of you," she called out. "They only saw you as a sick man, being brought into our village. You now look recovered. Let me come to you first and we can meet. After that, it will be all right."

Ignatious stood where he was and waited as the woman came to him. She was no doubt beautiful to the tribe but, to his Western eyes, she was unattractive, having a rather pugilistic face. However, the rich, long black hair that cascaded down her back_ was _a thing of beauty and, close up, Ignatious was drawn to the beauty of the large, dark and expressive eyes._

Not knowing what to do, he held out both hands in front, ready to grip hers. Arriving, she slapped his hands down and moved to him, encircling him with her arms and rubbing her nose against his! Her breath came to him, sweet and aromatic, the source unknown. Mid way through the ritual, the woman stopped, looking intently into Saviour's face. Her expression was one of shock and disbelief. The silence reigned deafeningly for many seconds before she spoke. "From where do you come?" she asked.

Saviour had to have the question repeated slowly in Portuguese, as he did not know the language first spoken. The woman did as asked, but haltingly, all the time staring into his eyes. "From the West, across the seas," he stuttered, puzzled.

Amazingly, the proud female dropped to her knees, her hands sliding

down his sides. She bowed her head saying: "Man. You are not of this earth. Of which God are you?"

Saviour could not believe his ears - was she seeing him as a God? "I am from the Christian faith and my God is the Creator of all things." He hoped his Portuguese was good enough.

The answer did not seem to satisfy. She backed away, still on her knees, saying: "Man. You come to teach us of your Gods and you are among them."

Just then, a figure appeared from the dense vegetation surrounding the village. It was a man, naked apart from a small loincloth, carrying a long spear and holding a bunch of dead birds. He was of the same attractive coloring as the women and not much taller, around five feet six inches. Then another, and another, and another, emerged from different parts, all bearing spears and some kind of dead animal or birds.

The women broke from their trance and began a loud cheering, raising and lowering their arms as if in worship. They were not worshipping the men, merely offering thanks to their Gods for the food that had arrived. It was a daily routine. The tall woman then stood and walked to the center of the area, where the tribesmen moved to her with their kill. She clearly held a position of importance with them.

From the jungle, there then came a sight to warm Saviour's heart; one by one, his colleagues emerged. They had survived! On seeing Ignatious there, standing, clearly over the main effects of the illness, they ran to him, shouting greetings. Ignatious noticed that the clothes they had been wearing at the beginning of the journey were now replaced with crudely made shirts and shorts, and each wore a wide-brimmed straw hat on their heads. The group met, more collided, with their comrade, almost knocking him to the ground in their exuberance. Words poured out in an excited babble.

Through the throng of his comrades, Ignatious glanced toward the tribe. All were stood, silently watching the proceedings. Sensing Ignatious's tension, the missionaries ceased in their greetings and turned to follow his stare. For a few moments, the two groups stood, each motionless and silent.

Then, a figure new to Ignatious appeared. From the mode of dress, he was obviously the witch doctor. He moved toward them with a tribesman and the tall woman following, a couple of feet behind.

"What is happening?" Ignatious asked Father Christian.

"I don't know," he replied, puzzlement in his voice. "Something seems to be bothering them." Nodding his head in the direction of the oncoming trio, Christian explained: "The witch-doctor has a lot of power and influence here. He is quite friendly towards us now but he was highly suspicious at first."

"At first?" Ignatious turned to Christian. "At first? How long have we been here, then?"

This is our sixteenth day, Gawain," he replied. "You have been very sick. These people have nursed you like a baby. They also tended to the rest of us and had us on our feet in days. We..."

The words fell short as the trio stopped some fifteen yards away, the Witch Doctor shouting in a harsh, high-pitched voice: "Man! Leader! Come. Meet here!"

The message was aimed at Christian who, without hesitation, moved from his friends to meet the three tribes-people. Once there, he became engaged in what appeared to be serious but not agitated conversation. Occasionally, one or other of the trio would lean to the side in order to get a clearer look at Ignatious and then return to the conference.

After five or six minutes, Christian turned and shouted Ignatious over. He joined them, walking without the fake limp. The journey seemed ridiculously long, the sun beating on his back, but, as it was, he was there in seconds.

Christian put an arm around him when he arrived. "The good people of the village, being a tribe known as The Remunaras," he began, speaking in Portuguese for the benefit of his hosts, "say you are a God. Nothing I can say will dissuade them. Excanda, here, is a Chieftain of the tribe and she has

powers that allow her to know of things unknown to normal mortals. She has been visited when in your presence and has been told of your status."

Saviour almost laughed but, realizing that it would have been taken as a great insult, he kept a solemn expression.

Christian continued: "The good people wish to offer their greetings to you and hope you will grant them good harvests and plentiful food. Whilst here, you will not be expected to carry out any tasks and you may have the pleasures of whichever young female you desire, at any time."

"What?" expounded Saviour. "Pleasures of their females?"

Christian replied hastily, in English. "Yes. Don't rock the boat. Just accept. Our task here is now made that much easier because if you tell them of our Lord, they will believe it. We hold daily classes and have made progress but we have not been able to convince them yet."

"Well, Father. I will do all I can to help, of course but ... girls? No. I do not think I should do that."

Christian shrugged his shoulders and let out a short sigh, before turning back to face the tribal leaders. "Our holy companion, says thank you for your hospitality and he is pleased that you recognize his powers," he said, in their tongue again. "He wishes to withhold his mighty knowledge and live amongst you as equal." Quickly spotting the concerns on the leaders' faces, he added: "But he will accept that he should not work in your presence." This seemed to appease them and they urged Christian to introduce them to the new God.

The Witch Doctor was introduced as She-Akbiyla and he also greeted Saviour with the rubbing of noses. The aroma from him was not nearly so pleasant as that of the woman, Excanda, who was next to being formerly introduced. Finally, the silent one of the trio stepped forward and, after giving his name as Ko-At-Skanta, he carried out the now familiar ritual with the noses.

The trio formed a line next to each other, three feet from Saviour, bowed as one and retreated slowly backwards until the body of the tribe was reached. They then went their separate ways.

"Well done!" said Christian to Ignatious, slapping his shoulders. "I think we should find you something to wear, don't you?"

On the climb back to his quarters, Ignatious was much more aware of his nakedness and found it most embarrassing to be climbing above his colleagues, especially Vasquez, feeling that they would all be staring at his naked bottom! Once inside, he quickly found a beige-colored shift, donning it just before the head of Sister Vasquez appeared in the entrance.

From then on, Ignatious lived a life of relative luxury, the only work allowed him being that of a preacher. The tribe, men and women alike, erected a reasonably large church, with a solid stone altar installed at which communion was administered.

The tribe enjoyed their lessons and took on board the new God, Jesus, about whom they were taught. The missionaries allowed the age-old traditional Gods of the tribe to be worshiped alongside theirs so as not to cause any conflict, and this worked fine. The Witch Doctor was honored as an equal to Saviour but he refused to accept such high office remaining happy as the guide, counselor and, in some cases, physician to his people. However, Sister Vasquez carried out the greater medical work and she performed many hitherto impossible cures. She was liked and admired by the people and, secretly, she was looked upon as a greater healer than the Witch Doctor.

Throughout the stay, Ignatious remained celibate, although the simple beauty of the young girls on offer often tempted him. He was disappointed that his male counterparts never failed to take a girl to their beds at night. Sister Vasquez, revered though she was, was still a female and had no call on any of the men; nor were they allowed to choose her. Puzzlingly, it was permissible for her to have any of the girls, and in as many numbers as she desired but she refused, consoling herself with cleansing prayer. Even so, from Ignatious's vantage point in his newly erected building, high to the left

of the village where he had a view of the whole area, he often saw dark figures sneaking up the short ladder into her quarters. These consisted mainly of well-muscled young men but, on occasion, a budding young woman or two.

Life here was basic and hard, but there was a great pleasure derived from the result of sheer effort and cooperation. The newcomers learned many of the trades of the tribe, including expert hunting of animals and fishing without use of a line. Ignatious could only watch and learn as he accompanied the parties on their missions.

After six months, the missionaries felt it was time to move on. God had been brought to these simple people and the church was now established as a part of their culture. It was a job truly well done.

Although the leaders were disappointed that these strangers had to go, they gradually came to accept it. They even built a rough but serviceable boat ready for the journey, which moored at the river's edge, close to a shallow bank.

On the final night, a huge party was arranged. The food was in plentiful supply, accompanied by many different and tasty fruits. Also on the menu were varieties of strange and unknown drugs, derived from the many exotic plants that populated the surrounding jungle, which were swallowed, taken in liquid form or smoked. This was a regular feature of weekend life in the village.

Late into the night, when the drugs were taking full effect, the whole place was a mass of screaming, writhing, babbling and openly lovemaking people, of all ages.

Although his companions easily abandoned themselves into the debauchery, Ignatious tried to remain apart, praying constantly. However, when a nubile young woman, of what age he could not even guess, fourteen to seventeen, it was impossible to know, he succumbed. Kneeling in his loose-fitting shift, he found the girl's delicate caressing of his head, then body, irresistible. All his pent-up emotions and frustrations were given reign in a totally abandoned three-hour stint.

There was a touching scene the following day when the missionaries took their leave, with the whole village in the center of the compound, bedecked with aromatic flowers, swaying as one and singing a haunting song of farewell, their arms waving aloft to the rhythm. Many tears were shed, among both men and women, and shared by Vasquez. The priests, to a man, shuddered in withheld emotion, lumps being silently swallowed. Among the crowd, Ignatious caught the eye of the girl with whom he had spent the night; she was completely at ease and smiling unconcernedly. When he recognized more the age of her, he felt a pang of shame. It soon passed.

Ignatious awoke from his dream, a smile on his lips and an act of nature giving a warm sensation to his body. They were such pleasant memories. He sat up, rubbing away the sleep from his eyes. Bending his knees and encircling them with his arms, he rocked gently to and fro, basking in the recollections and enjoying the sight that the memory of the eroticism with the young tribeswoman had brought to him.

After many minutes reverie, he rose and prepared himself for the day ahead. He would have souls to console, confessions to hear.

CH014

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The police helicopter had taken to the skies early. The pilot, Sergeant Robert MacKay, had several young police officers to train that day, so an early start was essential. With him now was Women's Police Constable Wendy Travilcock, the name condemning her to being the butt of unending "jokes" with the immature males around her, even though pronounced: "travilco." She took it all in good part, feeling a contemptuous pity for the poor souls; some day they may just grow up, but she wasn't at all certain of that. The thing about it that annoyed her to some extent, was how the majority felt that her name meant that she was willing to give her favors to any who asked - or, in some

cases, demanded. No way. Being with such child-men made her appreciate the older, more mature kind who treated her in a perfectly normal way. MacKay's age was of no consequence in this equation; he was interested only in his job when at work, with no time for diversions.

This was Wendy's seventh lesson and she was beginning to really enjoy it. She had reached the stage where Mackay felt confident enough to let her take control and she reveled in completing new maneuvers.

From the unit at Heathrow, they were now skimming over the Thames Valley area, the panoramic view bringing a lasting joy to both. The sun was just making its presence felt, at eight-fifteen in the morning, and the ground below was beginning to show increasing signs of life.

Automatically leaning to one side as she caused the craft to execute a wide turn, Wendy spotted something below. At first, she wasn't sure of what she had seen, even if she had seen anything at all. She made another turn, throttling back a little and searching below, between glances at the complex instrument panel. MacKay remained silent but he, too, began to look at the ground, realizing that his companion was looking for something.

"Ah! There!" she gasped. "Something in the middle of that patch. See it?" Mackay had to stretch his body upwards to look past Travilcock's figure and then he spotted it. "That's a body," he said with unarguable certainty.

The WPC righted the helicopter and stole a quick glance at her instructor. "How can you be so sure?" she asked, surprised.

"Experience, Travilcock. Experience." He smiled thinly. "I have been on so many searches and found so many bodies in the past, that I have come to recognize one when I see it." MacKay was on the radio, contacting base as he spoke.

A little more than an hour later, Sampler, Miller and the pathologist, Doctor Sallie Dunning, were speeding their way to the scene, directed by the helicopter as it hovered over the spot. Sallie was half a mile behind the detectives and in front of the forensic team, who were just assembling back at New Scotland Yard.

Nearing the spot, Sampler parked his car and the two made their way through the bushes toward the clearing. Both men were thinking the same: the area was so similar to the others, apart from the first, where the young Kylie Johnson was found, that being an open field in plain view of any passer-by.

Great care was taken on the approach, every branch and every piece of ground being inspected before moving on. They did not want to spoil any evidence that may interest forensics. Minutes passed and then they were there. The clearing came upon them suddenly and both men stopped at the edge of the bushes through which they had come, surveying the scene. As almost expected, their gaze fell on a peaceful sight; a woman lying in repose, clothes more or less undisturbed, no signs of struggle and no signs of footmarks in the sturdy grass. They moved forward, again very carefully, with Sampler taking the lead.

He reached the body and studied the face, slightly contorted with the struggle against whatever poison, for he was sure it was poison that had killed her. No doubt a large dosage. This appeared to be a woman in her early forties, still carrying a smoothness of skin and probably a bloom to her cheeks in life, neatly dressed. It occurred to Graham that she might have come out here on a date. The face bore signs of carefully applied makeup, but the lipstick had become smudged and faded around the mouth, giving the impression, correctly, that it had indulged in some amount of kissing prior to death. That would mean DNA being in evidence. As before, the DNA would need to be matched with that already found, and match, it would.

"Ah! There it is!" he muttered.

"What is?" asked his colleague, who was walking slowly around the victim, keeping a distance of three feet or so.

"The bunch of feathers." Pointing. "There half hidden beneath her left thigh." That was the clincher. The men exchanged knowing glances. It was the work of their man again.

At that moment, Dunning broke through, brushing away debris that had

clung to her on her path to the scene. Walking up to Graham, she gave him a sweet smile, said hello to both men and announced that she would wait for forensics before carrying out her inspection.

The three came together and stood awaiting the arrival of the men in white polypropylene suits. Sallie chatted about her morning; how she had got up late, not oversleeping, simply too cozy to get up! She laughed, a pleasant tinkling sound, as she shook her hair away from her face. The small movement and sound inexplicably caused Graham's heart to flutter. He looked at Sallie, his glance remaining that little bit too long.

She looked quickly at him and then she, too, lingered on the experienced face of the Detective Inspector. A tiny electrical impulse crackled silently between the pair, and Sallie's eyes took on a darker hue. Their heads moved almost imperceptibly to each other, ready to make the inevitable kiss. Then, as one, they realized the point they had reached and both took a small step backwards as though recoiling from some unwanted experience. Even so, Graham's eyes swept down the woman's body appreciatively, his thoughts becoming instantly lustful. Sallie recognized the expression and accepted it with another warm smile.

Quick to react to the developing situation, one that had become clear to him, Clive stepped between the two as naturally as he could, mentioning the helicopter as a means of breaking the spell. "Look, Graham, the 'copter's on its way now."

The move succeeded as the couple looked skywards and waved at the disappearing machine. A noise behind them heralded the team of forensic officers. They moved into the clearing suitably dressed for the work, little plastic bags and tweezers at the ready, expertly seeking any disturbance to the area, bending to pick some object up and seal it in the bag, at the same time marking the date, time, object and it's location. The initials of the officer were then added. Without a word they carried out their task, gently easing the three onlookers aside as they moved to the corpse.

The whole inspection by the forensic team took up a full hour before they left the immediate area where the body lay and retraced their steps back to the undergrowth, checking again as they went.

Sallie, now becoming impatient, moved to the lifeless form of Mary Stewart and began her examination. Speaking in a low voice into the tiny recorder that she always carried on such missions, she recorded every detail: the position of the body, the surrounding area, the lack of signs of a struggle, every mark, scar and pimple on the body, as she carefully removed parts of clothing to afford a clearer view, gently replacing them as they originally were. It was clear that sex had taken place but to what extent would be a matter for the pathology room inspection later. Rising, she answered Sampler's unasked question. "I would say that death was caused by some form of poisoning and that it occurred approximately twenty-four hours ago. I'll know better when we get her to the Lab."

The woman once again bewitched Sampler as she turned to face him, the seriousness of the job showing on her face. His breath stopped for seconds as his heart tightened in his chest, his lips becoming dry.

Sallie recognized again the interest, and she broke into a smile, enjoying this unexpected command of the rugged detective. He was very attractive to her, she had always felt that, but she had never allowed the feeling to develop, knowing him to be happily married man who had never shown any previous signs of interest in her. Indeed their paths had not previously crossed, she never being around on Graham's visits to the laboratory.

Now, however, amidst the horror of a murder, with the body lying cold less than two feet from her, she warmed to the tingling that had begun. She moved past the two men, making sure that her body brushed against Sampler on the way. "I'll see you at the laboratory later, if that's okay," she called over her shoulder.

Sampler came to life. "Yes. I'll give you a ring in a couple of hours."

"Right," he heard as the pathologist became lost in the bushes. He

followed with Miller close behind. They broke through the vegetation and reached their car as Sallie's disappeared round a bend. "You drive, Clive," said Sampler. "I want to think a bit."

Yes. And I'll bet it's about that bit of skirt, not the murder, he thought acidly. He was correct.

On the journey back to the Met, Graham had begun wondering at how he had become so taken with the young pathologist. He had noticed her before, that much was true, but not really in that way. After all, he really _was_ happily married and he would not wish to do anything that might interfere with that state of affairs. Still ... she did seem to reciprocate. For a few miles, he fantasized about adult activity with her ... and she was great ... as was he!

Suddenly returning to the world, he was aware that Clive was speaking to him and it occurred to him that he had been for some time_. I wonder if I should have given any replies_, he thought guiltily. "Mmm," he said, hoping that would be sufficient.

From then, they talked about the latest murder and the similarities to the others. How were they going to catch this man? The clues, such as they were, led in no definite direction. By the time they had arrived back at the Yard, Graham had decided that the only way forward now, was to go back on the case and interview the bereaved and friends and relatives to see if there was a common denominator. Long, painstaking work, but it needed to be done and he felt that they would be better served carrying out the enquiries themselves.

A little over three hours later, with Graham and Clive deeply immersed in the murder case files, the telephone rang. "Yes!" barked Graham.

His mood suddenly altered when he recognized the sweet, warm voice of Sallie Dunning. "Oh, yes, Sallie," he said, his voice softening. Clive felt like vomiting! "Have you completed the examination?" Still sickly-sweetly. A pause and then: "Oh, okay. I'll pop round right away."

Replacing the phone, he looked up at Clive to tell him to remain here whilst he went to see Sallie; no point two of them going. Clive was smiling knowingly, almost - only almost, causing a blush.

Eyes widening in pure innocence, Clive remarked,: "Yes, Guv'nor. Will you be leaving the office?" The twinkle in his eyes betrayed the sarcasm.

"Enough of that," Graham returned gruffly. "Yes. Business."

"Of course, sir," he said respectfully.

"Yes. Well. You carry on here and I'll go and see what she has for us."

Clive grinned, his thoughts evident.

Graham got up and left the office, annoyed at his partner for his silent insubordination. He resisted the temptation to slam the office door as he exited.

Sallie greeted Graham with her warm smile and handed him a mouth mask. He gratefully donned the mask; the smell of this unpleasant room had turned many stomachs. There was also the risk of inhaling some nasty little microbe that would bring a grown man to his knees with sickness.

He nodded a greeting to the other person in the room, Kevin Brindle, assistant to Sallie, whom Graham had met on many occasions. He was a married man with two children and he was thirty-five years of age. It was generally considered that he should, by now, be head of his department but, as a plodder, rather than a go-getter, he had seen the energetic, ambitious Sallie take the position even though she was seven years his junior and had come into the profession some years after him.

Sallie began: "Well, Graham, we have carried out the examination, removed and weighed everything necessary and carried out some tests."

"Go on," said Graham.

"The victim died from a strong dose of Opium poisoning. This is the same as used on the young girl, Kylie Johnson. After very careful examination, I was unable to find how the drug had been administered."

Sampler groaned as Sallie continued, unperturbed. "Therefore, I borrowed the equipment left here temporarily by Doctor Wray. Even with that, I

could at first find nothing." She was all business now; no warm smile, or indeed, smiles of any kind. "Then, on studying an old immunization scar on her left arm - one that had completely healed over with no new puncture marks -- I noticed a slight redness to the area. Zooming in as close as possible, I observed the most minute of enlargements to the actual pores in that location. Kevin, here," she pointed to her assistant, "also had a look, and he agrees that the pores are extended beyond the normal."

"How on earth did he do that?" asked Sampler. Did he use a multi-syringe or something?"

Sallie smiled the business smile, saying: "No. I don't know of any such device. What it appears to be, incredibly, is an air-operated injection, a burst of compressed air forcing the fluid into the arm. However, that is most certainly the point of entry."

Graham looked at her in admiration. "Thank you, Sallie," he said. "That confirms to me that it is the work of the same person."

"I should also add," Sallie replied, "that sexual intercourse had taken place. On the evidence, I would say that the intercourse was consensual. There were also faint traces of seminal fluid in the mouth; not an ejaculation, it seems to be more of the lubrication stage. Enough for DNA samples, though, and I have retained a sample."

"Thank you, again, Sallie," said Graham as he tossed the mask into a nearby waste-bin and turned to leave. Sallie caught up with him and escorted him to the door. "I need to work a bit late, tonight, Graham," she said in a low voice. "Would you like to take a bite to eat with me at the pub over the road and then come back whilst I complete your report?"

Graham's heart missed several beats. The invitation definitely seemed to be concocted on the spur of the moment. What did she want? he mused. "Well ... er ... yes." he replied without thinking. "Erm ... I can certainly find work to do in the meantime."

"Good. Six, then?" Graham readily agreed.

Sending Clive home at five-thirty, Graham tried hard to concentrate on the work in hand but it was impossible. He kept reading the same lines time and again, without absorbing any of what he read. His mind wandered. What was he letting himself in for? The woman was young, beautiful, gifted - and married! As was he! What could she possibly see in him? Of course, he wasn't old himself but she was about thirty and therefore, in his eyes, very young.

The thoughts ran through his mind until he was suddenly jarred out of them by the shrill ringing of the telephone. It was Sallie to say that she was now leaving for the pub and would he be ready. He confirmed his readiness as he almost leapt to his feet, snatching his jacket from the door peg. He replaced the phone and hurried out.

On entering the pub, 'The Coat Of Arms,' he spotted the woman at the bar, ordering a drink. Muscling through the crowd, made up mostly of office workers on their way home, and a number of off-duty police men and women, he reached the bar just in time to pay for her drink, a Bacardi and Coke, and order himself a pint of Best Bitter.

Finding a reasonably secluded table in a corner near the entrance and next to an old style, multi-framed window, he asked Sallie what she would like to eat. "Anything with a salad," she replied. Graham walked over to a large sandwich display, situated on the far wall and completely out of style with the pub's old-fashioned decor, and chose a ham and salad sandwich for Sallie. Putting in the required coins, GBP1.80p, he took the cellophane-wrapped and sealed food, cut into perfect triangles, and wondered whatever had happened to good, wholesome food prepared on the premises, in times not too long ago. For himself, he chose a cheese and beetroot sandwich -- GBP1.60p - conscious of the fact that he had deliberately avoided foods that would have tainted his breath, such as egg, onions and garlic. Before returning to Sallie, he used his mobile to get in touch with Bethany making the excuse that he had a lot of catching up to do with his paperwork and he would not be home until eight-thirty, or so. He surprised himself with the easy way in which he was

preparing for an illicit affair with a married woman. In all his time with Bethany, before and after marriage, he had never once been unfaithful, nor indeed, had the thought ever crossed his mind. Now, he was coldly and determinedly laying the ground for - yes, a laying!

During the small meal, the couple chatted about work and a little about their home lives, not once referring to what it seemed both really had in mind. They enjoyed each other's company, the alcohol providing just sufficient stimulus to keep things lively.

Within the hour, they were in Sallie's office adjoining the pathology lab. Still ignoring the lustful plans stored at the back of each other's mind, they studied Sallie's typewritten report, whilst both sat on the desk rather than the comfortably padded chairs. The report supplied no information that had not already been given but, none-the-less, they went through the motions of reading and discussing the various points.

At the end, Sallie swiveled round, her legs unintentionally parting as she came to face Graham, looking into his face with undisguised desire.

He immediately slipped from the desktop and threw his arms around her, pulling her close to him, his body easing between the spread legs. As he began to kiss her passionately, his hands wandered over her upper body, thrilling him at the feel of her firm and ample breasts. He felt her tongue dart into his mouth as passions rose.

Who took off whose clothes, could not have been decided in the sudden blur of activity, but they were naked and having urgent sex on the desk in seconds. It was as though both had been saving themselves for this very moment, starving of sex in the meantime. There was much puffing, grunting, screaming and shouting during the bout, the rather macabre surroundings seeming to add to their desires.

Finally, it was over and they lay together, still coupled, for some time, holding, caressing and cuddling each other tenderly. Both were fully satisfied by the encounter and they realized it heralded the beginning of a new phase in their lives; a phase that was certain to bring pleasure, pain and deceit.

The conscience crunch came when Graham opened the door to his home at a quarter to nine that evening. On seeing Bethany's happy-to-see-you face, he suddenly felt like throwing himself to his knees and confessing all. For too many seconds, he simply stared at her, feeling that she could see right through him, knowing his infidelity.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" she asked, uncertainly, wondering at the stare.

Quickly gathering his wits, Graham replied: "Yes, of course, darling. I just had a thought that I'd forgotten something at the office -- but I haven't. That's all. I'm okay." He bent to kiss her as was usual, feeling the soft warmth of the lips he had kissed so many countless times, always enjoying the experience. Tonight was no exception. Guilty though he felt, he knew that this was the first of many future deceptions. The pathologist had seeped into his system and he wanted more.

* * * *

The following morning, Graham was back in his office, again looking through the individual files of the recent victims, together with Clive Miller. He had not seen Sallie and did not expect to. Their paths mainly crossed when a new murder occurred.

"Christ!" he suddenly cried, startling Clive. "Clive! You know what? I've never asked forensics about the feathers!"

Clive looked at his chief in puzzlement. "What about the feathers?"

"If they picked them up! It never crossed my mind before, but the pretty little bunches may become evidence. They might not even have collected them. I mean, why pick up a tiny bunch of bird feathers from a field? Pretty common things, I would think."

Already beginning to sweat from the warming day, he picked up the telephone and dialed through to the forensic department. He was soon speaking

to Sergeant Brian Flynn who kept the records and bags of evidence from recent cases investigated by the forensics team. After hearing Graham's reasons for the request, he said he would check his records and get back in a short time. Graham put down the phone and studied the foolscap pad upon which he had made notes from each case. "Clive," he said slowly. "Apart from the obvious things that link the murders, I can't spot anything in common that gives a real clue to the killer's identity."

"No, nor can I," came the rather unhelpful reply.

"But there is one thing that crops up in every report," still speaking slowly as if gathering his thoughts and speaking them out, "and that is the priest. The Jesuit."

Clive chuckled. "Surely you don't suspect him, do you?"

"No. Not exactly, but there's some reference to him in every case."

"Yes. Well, there will be won't there? He gives comfort to the bereaved doesn't he? Therefore, he's bound to be mentioned."

"Yes. I can accept all that but, just the same, we are going to have a word with him. Do we know where he is now?"

"No, but I can soon find out."

At that point the phone rang; it was Sergeant Flynn. "Hello Graham," he began. "I've checked my records and you're right. There is a small bunch of bird feathers in each case. Nobody paid any real attention to them but they have all been logged and bagged."

Graham's excitement was mounting. "So, you've got all the feathers - from each murder scene?"

"Oh, yes. Every one. Because they're so delicate, they've all been bagged separately - in their bunches. If you want them you will have to sign." He warned officiously.

"I'll sign okay. Give me ten minutes or so and I'll be there." With that, he hung up. In fifteen minutes, Graham had rushed down to forensics, signed for the goods and returned with them to his office. On looking at the individual bags, he was pleased to note that each had been logged with the date, time and the name of the victim. He pinned them to the wallboard alongside the pictures of the murdered people. Soon, if there were no further progress, the board would be too small to fit extra evidence.

"I wonder why he does this," mused Graham, aloud. "What is the significance of the feathers? There has to be a reason; I'm sure he doesn't go to the trouble of obtaining the specimens and then leave them near to his victims just for the sake of it." He sat, wondering. Clive was unable to offer any solutions either, so they each went on looking into the files for what seemed the thousandth time, hoping to glean some extra clue.

By teatime, both men were tired and had made no progress. They discussed what they should do next but even that was a puzzle. What could the next step be? They had all the information possible, had read and re-read the reports and witness statements and they were no nearer to a solution. Just then, the phone rang; it was Sergeant Flint in Penn.

"Oh, hello, George!" Sampler was pleased to hear the familiar voice. "How are you?" Then a thought occurred: not another murder! Before giving Flint time to reply to the first question, he spoke. "Not more bad news, is it, George?"

A short laugh cackled down the line. "No. No, not at all. You remember the Jesuit we spoke of?"

"Oh, yes?"

"Well, I've provisionally arranged for you to meet him, as you asked."

Sampler had completely forgotten. "Have you? Well, thanks, George. When and where?"

"I spoke to Father McGiven at St. Mary's a few days ago and he got in touch with the priest. He's agreed to meet you tomorrow, if you can make it, at the church. It's the only spare time he has at present."

It was short notice but Sampler was interested in the man. Clive could carry on here - unless another dead body turned up! "Yes. That's okay. At what

time?"

"He made the appointment for four in the afternoon. Will that be suitable?"

"Yes. That will do fine. Will Father McGiven be there?"

"Yes, if you have no objections. He'd like to meet you and he says the Jesuit is such a character that he finds himself wanting to be in his company all the time. Says he's never been so affected by anyone before."

"Mmm. I feel the chat will be carried out on our knees," he joked.

He heard the short laugh at the end of the line before the call ended and he replaced the phone. He looked up to see Clive smiling.

"On your knees, Graham? I don't think so, somehow."

Sampler chuckled. "No. Nor do I." He then went on to apprise Clive of the development and suggest that he go alone on this occasion. This suited Clive admirably; he would rather not be in the company of "holy" people.

"Okay, Clive. You may as well get off home now. I'll tidy up here. I'll take the file on Debbie Singleton home with me and travel to Penn tomorrow morning. I may well stay overnight. You can reach me on my mobile, if there's anything urgent." Already surreptitious thoughts were forming in Sampler's mind. He accepted the quizzical glance of his partner, without comment.

Once Clive had left the office, Graham picked up the internal and dialed Forensic Pathology. As he had hoped, Sallie answered. "Oh, hello, Graham," she said, brightly. "What can I do for you?" He resisted the urge to tell her.

"I'll be out on a job tomorrow," he began. "Probably take all day and I may have to find somewhere overnight."

"Oh. Where?"

"Penn."

"Penn? What a lovely place to visit. Work?"

"Yes. What else?" Graham put on a resigned note. "Meeting a priest, of all people. A Jesuit. Need to have a chat with him."

At the other end, Sallie was beginning to see where this might be leading. "I didn't have you down as a religious person, Graham."

"Just goes to show, you don't know everything about me, do you?"

"No. Nothing, really," she answered, lightly.

Graham decided it was time to put his proposition to her. "Sallie?"

"Yes." Guessing what was to come next.

"Is there any way you may be able to come with me?"

Even though the question was expected, it still caused Sallie to pause, her heart fluttering.

"Sallie?"

She spoke: "I can't just up and go, Graham. You know that." She paused again, Graham remaining silent. "Is there any reason for you to have a pathologist along?" she finally asked, warming to the intrigue.

Thinking quickly, Graham suggested that the police at Penn could have found something that may be linked with the murder and it needed an expert's view. "No-one is likely to question it, are they?"

Sallie's heart was pounding. She had always acted so professionally in her career, never one to make excuses or have unnecessary time off and was dedicated to the job in hand. The words filled her mouth so that she almost physically gagged. "Yes, Graham. I'll come. What time and where?"

The gagging now invaded Sampler, his hand shaking. "Lovely. Er, ten-tomorrow morning, if you can manage that. I'll pick you up on the drive at the entrance to The Yard. Okay?"

Sallie was firm now; she had made her decision. "Yes. That will be fine. I'll see you tomorrow, then"

His face coloring a deep red, Graham subconsciously blew a kiss down the phone and hung up hurriedly. He was behaving like a schoolboy and he felt foolish by it.

* * * *

The morning began, thankfully, a little cooler than of late, but still

warm. A slight breeze added to the comfort, even though it was a warm breeze. Sampler had told Bethany of his trip and that it was unavoidable. He failed to mention the company of the pathologist. Bethany was accustomed to such arrangements, however; a policeman's job cannot guarantee regular hours. It is not a nine-to-five occupation.

The guilt he had felt on leaving home disappeared as soon as he saw Sallie, metal instrument case in hand, standing elegantly on the drive, near to the entrance to Scotland Yard. She smiled as he approached and, leaning over the passenger seat, he opened the door for her.

As she got in and clicked the seat belt into place, she had to pull herself back from giving him a greeting kiss. What was she thinking of? Graham moved smoothly away, following the curve of the driveway out onto the road again. They stole a glance at each other, noting the excited gleam in the other's eyes, and the flushed cheeks. The adrenalin was buzzing. As little as a week ago, neither one could have anticipated embarking on an adventure risking the happiness of their partnerships. This was all wrong; it was unnecessary; it was devious; it was thrilling!

CH015

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was as Sampler and Dunning were taking the route away from The Met, that Ignatious was arriving in the vicinity of the rendezvous for an assignation with Thomas Singleton, the grieving father of Debbie.

Although he and Elizabeth's marriage had failed, Thomas still held a soft spot for her and whilst in shock at the untimely death of his daughter, whom he loved so deeply, he had progressively sunk to a depth close to utter despair. In this state, he had come to visit his ex-wife, feeling that, being with Elizabeth, he was near to Debbie. Elizabeth persuaded him to speak to Father McGiven and seek comfort and advice. She could never forgive him for his betrayal, but her heart went out to the broken man.

The visit to the church was not a complete success. Unable to console Thomas, the priest had suggested he meet Brother Ignatious Saviour, the man who had helped Elizabeth so much, following Debbie's death.

When Thomas agreed to this, Father McGiven had traced Ignatious and asked him to come over, if he could spare the time, explaining the situation to him. "There is always time to comfort the unfortunate!" Ignatious had boomed down the phone and arranged to come that very day.

Like everyone else, Thomas had come under the spell of this unusual priest, totally immersed in what he had to say. As Ignatious issued his new words of wisdom, Thomas felt his spirits rising again. The man seemed able to place everything in perspective. At the end of the meeting, Thomas was almost buoyant; he could not believe his present feelings. Father McGiven had sat in on the interview and had listened and watched in rapt awe, not saying a single word. Again, he felt in the presence of someone greater, not of this earth. Silly and impossible, but that was the feeling, beyond a doubt.

Ignatious led the now consoled man to his car, a friendly arm around his shoulders. In a low voice, he suggested that they meet on the following day, around ten-thirty if suitable, at the place where Debbie's body had been found. This, he explained, would exorcise any remaining demons and give Thomas a chance to cement his newfound optimism, without fear of returning to the despair that had overtaken him since their last meeting. Thomas readily agreed.

Back with Father McGiven, Ignatious decided to accept the kind offer of an evening meal, helped along with a small amount of red wine and he stayed chatting until eight in the evening. Whilst there, he allowed the parish priest to get in touch with Sergeant Flint in order to arrange a meeting with the detective investigating the recent spate of murders. He considered this to be a wise move, expecting to enchant the policeman as he did with all others, thereby allaying any suspicions the officer may be harboring. An appointment was made for four o' clock the next afternoon and it was to take place here,

in the home of Father McGiven.

Instead of parking the motor home in a convenient lay-by, Ignatious chose to drive a little way off the road and find a suitable place, hidden by the surrounding trees. It did not take long. The road he took, though fashioned by countless feet over the years, was reasonably flat and wide and he moved along steadily. Two minutes into the woods, he spotted a flat, wide area, with just sufficient space between the trees in which to guide the vehicle. He brought it to rest as close to the trees as possible, reckoning that it would not be seen from the path. As he got out and secured it, he took in his bearings and then set off to meet Thomas at the main road, near to the pathway leading to the scene of Debbie's death. It took him a mere five minutes.

At twenty-five minutes past ten, by Ignatious's watch, Thomas's car came into view. Spotting the priest, he pulled into the lay-by and got out. Ignatious noticed the sprightliness of the walk as Thomas hurried towards him. His words had clearly had the desired effect.

On their way to the scene, the couple chatted about everyday things, both avoiding the subject of Debbie. Thomas had arrived wearing jeans, trainers and a blue sports shirt, with short sleeves. The arms were bare and showed the pattern of several small tattoos: a snake-like dragon with evil eyes, an English flag, crossed daggers and the words, "England for ev -- , " the last two letters being indecipherable. Ignatious made a mental note to use the tattoos as entry, if no other suitable place could be found.

At last they reached the spot and, at the Jesuit's suggestion, Thomas had a good look around, absorbing the atmosphere of the place.

"Now, Thomas," the quiet, calm voice came to him. "You are taking in the ambience. You can feel the vibrations. Your daughter's spirit is here, with us today. Do not be afraid of it."

"But, Father, I let her down - and her mother. I went with another woman and, worse still, in our marital bed."

Ignatious allowed the term, 'Father.' "Yes, my son. You did wrong but the Almighty has forgiven you. If he can, then so can your ex-wife and Debbie. In fact, I can feel the vibrations. Debbie has forgiven you. She loves you very much, Thomas, and she always will. She is now in eternity and so that love will remain."

The kneeling man began to weep softly. "I do love you, Debbie. You know I do. Thanks for your forgiveness." Although not a religious man, Thomas had clasped his hands as in prayer.

"Do not weep, Thomas. Debbie is truly happy. She knows that she will see you in her place together with her mother and you will be happy. Your new wife will share in that happiness, too. Heaven is not a tangible place; it is a state, an aura. Your soul will feel no pain, no sadness, no anger or jealousy. There will be nothing from this human world, except happiness and love. You will visit worlds past, times long gone. You will be invaded by all the sights you ever wished to see and many of which you have no comprehension."

The soothing words were accompanied by the laying of hands on Thomas's head. He felt the power of the Jesuit surge through him, holding him in a mental grip. I love this man, this priest. Scourge me! Do as you will with me! I want to feel your love! The thoughts flashed into his brain. He had no control.

"Feel the air that God has provided. Feel it, enjoy it." Ignatious raised his hands aloft, in prayer. "Take off all your clothes, my son. Fold them into a neat pile by that tree." He did not point to the tree, merely indicated it with his mind. Thomas carried out his instructions, in a trance-like state, folding his removed clothing neatly and stacking them beneath a nearby tree. He then returned to the Jesuit and stood before him, arms by his sides, awaiting his next instructions.

Naked that I am. Sinner that I am. Do with me as you will. Remove my sins! Scourge me! Love me!

The priest ran his hands gently over Thomas's shoulders and arms, searching for inoculation marks. High on the right upper arm, he found what he was looking for. Without prompting and without any question being asked verbally, Thomas began to relate why the injection had been made. It was in preparation for a world cruise taken six months ago aboard a P & O Ocean liner. He went on to describe the luxurious cabin facilities, the first class services, entertainment and the exotic places visited. Ignatious listened patiently, as he withdrew a hypodermic syringe and a small phial containing a clear liquid. Filling the syringe, he squirted a small amount from it to clear the air bubbles.

Thomas continued his narrative, his eyes looking straight ahead, his expression vacant. He allowed his right arm to be raised by the priest, the story continuing without pause, and was unaware of the slim needle sliding easily into one of the tiny holes made by the holiday jab.

As the fluid surged into the vein, Thomas suddenly stopped talking, looking at his advisor, his counselor, with some puzzlement. A lop-sided smile spread along his mouth, as Ignatious slowly backed away.

Ignatious was interested to see what effect the poison would have. The dose, as always, was excessive. He watched in fascination as the smile faded from Thomas to be replaced with an unstifled yawn, followed by another. The stricken man then swayed from side to side before tottering forward in a clumsy attempt at walking, clearly feeling the effects of dizziness. Another attempted step, as he clutched at his dry throat, caused Thomas to fall. He tried to rise but was only able to get to his knees.

Ignatious noted the extreme paleness of the face. When he tried to speak, Thomas could only grate out unintelligible words, in a husky voice

He made another attempt to stand but was thwarted by legs that would not obey and a dizziness that prevented concentration. He remained on his knees. Ignatious moved nearer to him and knelt, studying the face. From the paleness, a scarlet rash had begun to appear and this spread like magic before the watcher's eyes until it completely covered the face and neck. Thomas began to choke and the veins at his temples began to stand out, throbbing wildly. The veins in his arms also began to pulse in the same erratic manner. Bulging eyes with greatly dilated pupils looked into Ignatious as though asking for a reason. Ignatious stared back into them, thought-waves conveying the message that, as a sinner, punishment was necessary to cleanse the soul. Powerful though it was, the thought failed to penetrate the dying mind and Thomas fell forward onto his face, the pulse now slowing at a rapid rate. He was dead within the next ten seconds. The poison, Atropine, had done its deadly work.

The Jesuit then began to pray over the body, now empty of a soul. "Good Lord above, I pray to you for this wretched sinner. He failed in his family duties and was therefore punished. I pray that you approve of my method. He is now at peace and his soul comes to you cleansed and pure. He will now be able to join his beautiful daughter, taken into your all-loving embrace and I yearn for their happiness through eternity. Amen"

With that, he knelt beside the corpse and reached into his shirt pocket. Very gingerly, he produced a small bunch of feathers, which he placed against Thomas's right thigh. Rising, he walked briskly away to retrieve his transport, without once glancing back.

* * * *

Arriving in Penn, Sampler and Dunning searched around for somewhere to stay for the night. Amongst the collection of hotels and guesthouses, they came across a delightful, Olde-Worlde hotel, situated a half mile from the southern exit of the village. The hanging wooden sign, unmoved by the slight breeze, showed the name as "The Stocks." It was painted with the picture of some unfortunate serf, locked in the village stocks with pieces of ripe fruit squashed on various parts of his face and body, no doubt thrown by the group of laughing villagers shown surrounding him.

They drove into the car park and found a suitable spot. Going into the atmospheric hotel, Sampler ordered a lunchtime meal and two rooms for the

night. The couple were on official police duty so it would not have looked proper had they booked a single room. A short walk from one to the other would easily solve the problem.

It took only a few minutes to complete the booking. The Landlord, a large, bearded man, wearing a striped shirt, open to mid-chest, with short sleeves revealing thick arms covered in dark hair, matching that sprouting from the open shirt, greeted them cheerfully. Learning that they were from the Met, he did his best to find out how well the murder investigation was going but he received scant information and was left to believe that progress was being made but at such a critical stage as to prevent the divulgence of information.

He was satisfied. He had enough ammunition now to later impress his regulars with a tale of "inside" knowledge and being unable to disclose the facts due to a promise of discretion. Alexander Brighthouse, ex-Marine in the Royal Navy, had contacts in high places, in many areas and could be trusted by all. Or so he would have his friends believe.

Graham and Sallie made their way to the first floor and entered the allocated rooms, Two for Sallie and Three for Graham. They were identical, both compact and sufficiently fitted out, with a three-quarter size bed covered by a floral-patterned duvet, a wide, built-in wardrobe, shower, vanity table, bookcase filled with a varied selection of reading and a washbasin with lighted mirror and shaver socket. To the right of this, stood a small floor-mounted cabinet that held an electric kettle, a toaster and space for a dining plate. Underneath was three drawers containing eating utensils, pot and hand towels together with cleaning materials.

As if in mental contact, both moved to their respective windows at precisely the same time, and opened them three notches. The warm air entered the stuffy rooms alleviating them just a little, as the net curtains rippled gently in the little draught that was afforded.

Graham then locked up and went into Sallie's room. She turned on his entry and they stood, smiling, looking to each other. For a minute, neither spoke or moved, and then Graham broke the spell going to Sallie and encircling her in his arms. He pulled her to him, delighting in the soft body and the fresh smell. Their mouths met in a tender, natural kiss as Sallie slipped one hand into the hair at the back of her lover's head and the other around his muscular waist. Immediately, she felt his urges responding. Tempted to flow into the oncoming action, she pushed him gently away, smiling as she took in the evidence of their embrace. He was a stallion waiting to pounce!

"Now, now, lover," she said in mock admonishment, "There's time for that later. Food is next; I'm starving!"

"I'm starving too, sweetheart, but not for food!" He made a sudden lurch towards her but she easily sidestepped him, laughing as he careered into the wardrobe with a loud bang. "You can satisfy your eating urges now," she commanded. "You need to keep up your strength, you know."

Graham laughed along with her, allowing his passions to visibly subside. "Okay," he said. "Give me a minute, then we'll go downstairs."

The weather was too warm for a hot meal, so the lovers took a cooked ham sandwich with a salad side-plate. The sandwich consisted of two thick slices of white, home-made bread, thickly buttered, with the most delicious slices of cooked ham buried under all means of salad items and sprinkled with just the right amount of dressing. This, in itself, would have provided a sufficient meal, making the side-plate unnecessary. However, both ate the lot with great relish, washing it down with a cold lager for Sallie and a cool beer for Graham. Being fully sated, they went for a short walk immediately afterwards, returning to The Stocks an hour later. Going up to Sallie's room, they surrendered to their mutual lust and indulged in further discovery of each other's bodies enjoying the new, and different, techniques.

* * * *

Ten minutes to four in the afternoon, saw Graham and Sallie sat in comfortable chairs, chatting amiably to Father McGiven, awaiting the arrival of the

enigmatic Jesuit. Graham talked about the recent murder of Debbie, with genuine compassion. No murder was good but the life of a young person, with so much time ahead of her, troubled Graham deeply.

"We will catch him, eventually, Father," he said, "but we have to hope and pray that he doesn't carry out any further killings in the meantime." He knew this hope was a forlorn one, and no amount of praying was likely to change that. Still, one had to have faith. "Murderers almost always slip up; make that one vital mistake that leads us to them."

"This one hasn't done as yet though, has he? Slipped up I mean," observed the priest.

Graham could not deny the fact. "No, Father, that is so. However, we will not be giving up and perhaps we'll get the break we need, soon."

Just at that moment, a shadow fell briefly across the window casting over those inside, causing heads to look in that direction. A figure flitted past without being properly revealed but it was expected to be the Jesuit. It was exactly four o' clock.

In a few seconds, Mrs. Morgan, the middle-aged cleaning lady for the church, showed the visitor in. Brother Ignatious Saviour thanked Mrs. Morgan as she closed the lounge door and he accepted the handshake and greeting of the parish priest.

On his entry, Graham and Sallie stood, studying the guest in close detail, following the police training instilled into their lifestyles. The aura of the man hit them as one, causing both a slight intake of breath. He appeared so relaxed, so at peace with the world and so much in command.

Father McGiven waved an arm in the direction of the two visitors as he introduced them. "Please meet Detective Inspector Graham Sampler and Doctor Sallie Dunning -- a pathologist."

"Good afternoon, good people," he said in opening. "You will be from the world famous, Scotland Yard, then. I hope I can be of assistance."

Neither of the two had been addressed as 'good people' before, but they accepted it in some amusement. "Yes, Brother," replied Graham as he stretched out his hand. He had already been advised of the correct term to use for a Jesuit. The Jesuit's grip was firm and dry, filling the detective with over-all warmth, both in body and mind. He found himself wanting to genuflect before this sudden and unexpected 'Holiness,' but he manfully resisted the urge. "We are, indeed, here to meet you and I'm sure you will prove to be of some help in this terrible case." He moved aside to allow Sallie to meet the Jesuit's outstretched hand.

As soon as contact was made, Sallie's smile faded. The warmth enveloped her instantly, from head to toe. A tingling sensation went through her body and she had an inescapable desire to grip the man, remove his clothes and let the light emanating from him be revealed. Of course, there was no real light but he shone into Sallie's eyes as their hands held, neither one releasing their grip.

Take me now, my God. Take me here. Tear my sins from me and scourge my body and my soul. Let your beautiful body enter me! I am yours! Take me! The unsettling thoughts ravaged Sallie's mind. From where they came, she could not tell. She did not even use such phrases.

Ignatious was fully aware of the effect. He commanded respect and subservience from men, but women were much more accessible: more aware, more perceptive beings altogether. At last he let go and Sallie returned to her seat, her eyes wide, staring unblinkingly at her God.

The group sat, Ignatious choosing an armchair facing his two interviewers. "How may I help you?" he asked, hoping he did not sound too much like the telephone receptionists when they put that insincere question, hoping they are not called upon to help in any significant way.

Graham started to respond as Mrs. Morgan arrived wheeling in a two-tier trolley loaded with a pot of tea, four cups and saucers, the same number of small plates, milk, sugar and a couple of teaspoons, with an array of delightful looking cakes and buns set out on the lower tier. "Help

yourselves," urged Father McGiven, smiling, as his cleaner left the room. "We don't stand on ceremony here."

Instinctively, following male acceptance built over many centuries, the men waited for Sallie to pour the drinks. After a brief pause, during which she entertained the idea of showing her indignation, she decided to follow routine and reached for the teapot.

"From all accounts, Brother," Graham began again. "You have been able to bring a surprising amount of comfort to the stricken souls in their grief, following the tragic deaths of their loved ones."

"Yes, that is so. My mission here is to do just that and I am pleased to have been fortunate enough to have brought hope to the empty lives of those I have met."

Sallie was seated three feet from the Jesuit and his vibes were coursing through her as she gazed, entranced, at the God's holy face. *_Take me now! Here, in front of these sinners! Rid me of my sinfulness!_* She was utterly powerless to stop the weird thoughts that were in danger of consuming her. As he stopped speaking to Graham, his eyes swiveled in her direction, a smile playing gently on his lips. It was as if a lance was being thrust into her.

Graham, also, was not entirely immune to the compelling aura of the Jesuit. Even through his hard-nosed experience, he found himself struggling to put his thoughts together, a state of confusion tending to invade. However, he concentrated on the task and continued to put his questions.

"How do you find out about the tragedies, Brother Saviour? You do seem to be around at the right time." He smiled as his words probed.

"Oh, I keep my nose to the ground. It's surprising what information one can gather just from local gossip. There is always someone who knows what is going on and eager to spread the news. I also take confessions and talk to my brother priests. Such as the dear Father McGiven, here." He waved a hand towards the silent priest.

"Ah. I see." The explanation was quite feasible. "What brings you to this area?"

"My mission. I had to begin somewhere. It could be any part of the country but I chose what I consider to be a charming part of England. I do not intend to stay as I am instructed to travel to different parts of the world with my work. The more people to whom I am able to offer solace, the greater the possibility of bringing them to The Almighty, or to renew their faith in Him. I see my role in life as fulfilling a quest, the "treasure" being the acceptance of the one great God."

"Do you see yourself as equally able to bring your word to persons of differing faiths; Hindu, Moslem and so on?"

Ignatious was fully in his stride now, speaking on his favorite subject. "Oh, yes. No matter the faith, we all believe in something. I would dearly love to see all the religions of the world joined in one universal Master, although I fear that will never be. Broadly, all religions have the same teachings: love of fellow beings, succor, fairness, compassion, understanding, humility and sacrifice to the Lord." His eyes now drifting towards the heavens, Ignatious did not want to stop.

Graham, spotting the danger of enduring a never-ending religious sermon, jumped in. "Yes, Brother, a very noble aspiration. I think we should all wish to see that come to be." Returning to the questioning, he asked: "Do you hear of the deaths prior to arriving in a village, or town, or are you in the place already?"

Ignatious pondered this a moment before replying. "It is difficult to say, really, Detective Inspector, but I think I am usually in another place when I get to hear of the tragedies."

"Where were you when you heard of the murder of the little girl? Kylie Johnson that would be."

Again, the Jesuit pondered. "I would say..." he said thoughtfully, "that I was ... let me see ... in ... er ... Aylesbury, I think. Yes."

Aylesbury. I was on my way to this area and I parked up there overnight, after spending a little time in the town, talking to anyone who was willing to spare the time. I also read of the death in the local newspaper."

"And what about the other deaths? Can you recall where you were then?"

Ignatious smiled. "Detective Inspector. You are questioning me as though I were involved!"

Graham looked into the Jesuit's eyes, resisting the sudden urge to cry out for forgiveness. "Well, Brother Saviour, you are involved aren't you?"

Puzzlement showed on Ignatious's face. "In what way do you feel that I am involved?"

"By the fact that you visit the bereaved shortly after the deaths of their family members. You are involved with them almost immediately."

"But, surely, Detective, you do not suggest that I have anything at all to do with the murders?"

Graham reacted with surprise. "Oh, no. I do not imply that," he replied. "I merely feel that you might just have picked up on something said, when on your visits. Any little thing that may give us some kind of a clue."

Ignatious relaxed. "Well, no. I have only made two visits in connection with the killings -- no, three in all. I visited the mother of Kylie Johnson and the parents of Debbie Singleton. Then, later, I had a chat with the father of Debbie as he had regressed from the day of the funeral. I felt that I had helped to permanently drive the demons from his mind on the last meeting."

"When was this, Brother?"

"Yesterday: at this church. Here, in this room in the presence of Father McGiven." Father McGiven nodded.

"And how is the man now, Brother?"

"Fine. I feel certain that he is completely comforted and in the protection of The Lord."

Graham continued the questioning. "What I am looking for is any mention of the victims arranging to meet someone -- perhaps a friend, relative, or even a stranger. Was there any mention of any such persons?"

"Possibly. As I remember it, Kylie was simply out on a pleasant walk; something she did often, apparently. With Debbie, her mother did say that she had got herself ready to go out as though she were meeting some young man, but she told her mother nothing more than that she was going out. Mrs. Singleton's intuition as a mother told her that Debbie was preparing for a romantic meeting but that's all."

There seemed no point in going further with this. The Jesuit was quite clearly a man in the right place at the right time. There was no suspicion of any wrongdoing attached to him. Graham thought he may visit Mrs. Singleton, though, to see if she was aware of any young men that her daughter had recently been going around with, or any that she had recently met. "Thank you, Brother Saviour," he said, "for all your help. It was very good of you to meet me and I may say it was also a pleasure on my part."

"Likewise, Detective Inspector," said Ignatious, holding out his hand. As Graham took it, he felt the confusion in his mind begin again and it was several seconds before he felt able to speak. "Good luck to you," he managed, "and I hope your mission succeeds. We need some good deeds in this awful world."

"I will do my utmost," he returned before turning to Sallie. "And I am charmed to have met you, my child," he said. "Whatever your sins, I am sure God will forgive you." He took her hands in his. "Read your mind carefully; try to make the right decisions. Following your heart is not always the best course." He let go.

Sallie stared at him, feeling nausea through the erratic thoughts surging back into her mind. Rape me, my God! Take me by force! I deserve it! I am an evil sinner! He knows! He knows what I have been doing! How? How? She remained seated, her mouth open, silent.

Ignatious backed away, a knowing smile on his face. He said his farewells to the three and left. It took several seconds for anyone to speak.

Each turned to the other with a feeling that a holy visit had just taken place and none could be certain that the Jesuit had left the building by normal means. He seemed to have spirited himself away. Except that he knew he had been questioning the priest, Graham would have felt that this had all been a dream, or a figment of his imagination. Never had he experienced anything like it.

The trio chatted for the next hour, mostly about the Jesuit, trying to understand the effect he had had on each of them. Sallie kept quiet about the erotic impact he had made on her.

Father McGiven drifted into the tales that Ignatious had brought to him about his past experiences: his criminal record, his turn to God, the various missions he had attended with Father Christian, the illnesses, torture and the need to learn medicine. What a varied experience he had had.

Just then, Graham's mobile rang, causing them all to start in mild shock. It was the urgent voice of Sergeant Flint.

CH016

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was six in the evening and Ignatious had enjoyed a nice mixed salad for his evening meal, finished off with a cup of hot, sweet coffee, the rich aroma pervading the small space of the motor home. He was pleased with the day's work: sent someone to his Maker, another cleansed sinner, and survived a minor grilling from an experienced policeman. He felt his standing with the Almighty was improving to quite a high level now.

Before traveling on to Pangbourne, his next chosen destination, he decided to take a nap in preparation for the journey. No matter that the dream would return he needed to rest.

By six-twenty Ignatious was sleeping soundly, a gentle breathing sound coming from the partly opened mouth. He did not snore, his sinuses being in excellent order. The faint smile on his lips remained as the dream returned to him, again starting where it had previously ended.

The journey down the tributary was calm and uneventful, allowing the arrival at the Amazon River to be reasonably quick. Under Father Christian's guidance, the priests maneuvered the pleasantly creaking craft to a position some fifteen feet from the banking.

The Sun shone from a cloudless sky burning the already deeply tanned crew into an even darker shade. Mosquitoes and flies of unknown description constantly menaced the small band of missionaries as they eased their way along. They had no particular plan in mind; merely to go where the route took them. A major desire was to come across an unknown tribe, of which the Amazon area was thought to contain several. Indeed, in the latter part of 1999, a tribe believed to have become extinct, the Naua people, had voluntarily made contact with inhabitants of a remote little town, Cruzeiro do Sul. The Brazilian Government's National Indigenous Peoples Foundation, known as Funai, after sending a surprised and thrilled anthropologist to their village, ratified them as genuine.

The waters were relatively calm today; a marked difference from the group's last encounter, and progress was peacefully maintained. A full day was spent on the river, the missionaries eating as the mood took them.

At seven in the evening, they came across a wide river mouth, leading from the Amazon and into the density of the jungle. Father Christian instructed the crew to take that course and find a suitable place to rest up for the night.

The tributary soon narrowed until they were cruising down a faster flowing river, now some twenty feet wide. Spotting a wide natural bay to the port side, after journeying for half an hour, they made for it, easing gently to the sloping, soil-covered shore. After securing the craft, they all went ashore to take some exercise and ease the aching legs brought about by the inactivity.

The heat was oppressive, causing clothing to cling uncomfortably and it

wasn't long before the men had removed their shirts and Sister Vasquez had tugged her blouse from the skirt band allowing what little air there was, to circulate around her upper body.

In his sleep, Ignatious's smile broadened as his brain now admitted to the lecherous feelings he'd had on seeing the young nun with the bottom of her blouse showing glimpses of the firm waist-line as it flapped gently, and the sight of her nipples as they were made visible by the sweat-soaked material clinging tightly. At the time, he had denied himself admittance to this weakness.

The path, such as it was, suddenly came to an end with an impenetrable barrier of thick foliage barring any further progress. The sounds of the jungle seemed to bounce back off this natural wall, echoing and booming into the air. An unbelievable array of wildlife had been seen on the short walk to their present position: many colorful butterflies, birds, howler monkeys demonstrating the source of their name, playful toucans, scarlet macaws and several squirrel monkeys flitting busily through the trees.

Somewhere near, but never seen, came the unnerving sound of boars, always crashing through bushes in an angry manner. Unknown to the group, a jaguar had tailed them for a time, curious as to what was invading his territory.

However, the biggest danger had come to them by a mischievous spider monkey that persisted in breaking off tree branches and hurling them with surprising force at the intruders below. It was a small miracle that no one was injured. The party retraced their steps and returned to the boat where they set up the sleeping arrangements for the night. Having settled the bed positions, they covered each with a fine net as a protection against any of the flying insects that may take a fancy to them, the bites or stings presenting a danger of severe illness.

After a fitful night's sleep, the missionaries set about their morning ablutions and cooked a small breakfast before setting off again. The swiftness of the river carried the boat along as the sun began to clear the early morning mists and send its warm rays to the life below.

Twenty yards down river, Ignatious observed another inlet that was teeming with some form of life. As he watched, a huge, ugly jaw opened, displaying a fearsome mouth. Then another and yet another appeared. He realised with a shudder that they had set their camp within easy distance of a group of crocodiles!

An hour later and the party were ready to come ashore again and trek through the jungle in search of a tribe. They secured the boat, making it fast so that it would be there when they eventually decided to return to civilization, and set off, Father Christian taking the lead.

The journey was hard, hot and uncomfortable, necessitating hacking through several miles of untouched vegetation, with their large, flat-bladed knives. They had no idea where they were going, using the position of the sun to ascertain the general direction of their travels.

On the second night, a raging fever hit Ignatious, rendering him totally inactive. He was laid inside a makeshift canopy, fashioned from the surrounding saplings and fern leaves, with a homemade mosquito net fixed around it. Sister Vasquez tended to him night and day at the risk of her own health suffering. Sleep was necessary, especially in the present conditions, as the traveling was exacting, sapping the strength and will from the determined missionaries. It was four days before Ignatious was fit enough to be moved, although he was still very ill and suffering a constant temperature. Needing to continue, Christian and Ottomier dragged their companion on a stretcher of canvas and bamboo poles, whilst Vasquez kept a close eye on her patient throughout.

The going was slow, the stretcher having to be constantly put down whilst the men swathed a path forward. All three had sensed the presence of other beings close by but, apart from an occasional rustling of leaves, nothing else was heard and nothing was seen.

The undergrowth was exceptionally high at this point, with little light penetrating the gigantic trees, whose upper branches carried plant life that would normally be fertile on the ground. However, the light being so poor, the plants had, over time, found their natural habitat in the branches and this is where they proliferated. The team worked in a state of semi-darkness each day until exhausted.

Another three days passed then, quite suddenly, the interminable undergrowth gave way to a clearing, which provided a narrow stream, seemingly of pure water, gurgling past and curving away. Christian and Ottomier rushed forward with Vasquez close behind. Arriving at the stream, all three threw themselves to it, burying their heads under the water and gulping it in greedily.

Several minutes passed before they left the stream and returned to Ignatious, Vasquez carrying a container of water for him. As he came into view, the missionaries were delighted to see him sitting up and looking around. Ignatious's eyes looked clear and alert once more. The fever had clearly left.

"Ah! Father Hadleigh! Welcome back to the world!" shouted Christian happily, as he ran to his friend and enveloped him in a crushing bear hug. "Welcome back! We have been most worried about you Gawain."

When he recovered from the hug, standing on shaky legs, Ignatious accepted the greetings of Ottomier and Vasquez. He still felt weak and on unsure legs but he knew the illness was past.

"How long have I been out?" he asked.

"Over a week, altogether," answered Ottomier, "but the Sister, here, took good care of you, Gawain. You can thank her for your recovery. She stayed with you night and day. She is a true saint."

Ignatious turned to the Sister, who was bending her head in embarrassment at the praise. "Thank you sister," he said with heartfelt emotion, "I owe you a lot." He hugged her to him.

"You owe me nothing Father," she said, quietly, "I'm sure you would have done just the same for me." Ignatious wasn't so sure he would.

The party set up camp in the clearing, which stretched for as far as the eye could see, following the bend of the stream and into infinity. Short grass covered the entire distance between the foliage and the stream, on both sides.

The day had passed quickly and it was now time to sleep and recharge the system for the day ahead; a day, which everyone felt sure, would bring them to a village and people to convert.

For the first time in many days, the party slept soundly, unaffected by the noises of nature going on around. At some time in the early hours, eyes peered through the denseness of the jungle, studying the sleeping missionaries. The watchers did not make any move towards the strangers, content to observe and absorb. As suddenly as they had arrived, the tribesmen left, having spent an hour in their positions.

It was seven o' clock before the first of the party, Sister Vasquez, roused from the sleep. She opened her eyes dreamily and lay, staring at the warming sky for several minutes, not wanting to move. However, duty called and she sat up, shook the mosquito net and removed it before leaving her bed. As she started a fire in readiness for the morning beverage, she saw the men begin to stir. One by one, they rose and came to her, yawning and shaking the sleep from their brains. Ignatious was last to arrive, still feeling weak from the illness but much stronger than before.

After cleaning themselves up and finishing off their breakfasts, the crew packed up and prepared to go on. As they began to move, a growl stopped them in their tracks; a growl that reverberated through their bodies. In front of them, fifteen feet or so away, stood three gigantic lizards, the type that are seen in old dinosaur movies, with cold, sharp eyes and a flicking, snake-like tongue. None had ever seen lizards so large. They stood about three feet high, twelve to fifteen feet in length, on squat, powerful and scaly

legs, with what appeared to be armor plated bodies. The impression they gave was of dragons, which, in fact, they were. The name allocated to these creatures was Cirmundo Dragon. The party remained transfixed in fear and awe.

The dragons moved slowly towards the humans, led by the largest and, if possible, meanest looking. Its head swung from side to side as it neared, savoring the meal to come. It broke into a slow trot, followed by the other two. The small group found themselves terrified and unable to move, knowing they were about to meet an awful death.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the leader halted in its tracks, causing the two behind to collide with it, both veering to one side as they stumbled. Then, they, too, halted.

First to gather his wits, Ignatious tugged at Vasquez's arm, pulling her back from the fearsome monsters. Broken from their trance, Christian and Ottomier followed suit, retreating backwards to the jungle edge. It was then they saw the boy. He would be around twelve years of age, covered in only a loincloth, with skin more gold than brown, and bearing shoulder-length jet-black hair. His features were more European than South American Indian and he stood, proud and erect, before the dragons. He stared into the cold eyes, making no gestures or sound.

After only half a minute, that seemed much longer, the beasts slowly turned away and walked casually off into the surrounding jungle. The boy waited until they had disappeared before turning to the group of strangers. "Who are you and what do you seek?" he said to the surprised crew, speaking in a cultured Portuguese.

Christian replied in the same tongue: "We are people from the big cities far from this place and we seek to bring word of our God to those who live in such remote places as this and who have been denied the great pleasure of His comfort and guidance. We come in peace."

The boy looked sternly at Christian. "You come in peace but you have no right to be here. This is the land of the Incudas, my people." He folded his arms and spread his legs in a defiant gesture. "Had I not been here, you would now be in the belly of the dragons."

Christian was at pains to mollify the youngster. Putting on his best smile, he said: "Yes. We realize you saved us and we are all very grateful to you. How you did it, I do not know, but it is clear that it was you who chased the beasts away."

Unmoved, the boy replied. "Every one in our tribe can communicate with the animals, that is why we are still here. We send them back to their homes if they try to attack us."

"Yes but how can you do that? You are unarmed."

"As I said, we communicate." Christian found this hard to believe and quietly searched the surrounding area with his eyes for evidence of adult presence. "I told the dragon with my mind to go back and he obeyed."

The missionaries looked at the boy in disbelief. Yet, he had saved them and he had no weapons of any kind.

As Christian prepared to ask another question, the boy dropped his arms to his sides and turned towards the jungle. He remained in the spot for a full minute, not moving or speaking. Suddenly, from several places in the undergrowth, men appeared, all bearing short, pointed spears, in the style of javelins. They moved quickly to the intruders and surrounded them, looking menacing.

Without being told, the four began to walk along the bank of the stream, in the direction they had originally intended taking. They were escorted by the tribe, walking along each side of them and behind, spears at the ready. This was a scary experience.

They walked for a distance of half a mile along and, again without being told, they turned along a very narrow, man-made path leading into the thick green foliage. The animals were once more in evidence, bounding through the trees, whooping and calling, with birds fluttering noisily about. Occasionally, a snake would be seen slithering along and out of the path of

the humans.

Finally, after a journey of around twenty minutes, they came upon the village. It appeared to be a well-ordered affair, with what could only be described as streets, fashioned on a grid system. However, unlike in so-called civilized towns and cities, no shops were to be seen. The streets were lined with dwellings, each with its own plot of land surrounding it. The houses were more traditional to the accepted impression of jungle tribes, in that they appeared to have been made from mud and then glazed, with straw roofs covering them. They were of differing sizes but none could be described as small.

People emerged from the buildings as the tribesmen passed with their prisoners. Ignatious noted that, like all the other tribes they had encountered, the adult women were naked to the waist with girls of all ages varying between complete nakedness and half nakedness. The same applied to the males but Ignatious's eyes were drawn to the opposite sex. He would need to concentrate on his prayers if he and his party were allowed to live.

Going on through the streets, a throng of villagers joining the troupe as they went, they finally came upon what appeared to be a village square. Unusually, though, it was situated at the rear of the village rather than the center, and it backed onto an ever-steepening hill covered by a carpet of greenery to its top. At the foot of the hill and opposite where they now stood, was a short porch made of natural woods from the area, and this covered a wide door made from the same timbers.

As they stood, uncertain of what was to come next, the door opened and a tall man appeared, dressed in a colorful gown that reached the ground, covering his feet. His skin was of an even more prominent gold than the captors. Again, the features were more European than Indian and he stood around seven feet tall, the average of the tribe being something in the region of five feet ten to six feet. Clean-shaven, his hair was long and golden and his eyes were a startling blue.

The man, clearly a leader, spoke, directing his stare to Christian. "You come in friendship and you wish to bring news of your God to the people of this village." It was a statement, not a question. The amazing part was, that he spoke in excellent English!

Recovering from the initial shock, Christian confirmed the mission. He then stepped forward, his hand outstretched in greeting, a smile intending to give reassurance. Before he had moved three feet, he was met with a clutch of pointed spears thrust before him, wavering no more than inches from his face.

The tall man spoke, quietly. "You will never touch any part of my person, Father Christian," he said, dumbfounding the missionaries with his knowledge of the priest's name. "You will never visit me, or contact me in any way. Nor will you be allowed to enter this portal or what lies beyond the hill." The Leader then waved an arm and the tribe began to melt away, leaving Christian and his companions alone.

"I will allow you to live," the man continued, as I do not wish to interfere with your mission. I am satisfied that you mean no harm to the people, so you may live here for as long as you wish. You will be provided with suitable accommodation and you may help the tribe with their daily work, if you so desire. However, there are rules to be followed." He adjusted his flowing sleeves and commanded the group to sit. They obeyed without quibble.

"Firstly, you must not interfere with the day to day tribal activities. Whatever they do, whether you approve or not, you must not become involved.

You may preach your religion and seek converts as you wish but no pressure must be put on any person.

If you wish to assist in any way, you must seek permission from the Elder, who is known as Kaba. He is distinctive in that he stands as tall as myself and he has a short, utterly white beard. You will not accept that he will be aged at 200 years, but that is what he is.

You must seek his permission on anything that concerns the tribe in any way. He is not obstructive and will allow you much freedom so do not attempt to deceive him. He will spot your deceit immediately.

If you wish to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh with any, be it male or female, seek his permission. Should you take a partner without permission, the punishment will be most severe and final. In most cases, your request will be granted.

Food is for all and you may freely share in this, whether or not you have assisted in its gathering.

You will find this an unusual tribe. While they live generally in the way befitting of such peoples; ways handed down through the centuries, they possess many powers that are above your own civilization.

You, in your world, have forgotten how to remember. You need paper and electronic means. Your early ancestors, not having that facility, had to remember everything and their brains, in that respect, evolved along those lines. The power of the mind is infinite and the people here have developed some of that power and put it to good use. Today, you witnessed a demonstration of that with the young boy. He willed the beasts to go away and they did. Animals are also brought to the tribesmen in the same way and provide food. It is not necessary to arrange hunting parties.

On a cultural plane, you will find that the people have different values to yours. There are no marriages, for instance. People create children that are cared for by the natural mother but she accepts help from other women and men.

Boys and girls are deemed old enough to indulge in sexual behavior as soon as they feel ready. Touching of bodies, whether their own or someone else's, is not a matter of concern but it is carried out in private, as is any sexual matter. The only deviation to this is when indulging in celebrations. It may shock you, due to your cultural restraints, but all females give their virginity up to the Elder in the first instance. He treats them with proper care and teaches them the methods of providing pleasure to the men. After this, they may go with whoever they wish, providing permission is granted by the Elder."

The missionaries were dumbfounded. This behavior was totally foreign to their culture and religious beliefs.

"There are things in this place that you may find incredible but, again, you must not become involved. The people here live a happy and contented life. Apart from my group, to whom the tribe will refer to as Gods, there is no social status except for the Elder. As a consequence, there is no envy, no jealousy and, therefore, happiness reigns. Now, go in peace and may you enjoy your time here."

At that, the door swung open and the 'God' disappeared back into the hillside. As the door closed, the bewildered group stood and turned towards the dwellings, stunned and amazed at the incredible man.

As they began to walk, a figure appeared at the perimeter. It was the Elder. Again, it had to be said, the man presented a striking figure. Tall and erect, walking at a casual pace, he wore a long, flowing white gown. The golden skin was more of the shade of the tribe but the eyes were blue!

As the missionaries neared, he spoke: "Welcome, friends. You have had the rules of our society explained to you and you will be expected to adhere to them." His language was a strange mixture of Portuguese and Spanish, but could still be understood. "Come with me and I will show you to your accommodation. After you have settled, you may meet the villagers and, after that, you may do as you please." He turned and led the visitors away.

Ignatious turned in his sleep and muttered something unintelligible. He turned back and then again, ending up on his right-hand side, his expression serene.

Life in the tribal community was good. The missionaries gradually formed regular daily meetings where they were able to tell of their Christian beliefs and encourage the villagers to convert to His faith. They seemed to have no particular religious beliefs except that they constantly referred to their Gods being here with them, in the form of the extraordinary Leader and his company who resided over the hillside in an area forbidden to all except

in dire emergency, such as life-threatening illness or threat of battle. The tribe could ably account for themselves in any battle, using the power of their minds but it was not considered to be a total defense against weapons such as those used in modern warfare. The best defense was the one that existed -- the fact that the tribe was undiscovered._

Although Sister Vasquez tended to the sick on occasion, the tribe seemed to provide an excellent medical service of their own. Injuries received from accidents when in the jungle, were amazingly dealt with, cures being effected in days when in modern society, they would have taken weeks or even months to cure. Broken bones were a matter of three days in the fixing, ending as good as before the break. Fevers were of no real consequence, recovery coming within hours due to the injection of some fluid into the arm, or leg, by means of an extremely fine hypodermic syringe fashioned from delicate reeds found near the clear-water stream. Cuts and gashes were treated by a fine gauze soaked in some oily liquid being laid over the injury and covered with bandages. Depending on the severity of the damage, the wounds were completely fixed within one day to a week, leaving no scar! Vasquez got the idea that her services were used merely as a good-mannered, token gesture. The villagers themselves tended to all injuries and ailments, with no need for a medical service or hospital.

Even with the fantastic knowledge, deaths did occur, mostly as a result of age, which the Elders did not interfere with as it was accepted as nature's way of keeping a balance. In rare cases, illnesses suffered by children and young people could not be cured and deaths resulted from this, also.

Burials proved interesting to the missionaries. All bodies received a respectful funeral, being dressed in their finest, colorful garb. For females, a small bunch of humming bird feathers tied together, would be placed against the left thigh, whilst with males, the bunch would be placed against the right thigh. It was firmly believed that the bird, which had so many abilities in flight, assisted the soul of the person to enter their heavenly place. All were cremated.

However, even the cremation was something of wonder in that the heat generated in the crematorium was of an unbelievable intensity. The body would be placed into a pod measuring seven feet by four, made of hardened mud and sealed by a lid of the same substance. The pod, a permanent fixture, stood on top of a similar structure, this being the furnace, standing three feet from the ground and slightly longer and wider than the pod. This would then be filled with timber together with mixtures of earth locally gathered, and then sealed.

A shaft, protruding from a place about half way down the furnace and containing a central groove filled with dry timbers, would be ceremoniously lit by the Elder and the whole pushed back in. After a few seconds, the fire within could be heard humming and roaring, building to a heat that caused the exterior to glow a dull red, then white. A loud 'whoompf' and the cremation was complete, the people then dispersing to their homes. The whole cremation would last no more than three minutes! No ashes were saved and there were no markers to honor the dead.

Ignatious worked hard at conversion but even he had no success, the tribe seemed content as they were and saw no reason to defect to another God. This strange new God of which the visitors spoke, was invisible; there was no evidence of His being. Nor did He offer much protection; the priests were more vulnerable to the rigors of the world than were this small band of people living in relative isolation. At least the Incuda's Gods were here, within reach.

Over time, Ignatious and his companions grew into the new society, still trying to convince the tribe to accept the Christian God but realizing that theirs was a lost cause. Whilst Ignatious remained celibate, using the power of prayer to resist the many and easy temptations, his companions fell into that part of the village life with ease.

Ottomier, the American, seemed to have found an outlet for his hidden

lusts as he regularly took young girls into his dwelling, girls as young as twelve and thirteen. The Elder was quite willing to grant his permission, this being nothing out of the ordinary in his society. Even Christian had allowed himself to indulge on a regular basis, the lure of young flesh being irresistible to him, although his choice was girls of more maturity. Vasquez, too, after resisting commendably for several months, began to throw herself into what Ignatious saw as sinful perversion, in that she started to entertain the young of both sexes.

Ignatious had befriended one of the tribesmen, a young man of around twenty years of age, with whom he spent much of his time. He went about with his friend, named as Karakta, into the jungles and stood with him as he commanded the various beasts, either to come to him or go away. Try though he may, Ignatious could not master this skill. The pair also went fishing together and a strong bond was forged.

The missionaries started to neglect their original orders and gradually gave up on trying to convert these unique people, instead going with them into their dwellings or out on food missions, or simply enjoying the treks into the jungles and along the river. All in all, the group became part of the community, marveling at the simple yet, in some ways, advanced life.

After a year had passed, the group showing no inclination to move on as their duties demanded, Karakta persuaded Ignatious to stay in his dwelling for a full day, concentrating on his mind. He was urged to search into it, re-live his life to the present, sort the useful from the useless and dwell on the power that lay dormant. He was to do this without break for food or natural bodily requirements, including sleep. When the morning broke, he could then sleep for as long as he wished.

Without deviation, Ignatious carried out his friend's instructions, falling asleep after the proper period and remaining that way for a full twelve hours. After waking and carrying out his normal functions, Ignatious sought out Karakta, eventually finding him by the river.

"Ah! So you have returned, my friend," he said, smiling broadly and using the mixture of Portuguese and Spanish that Ignatious and the rest of the party had now become accustomed to.

Ignatious walked over and hugged Karakta. "Yes. I did as you said and I have to say that I feel strangely uplifted. Now, why did you want me to do that?"

Karakta, still smiling, motioned for Ignatious to come with him as he walked along the river. Falling into step together, they walked towards a cluster of thick bushes skirting the tangle of jungle some twenty yards away. Here they stopped. "Okay," said Karakta. This is the test."

"Test?"

"Yes. Remember the dragon lizards you saw when you first came?"

Ignatious nodded in response.

"Look towards these bushes, picture the dragons and will them to come to you."

Ignatious looked at his friend suspiciously. "Why do you want me to do that, Karakta?" he asked.

"Just do it, my friend. I will not interfere. Just do as I ask."

To humor Karakta, Ignatious turned to the bushes, nervously aware of the low growling that had now begun behind the plants, and began to concentrate. 'Dragon, come to me,' he thought. 'Come to me.'

Suddenly two of the frightening dragons appeared, tongues snaking, teeth bared and growling menacingly, walking towards the two friends.

Instinctively, Ignatious thought: 'Move back! Get back in there!'

To his great surprise, the beast obeyed! Turning as one, they ambled back into the thickness of the bushes. Ignatious swiveled to look at his friend, an expression of bewilderment on his face. "What? What?" he stuttered.

Karakta chuckled. "There you are. You now have the power of your mind. The Elder and everyone here saw in you, a different being from your comrades. You held a dormant power within your brain that we were able to detect. You

will have noticed tribes where you last visited treating you with a different respect. That is because of the power that was, in a way, leaking out. Use it. Practice and do not let the skill go, even when you return to your own world."

Ignatious had completely forgotten about his 'own world,' that was far away, lost in the past. However, the mention of it stirred his conscience. It was the duty of the party to leave here and go about their sacred work. He felt a strong degree of sadness at the realization.

Understanding Ignatious's reservations, Karakta put an arm around him in comfort. "Sorry I spoke of your world. I can see it has troubled you. There is no need to leave here, Gawain," he used the name given when the friendship first began. "You and your friends are welcome for as long as you wish."

"Ignatious shook his head. "No. We do not have a choice, Karakta. Our duty is to our God and we must follow His commands. I will speak to the others tomorrow."

Sadly, the pair returned to the village. It was becoming dusk, the Sun slipping gently below the earth's curvature. The village was quiet and almost deserted. As they stood, lost in their thoughts, Ignatious reached a decision. He would not broach the subject of leaving; not just yet, anyway. He was certain that Christian and Ottomier would now be satiating their lust with the nubile girls of the village, and that Vasquez may well be doing likewise. 'Have they lost all sense of their vocation?' he thought. He also decided to keep his newfound power from his colleagues.

With a tug on Ignatious's arm, Karakta asked him to come along to see something of great interest. He moved to the hill and began to climb. This was forbidden territory and Ignatious knew that his friend was breaking one of the strict laws of the tribe. None-the-less, he followed without protest. As the hill steepened, the lush vegetation thickened into interwoven branches of small trees and hardy bushes, making progress so much tougher.

It took half an hour to arrive close to the top, where Karakta whispered for Ignatious to lie on his stomach and wriggle the rest of the distance. "Keep very low and show as little of your head as possible," he said.

When the pair reached the top, they lay flat and peered over. What came into view took the priest's breath away. He stared in disbelief.

At the foot of the hill, there lay a flat expanse of land, covered in fine, deep-green grass. Built on this land, at a distance of around twenty feet away, were three buildings, one large, flanked by two smaller ones. The amazing thing was, they were pyramid shaped! They appeared to be built of the same materials as those at Giza in Egypt but covered in a shiny limestone, as would be the original Great Pyramids.

The center one would be around seventy feet high with the two smaller being around fifty. Several people, all similar to the Leader whom Ignatious had first seen, were moving around, apparently carrying out repairs to the pyramid on the right. Part of the structure, about half way up, had been removed and it was clear that the workers were about to fill the gap.

An untidy pile of flat, square blocks hewn from this rocky side of the hill, lay nearby and the men were moving in that direction. Ignatious could see no lifting gear or means of transport so he wondered how the blocks were to be moved. Each block would measure something in the region of five feet square, by two feet deep and must weigh extremely heavily.

The men approached and stood in groups of two around three of the blocks. For a minute, they stood, simply staring at the objects and then each man placed his fingertips on the block in front of them. A further half-minute or so of staring and, incredibly, the blocks rose as if lifted by the fingers! The party then moved off in the direction of the pyramids as though carrying a cardboard box. The naked arms showed no sign of muscle strain, whatsoever. Ignatious's mouth dropped as he watched the men walk up a ramp erected by the side of the damaged building and carefully slide the blocks into the appropriate places, leaving them perfectly aligned. This operation was repeated until the pyramid was completely repaired, the limestone being

applied as a final act. Finishing the task, the men removed the ramp and went inside the pyramid.

Ignatious turned to his pal, his mind full of questions, not knowing which to ask first. "Just how did they do that?" he asked, utterly mystified.

"Magic," said Karakta in explanation.

As they made their way back down the hillside, Ignatious gleaned a fuller explanation from his companion. Through the ignorance of the tribe in such elevated matters, Ignatious managed to put together the picture. It seemed that the power of the mind was once more at work but of a higher quality than that employed by the tribe -- and Ignatious, too, with his newfound ability.

The men were not concentrating on the actual blocks, but through them to the ground beneath! What they were doing was removing gravity! In his way, Karakta explained that the human form carries many varied electrical impulses, the strongest of these being contained in the brain. By isolating that part and concentrating it on, or through, an object, it acted as a magnetic repellent to gravity, therefore removing the weight from the solid mass. In this way, gigantic stones, weighing many tons, could be easily transported over any distance and put into whatever position was required. It was all so simple, really!

Reaching the foot of the hill undetected, the friends said their farewells and went to their respective dwellings, Karakta with the intention of enjoying sexual activity to release his new exhilaration and Ignatious to pray and sleep.

The missionaries had been with the tribe for almost a year and a half when it all went badly wrong.

Ignatious stirred in his slumber and opened his eyes, a thin film of sweat on his brow. He sat up and checked the time: eight-thirty and time to be moving on.

CH017

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Hello, Graham," opened Flint. "Glad I finally got you. Been on to the Met and they gave me your mobile number."

Graham wasn't too happy to be contacted now, with his secret tryst in flow, but the urgency in the Sergeant's voice made him expect the worst.

"Yes, George. What can I do for you?"

"It's another body, Graham, believe it or not. A man again and no immediate signs of how death was caused. No one has touched the body and we're waiting for your forensics boys to get here. I believe the pathologist is with you at the moment."

Graham sighed. "Yes. She's here with me. Sallie Dunning. You met her last time, George."

"Yes, I remember her. Couldn't forget a face like that, could I?"

A small wave of anger washed over Graham at the light-hearted comment but he quickly let it die. He had no right to complain; Sallie wasn't his, after all, and men, he included, were apt to make such remarks. "No, you couldn't," he replied, forcing a chuckle.

"Right. The unnerving thing about this one is, that the scene is the same as where Debbie Singleton was found. The exact spot."

Graham gasped in surprise. "We'll meet you there, then, George. I know where it is. See you in about twenty minutes?"

"Yes, okay. 'Bye." He hung up.

Sallie looked at her lover expectantly. She had heard him say that 'we' were to meet someone and by Graham's expression, she knew it was a serious matter. "Where are we going, Graham?" she asked.

Unable to hide a smattering of annoyance, Graham explained the substance of the call to Sallie and the priest, after which they took their leave.

On the journey, the couple tried to convince each other that this might

not be a connected death. It could even be from natural causes, like the woman on the picnic. Neither believed it.

Arriving in the area of the death, Graham parked the car and they set off on foot to the scene. A serious looking Sergeant Flint met them on arrival and they stepped under the striped plastic tape moving to a spot where the body could be seen, to await the forensic squad.

Nothing much could be learned from their present position, except that there were no signs of struggle and the body was naked, lying face down with one leg bent backwards from the knee, five or six inches from the ground. The man's clothing was neatly piled a short distance away -- early indications that this was the work of the detective's quarry. The notion that it may have been a natural death evaporated quickly, as did the couple's thoughts of a pleasant evening meal together followed by unbridled sex!

The forensics team finally arrived; some fifty minutes later, and began their painstaking work. Graham was allowed to move closer to the body to carry out a visual inspection, some four feet away. His eyes were searching for the one convincing sign that this was their murderer and, peeping from the right thigh of the man, he found it -- the small bunch of feathers. Some time later, he saw one of the team carefully remove it with a pair of tweezers and drop it into a plastic bag.

It was another hour before the team completed their work and Sallie moved in, with Graham and Flint in close attendance. She donned her mask and surgical gloves before carrying her case of equipment to the body. Following the customary practice, she began to record her words onto the tiny machine as she worked. "Male, approximately forty years of age, found in naked condition." She closely inspected the man's back, buttocks and legs. "No scars or injuries to rear of body." Sallie carefully rolled Thomas over and began her inspection of his front. "Facial area unblemished, eyes open, mouth open with tongue protruding and blackened. Bruise on upper left side of chest, approximately four centimeters in diameter; appears to be from earlier injury. Operational scar on right abdomen; faded; appears to be from surgery of a minimum of ten years ago."

She then looked closely along both arms. "Immunization scar on upper right arm, of indeterminate age. Possibly from childhood." Knowing the method of the killings, she bent closer so that her eyes were a mere inch from the scar.

"Here, Sallie," said Graham, handing her his magnifying glass, "Try this,"

She took it from him and continued the inspection. After careful study, she breathed: "Yes. There it is." Then remembering that she was recording all her comments, she became official. "Appears to be minute speckle of blood in center of immunization scar, administered within the last twelve hours."

Sallie completed her examination then rolled the victim onto his face again, in his original position. She stood and walked away, removing the mask and gloves as she went. Graham and Flint followed.

Catching up with Sallie, Graham asked: "Well, Sallie. Is it our man?"

She stopped and turned to him. "As you know, Graham, I don't like to commit myself until a full examination can be completed, but I would say that the indications point heavily in that direction. There does appear to be a tiny new puncture mark in the immunization scar, so it certainly looks as though it's the work of the same person. Judging by the face, I would also say that he died as a result of poisoning."

All three exchanged grim glances. "We've got to get this person!" spat Graham. "He's not going to stop, that's quite plain to see." Turning to Flint, he said: "George. Can you get the wheels in motion; house to house again and all that?"

"Well, Graham. What I will do, is check our last reports and dismiss those who are most unlikely to provide help -- the housebound and such -- and get my lads to interview the rest. I'll also get notices up around the locality and put something out on local radio."

"Good man."

"Is there anything particular you'd like to put to the public?"

Graham thought about this before replying. "Yes, George. There is something. Just a niggling doubt that lies with me."

"Oh? What's that?"

A little sheepishly, Graham said: "Ask if anyone has noticed a particular vehicle; one that isn't familiar, in the vicinity."

Sallie knew what he was getting at, but George wasn't aware of Graham's vague suspicions. "Okay. Will do." Then, looking quizzically at the detective, he asked: "Do you have a particular vehicle in mind?"

Graham explained about the constant appearances of the Jesuit and that it left him just a little puzzled. Something didn't sit right with him.

George paused to take it in. "Do you suspect the Jesuit, Graham?" he asked.

"Not entirely. No. He seems to be very open and he does seem genuinely concerned about the effect on the families. I also notice the effect he has on people, myself included. It's as though being in the presence of a really holy man."

George and Sallie nodded in agreement. A lewd sexual thought briefly entered Sallie's mind as she pictured the Jesuit, then it was gone. An imperceptible shudder ran through her body.

"Even so, something about him just gnaws at me. Can't explain what. Just a feeling." By now the trio had reached their vehicles. They said their goodbyes to George and let him know where they would be staying for the night, at which point George drove off.

Back at the hotel, they entered the main lounge and bar where the Landlord, Alexander Brighthouse, was in the middle of expounding his greater knowledge of the stage at which the investigations were at in the recent killings, to a couple of avidly listening men.

Seeing the entrance of the two officers, he shouted a hearty greeting: "Hello, there! Come and have a drink -- on the house!" he called. The invitation was gratefully accepted; a drink was just what they needed. They stood alongside the two men at the bar and told Alexander what drinks they would like. Before turning to pour them, he tapped the side of his not inconsiderable nose with a forefinger, in a knowing fashion. "I'm not giving any secrets away," he said conspiratorially.

Sallie smiled at Graham, who returned it with a wink.

As he laid the drinks on the counter before them, Alexander bawled: "Time, gentlemen, please!" The voice almost deafened them and they both jerked backwards in surprise. "We have beds to go to, you know!" came the loud voice again.

As the patrons shuffled about, drinking the remains of their glasses, retrieving coats and moving through the exit doors, Graham glanced at his watch: twenty minutes past eleven. By law, Alexander should have stopped serving at eleven!

Anticipating a long-drawn out conversation with the exuberant Landlord should they be left alone with him, Graham and Sallie quickly downed their drinks and made their exit, offering a pleasant, "Goodnight, Landlord. Could you give us a call around seven in the morning, please?"

"Certainly. No problem -- _no problemo_," he said as he waved a hand to them. They hurried up the stairs and entered Sallie's room together.

Once in bed, appreciating each other's bodies, exploring with urgent hands, the sex began; eager ravenous, loving. Graham had an occasional flash of Bethany's smiling face but quickly overcame the guilt initially felt, while Sallie, unaccountably, entertained several vivid pictures of the Jesuit, calling to her, displaying himself in his full, naked perfection.

"Rape me, you bastard!" she hissed. Graham, naturally thinking she meant him, pleased that his lovemaking was turning her on to such an extent, increased his efforts manfully.

At that time, Ignatious, having arrived on the outskirts of Pangbourne and finding a suitable spot in which to rest the night, was just snuggling into his bed, covered only by a single, cotton sheet, the night being once more warm. In minutes, his mind and conscience totally clear, he was in a deep sleep.

Bit by bit, second by second, the pictures of his dream serial returned, with flashes of earlier events appearing as a trailer for a forthcoming movie. He turned, now restless, in his sleep.

As time wore on, Ignatious perfected his new powers, frequently testing them on the varied wildlife that abounded. He had also begun to notice that the attitude of the tribal women and the children had gradually altered towards him. They were now in some kind of awe! Children would stare at him and move out of his way as he moved around. Sometimes, they would fall to their knees when he spoke to them and would carry out his wishes immediately. Women, the more perceptible species, tended to stand for an inordinate length of time, looking into his eyes. It was puzzling and a little unnerving. This change in behavior could be traced back to the time around when Ignatious had perfected his mind-skills. Even though it had been accepted that he was different from the other strangers on arrival, he now seemed to be regarded as something nearing the status of the Elder. _

To the religious group, life here had taken on a feeling of near paradise. They wanted for nothing and life meandered on in a truly pleasant and friendly manner. The duty to which they were bound had taken a decidedly backward step as none wanted to break the spell of this charming life. Religious instruction had been suspended, not to be reawakened. These decisions had come about naturally, no one actually discussing and formulating a considered plan.

Then, due to the worst aspect of the age-old basic instinct of man, the pleasant life turned upon its head.

In the midst of the usual daily workings of the community, food gathering, construction work, cooking, washing, playing and chatting, a small cry was heard, coming from the denseness of the outlying jungle. It was rather faint and caused groups to pause in their activities, unsure as to whether or not they had actually heard something. After the slight pause, life continued as before.

From his position, at the top of a newly erected water tower, applying some finishing touches, Ignatious spotted his colleague, Father Ottomier, breaking from the jungle and into the village compound. As he moved forward, Ottomier cast a couple of furtive glances behind as though fearing something was to follow him, something unwanted. He then disappeared into the tribal dwellings and was lost from sight.

Dismissing the incident from his mind, Ignatious carried on. The project had been thought out by Karakta and Ignatious and discussed with the Elder, who had approved of the plan without hesitation.

The idea was to provide a constant water supply to the village, taken from the clear-water river nearby. A ditch, some two-feet wide and four-feet deep had been dug out close to the flowing river and extended to the beginning of the village, which lay several feet below the river's water-line. It then led into the tower, which would act as a storage tank.

The water was to be lifted to this by means of a cleverly constructed Archimedes Screw turned by the pressure of the onrushing stream. The supply would then be directed towards the dwellings to be joined by several narrower and shallower grooves. These led into wide bamboo tubes sealed together at various points and directed into each home, culminating in a primitive kind of sink, or washbasin, raised to around three feet from the floor.

A simple tap had been fashioned at the back of the sink that could be turned left or right to allow a flow of water and also to stem it. The water received would be pure, as the ditch and the grooves had been lined with the

same substance as that used on the outer side of the 'God's' pyramids. After supplying each dwelling, the liquid would run to a central point from which led a single pipe directed back to the river and into it, thus maintaining a continuing flow.

Finishing his work, Ignatious signaled to the helpers below and one ran off to fetch the Elder. After descending the ladder, Ignatious met up with Karakta and they, with the remaining men, moved to the start of the project, next to the river. Here, the workers inserted a strong board into the riverbank, immediately adjacent to the excavated ditch. They then dug out the remaining earth, the board preventing the water from entering, and installed another clever device, activated on the pressure principle, so that, if the water in the tank reduced due to use in the village, a 'shutter' would rise to allow more from the river and close if the pressure built due to the tank being full. The tribes-people were to be admired for their cleverness and adaptability.

As the Elder arrived, accompanied by many of the villagers, the work was completed. The Elder inspected the device and the channels before speaking a few words of congratulations to all concerned and explaining the advantages of having such a system. Their customary, and religious practice of taking a sip of water as soon as awake would now be made that much easier. He then ceremoniously raised the separating board and the water began to run into the system. Some villagers ran; some walked fast, including Ignatious and Karakta, all heading for the dwellings to watch the miracle take place.

Entering the first available house, as most were filled with people, they joined a group of half a dozen people who were just in the act of turning on the tap. The clear water gushed out into the bowl and was scooped into excited hands to be gulped down, splashing chins and chests, falling to the ground. Ignatious took his turn and was delighted at the absolute purity of the liquid as it slaked his thirst.

That night, the tribe organized a large party, attended by every single person. The food was plentiful and delicious. Alcohol, fermented from a variety of plants and berries was in never-ending supply, as were the strange drugs, several of hallucinatory properties.

Although severely affected by the abuse, there was no arguing or fighting as there would surely have been in the so-called developed societies. In fact, the opposite was in evidence, lovemaking becoming the chief activity as the night wore on. Even Ignatious, though not inebriated in any way, forsook his self imposed celibacy and took a delightful nineteen year-old girl to his dwelling, after first seeking the usual permission from the white-bearded Elder, who was never seen with any company other than his own. On his way home with the girl, he spotted Ottomier escorting a young girl to his place and Christian openly engaged in a close embrace with one who would be around sixteen. Looking around for the Sister, he spotted Vasquez ambling towards her dwelling with one of either sex clutched in her arms. Ignatious began to wonder just how far the group had allowed themselves to fall. The feel and the aromatic scent of the girl holding his hand helped him to quickly vanquish the guilt.

The following morning, rough hands, grabbing him where he lay, tossing the girl to one side, and dragging him, naked, from his home, awakened Ignatious. Carted along by arms and hair, he looked through bleary eyes to see that four tribesmen had gripped him, bearing grim expressions on painted faces.

'Painted faces?? Why are they painted?' Ignatious wondered. He had never seen them that way before. "Wait. Stop! What's going on?" he called out to his captors, but received no response. He was dragged along to the village square where he was pulled forcefully to his feet.

Before him stood four sturdy poles set firmly into the ground. Christian and Ottomier were lashed to two of these, also naked and looking equally bewildered and scared.

As Ignatious was being bound to one of the posts, a shrieking rent the

air and Sister Vasquez was dragged into view, naked and struggling frantically. It was all to no avail, as she was unceremoniously pulled to her feet and thrust against the remaining pole where she, too, was secured into place.

The missionaries looked to the one nearest to them, seeking a reason for this worrying predicament. All, that is, apart from Ottomier, who looked straight ahead. The four were very frightened.

The sun was rising above the horizon and Ignatious judged the time to be around six-thirty, the sounds of the awakening jungle echoing around the village as the animals searched for their early morning meals.

All the tribe had gathered before them now, the men with white-painted faces, large circles being left around the eyes and mouth, presenting a chilling sight. They all held short spears, the ones immediately in front of the captives jabbing them menacingly towards various parts of their bodies, without quite touching. A weird hissing accompanied the gestures and this somehow increased the terror.

Then the Elder arrived. The throngs of people parted to allow passage to the shivering prisoners. He stood before them, his height and immaculate garb, together with his startling white beard and golden skin, impressing his authority upon the bewildered missionaries.

For minutes, he simply stood before them, not speaking, looking into their eyes, into their souls. None of the missionaries spoke although they were desperate to know why they were being treated in this way. Then, moving close, he confronted Christian who was on the first post in line.

He studied deeply for several seconds before moving onto the next in line, which was Vasquez. Studying her in the same manner, he ignored her questions, thrown at him in a high-pitched, near-hysterical voice.

Ignatious was next and the imposing figure looked into him as with the others. This time, however, he spoke. "You, my friend, are of a different species than your comrades," he said in his mixed dialect. "You have powers they cannot understand and you are a good man." His tone was flat and without emotion. "A terrible crime has been committed against our society and punishment will be dealt in the appropriate manner. As part of the group, you, too, must suffer the same fate no matter the good work you have so far performed."

He passed on to Ottomier, imprisoned next to Ignatious. The Elder stood, looking into the priest's eyes for many moments. Reaching out, he placed a hand flat against the trembling Ottomier's forehead, again for many moments, not a word escaping. Stepping back a pace, he then spoke: "You are the guilty one."

"But ... but ... no ... no ... I haven't done anything!" he whined, unconvincingly.

Ignoring the comments, the Elder, Kaba, spoke to all, looking directly at Ignatious. "Your companion has sinned against this tribe in the worst manner possible. By this, he has put you all in peril. You will die as a result of his actions and, by the time you do, you will be happy to go to the next level. Tribal customs, centuries old, are still practiced here and I cannot interfere. The two concessions I will make, are that Gawain," he used the current name, "will be last to die with less punishment until that time, and Vasquez, the female will die instantly and without pain."

Ignatious turned angrily within his bonds, to Ottomier. "What have you done, Gerard?" he asked. "What is it that has put us in this predicament?"

"Nothing. He's got it wrong!"

Casting his mind back to the previous day, Ignatious recalled seeing Ottomier behaving suspiciously as he emerged from the jungle. "I saw you, Gerard," he said softly. "Coming from the jungle. You had done something hadn't you?"

Ottomier's silence spoke volumes. "Come on, Gerard. You are a man of the cloth. Confess to all here of your sin. Save us!"

Kaba intervened. "He cannot save you Gawain. The punishment has to be

for all." Ignatious looked at him in horror. The man was educated -- two hundred years old for the good Christ's sake! He was just, fair and wise. He had the ultimate power here.

In his sleep, body covered in sweat, Ignatious tossed and turned, gibbering nonsensical stuff to the confines of his motor home bedroom. The dream continued...

"What has he done, Kaba?" he asked. "And why must we all suffer?"

The Elder, again looking directly at Ignatious, through clear, young-looking eyes, explained: "Early today, one of our tribe took a journey into the jungle seeking food. When in there, he came across the body of a female of the village, Ka-Lauma. Ka-Lauma was fourteen years of age and had no experience of a sexual nature, never having desired it. She was missed during yesterday but thought to have gone with friends and, at night, during the celebrations, was thought to be here. When she did not return home after the celebration, she was thought to be staying at a friend's dwelling. You see, we do not have problems with missing persons in our society, unlike your decadent one, so there was no fear for her safety.

She was found, as I have said, and it was discovered that she had been forced into a sexual encounter and then put to death. By the time we got to her, it was too late to save her and she will be sent to the next plane later today.

It is clear that your brother, Father Ottomier, took Ka-Lauma away and carried out an attack on her, ending in unlawful killing. The punishment for such a crime is torture and death."

The missionaries paled under their deeply burned tans, horror chilling their minds and bodies. The warming sun went unfelt on the captive's skins. Death had become accepted to some degree but torture? Torture? This could not be! Things like this do not happen any more. These thoughts flashed through the partly numbed minds of the fated four, ignoring the fact of the tortures carried out every day in some part of the world, where war and political intrigue was prevalent.

"But, Kaba!" cried Ignatious. "Stop! Please!"

The elegant Elder turned to Ignatious, studied him for a moment and went to stand in front of him.

"What is it, Gawain? Please, do not plead for your lives. The decision is made; tradition has to be fulfilled."

Ignatious was sweating more heavily now, desperation showing in his eyes. He spoke softly, however, covering his fear. "Kaba," he began. "You are clearly different from the others. I can see that you are of an utterly different race -- different to us all, in fact. You are of a higher intelligence; an intelligence that is above all of this. Why do you allow it?"

Kaba's expression did not change, he merely inhaled deeply.

"Gawain, my friend. Your perception is correct. My comrades and I are of a different race. You will find it astonishing but we are from a different satellite than yours. We belong to the same galaxy but many millions of miles from here. I tell you this because of your circumstances. You will not survive but you are deserving of some explanation."

Ignatious looked at this mysterious man, a man so gentle and perfect of appearance, calmly telling him that he and his group are from another planet! How could such an intelligence allow what threatened to be a nasty death.

"Our work here is ongoing," continued Kaba. "By your time scale it is slow, but we can sit for hundreds of years in order to carry our experiments through. Some of the benefits you will already have noticed; the way the tribes people can control the wild beasts by the strength of their minds, for example."

Ignatious was unable to control the trembling of his body. "But what is your purpose?" he asked.

The Elder explained calmly. "I have neither the time nor the inclination to go fully into our business but I will tell you something that you will not be able to accept. You are a religious man and will follow your

faith."

He paused before speaking again. "My ancestors came to this planet billions of years ago. They watched this ball of gas cool and develop. They were experts in the construction of life -- DNA, which you have now discovered, being a large factor in that."

"What do you mean?" asked a pensive Ignatious.

"I mean that we, not your God, produced all life on this Earth. We made mistakes along the way, the dinosaurs being one of them. What useless, ugly, ungainly creatures they were. They provided nothing of value to the planet. They destroyed rather than enhance life. So we got rid of them."

"No. they were wiped out as a result of a giant meteorite hitting Earth."

Kaba almost smiled. "No, Gawain, they didn't. Do you not think that all other life would have died had that been so? The birds lived. Many, many other creatures survived, even some of the dinosaurs. Although they died relatively soon after."

"But how?" stammered Ignatious.

"Germs. Microbes. Organisms. We merely infected them. Anyway, it is enough for you to know that we created Man at a later stage. Based on apes, an experiment gone wrong, my ancestors manufactured Man. He appeared in a less than satisfactory form -- genetic engineering is ruled by very fine lines you must understand. However, we got it mostly right in the end. Unfortunately, we had to leave before correcting one of our major errors."

"And what would that be?"

"Violence, my friend, violence. The brain had too strong a strand and it retains the sometimes-necessary aggression for too long a period. Our brains have just the correct amount. We never have wars between what you would call nations, nor do we encounter aggression from other planets. Only Earth is so violent. In four or five hundred years from now, you will have improved to a near perfect standard. Your Earth will survive, and it will improve."

Ignatious was aghast. "But what is happening to my colleagues and myself is violent!"

The Elder shook his head slowly. "We cannot interfere too much here. Tradition is important and we must allow it to continue."

The wretched captives had all heard what the impressive man had said. None believed him. God was the Creator and that was fact.

A last glance at the unfortunate group by the Elder, accompanied by the words: "May you find peace and contentment on the next level," and he was gone. Immediately the villagers erupted into a barrage of noise; cheering, shrieking and roaring, their feet stamping heavily on the ground, spears jabbing the air.

Ignatious watched the activity fearfully. The tribe was working itself into a trance-like frenzy. Then, from the melee, strode a man holding one of the strange, wooden syringes that were sometimes used to cure some of the more severe illnesses. Without pause, he walked up to the crying and jabbering Sister Vasquez and placed the syringe against her arm. A slight delay as he searched for the correct spot and then the plunger was pressed. A short crack and the young woman died instantly, apparently feeling no pain. Her head slumped forward and she hung naked and beautifully serene in death.

Vasquez was immediately released from her bonds and carried in the arms of four men to the crematorium, where she was gently placed into the pod, a bunch of humming bird feathers being placed against her left thigh. This time, however, the lid was left off as a tribesman carried out the lighting process. The baying crowd now fell silent and their ranks parted so that the prisoners were allowed a clear view of the events.

The furnace roared and hummed, the outer covering glowing quickly to a white heat. A thin plume of flame appeared around Dolorita, orange and yellow in color, highlighting her peaceful frame for a few seconds and then she began to burn and shrivel. The sight of the twisting, blackening body turned the

stomachs of her heartbroken ex-colleagues. The lid had been deliberately left off to allow the body to burn rather than be incinerated and to let the others view the spectacle. Suddenly, a thick sheet of flame shot through the burning mass and the Sister disappeared, becoming part of the fuel for the fire. The lid was hoisted into place and left for it to complete the operation as normal.

A low murmuring came from the gathered crowd and this increased in volume and intensity until it was back to the blood curdling shrieking and roaring of before. The villagers surged forward to the captives, stopping a couple of feet from them, the noise continuing unabated. The stamping of feet began again, striking even more terror into the shivering trio. The noise and threat was awful.

Then, of all people, Ignatious saw his friend, Karakta, step forward and begin to jab his spear into the unprotected body of Christian. Jab, jab, jab, jab; chest, abdomen, thighs, arms; jab, jab, jab; feet, knees, testicles. The screaming brought tears to Ignatious's eyes and he wept unashamedly.

Ottomier, to his left, was uttering a strange, guttural sound, his eyes wide and rolling wildly, saliva sliding from the corners of his jaw.

A girl of around twelve stepped forward and stuck some pointed object into Ottomier's midriff bringing a loud cry from him. Looking into his face, giggling, she stuck him again and again, targeting his arms and legs, the crowd urging her on. This was the signal for several other youngsters to step forward and begin stabbing and cutting the helpless victims. The only one not included was, of course, Ignatious.

Christian was brought more into the horrendous display of violence, adults and children alike using him to vent their anger and clearly deriving sadistic pleasure from it. Ignatious was powerless to shut out the terrible screams of his companions.

The suffering went on and on, flaming torches and smoldering twigs being used in addition to the stabbing and cutting. The blood lust was plain to see in the eager faces of the tormentors, whether they are young or old. The genital area of Ottomier came in for prolonged treatment, his cries and screams serving only to encourage. Even if a miracle should occur and he be freed, he would never again be able to use that part of his body for pleasure.

The hot sun rose to its zenith, painfully burning the naked bodies of the missionaries, there being no shade to protect them. As if at a given signal, the torture ceased and the tribe's people moved away to their homes, presumably for the mid-day meal.

Turning to his friend, Christian, Ignatious was shocked to see his condition. He hung limply as far as his bonds would allow, pieces of flesh hanging from him, his body blackened where he had been burned, open wounds seeping blood. From head to toe, he was a damaged mess. Mercifully, he had lost consciousness at some period in the torture, but the trembling, incoherent babbling continued. Parts of his scalp were raw and bleeding where the hair had been torn from him, flies already settling on the open wounds.

Ignatious looked to the heavens, forlornly beseeching his Creator to free he and his companions from this hell. Receiving no immediate salvation, he swiveled his head to look at Ottomier. The man, the sinner who had brought this horror upon the religious group, was in a similar condition to Christian, with the added pain of having the eye nearest to Ignatious, reduced to an open, bleeding socket and an ear torn away. One of his feet was still smoldering, a thin plume of smoke curling lazily upwards, where the foot had previously been set alight. The blubbing and salivating was a constant accompaniment to the groans of Father Christian, further along the line.

The torture was resumed in the early evening when both injured men had recovered to some extent. The agony was made worse by the injuries providing fertile targets for the cruel treatment. Although Ignatious was left completely alone in all this, the torture he suffered was of a mental kind, creating scars that, if he managed to live, would remain with him for ever.

The sun had begun to set before the agonies finally ended for that day,

the victims being expertly kept alive. The only relief, of a sort, reached by Ignatious was to use the power of his brain to lift him to a higher plane and also to keep away the incessant attacks from the winged insects that plagued the blood-soaked humans. However, this wasn't something he could maintain indefinitely and he was forced to endure periods of suffering until his mind was strong enough to temporarily free him once more.

Shortly after sunrise, it all began again, the tribe seemingly tireless in their mission. The only break came when the cremation of the murdered girl, Ka-Lauma took place but the event had the effect of heightening the desire of the tribe to hurt the perpetrators. How Christian and Ottomier stayed alive seemed a sick miracle in itself but this was due to the expertise of the persecutors, following centuries of experience.

It was on the fourth day that a change occurred. The villagers came from their dwellings as usual, at sunrise, painted as before but carrying no weapons of any kind. An unnerving quietness descended on the villagers and they sat in a huge semi-circle before the almost mindless prisoners. Four chosen men then stepped forward, two of whom were carrying small wooden boxes, measuring approximately ten inches by eight and around five inches deep. They stood in twos before the miserable prisoners; one with a box and one without. What good eyes the priests possessed stared transfixed at the boxes before them, sensing something evil and dangerous. The lids were lifted to reveal a scurrying mass of small insects, which the priests easily identified as the poisonous Fire Ants. An involuntary shudder coursed through their bodies, and this included Ignatious.

With ceremonial aplomb, the men with the free hands dipped in and grabbed a handful each. They held the busy insects under the noses of their captives for several seconds, allowing the fear to increase as their minds imagined what was about to happen. The hands moved nearer and then sprinkled the insects onto the shoulders of the quaking men.

Like greyhounds released from the trap, the ants sped over the bruised and torn flesh, exploring the open wounds, biting as they went, scurrying into the warm holes of the ears and nostrils, doing their damage there, also. Ottomier endured the added horror of having the dreadful creatures invading his open eye socket. To the men, it was like having razors slid across their injuries and the screeching began again. In seconds that seemed like hours, the bodies jerked and shuddered in agony as the poisons hit their systems. The mouths that opened to cry out became immediately filled with nasty, biting ants, some speeding down their throats.

One of the tribesmen then brushed away all that could be seen, using a large frond from the abundant ferns that covered the area. They then sat with the rest to watch and enjoy the suffering of Christian and Ottomier.

The bound pair cried and screamed in their unconsciousness, the pain being so severe as to register through the insensible state, the life slowly being drained from them.

As death seemed imminent, and soon, one of the four rose and went to the twitching victims, pressing the compressed-air syringe against their arms. The figures stopped the pained movements and became instantly relaxed, remaining in an unconscious state, the poisons quickly surrendering to the potent antidote.

During that day, Christian and Ottomier were subjected to various injections, administered by use of the reed needles. The effect of these was varied in reaction and intensity, as the drugs that were applied caused muscle spasms and, at other times, frightening hallucinations.

Following the regular pattern, the villagers returned home for their mid-day meals before resuming the entertainment an hour or so later. In between the action, Ignatious was given pure, clear water to slake his intense thirst -- an unexpected act of mercy.

On returning for the afternoon session, the villagers sat, as before, in a large semi-circle, while one of their number administered the mind-bending drugs to Christian and Ottomier. As the day dragged towards

evening, with both tortured priests nearing the end, their bodies in a sickening mess, their minds in a fury of terror, Ignatious's friend, Karakta, stood before what was left of Father Christian, holding a timber box, similar in size to the ones before, which he set on the ground. Bending to the box, he lifted the lid, reached in and brought out a large ant, one much bigger than the Fire Ants. This was recognized by Ignatious as a Giant Amazon Ant -- a deadly species. He held the wriggling creature in his hand, holding it aloft to the cheers of the onlookers. After allowing time for all to see and applaud, he proceeded to place it at the base of Christian's neck, letting its legs beat a fast rhythm on the bare flesh where it created several nasty little scratch marks. Karakta then let go of the ant. Immediately it was free, the dreadful insect bit into Christian's neck before speeding away around his head, biting whenever it felt the urge. It completed its exploration by rushing down the torn side of the tortured priest before losing itself in the surrounding foliage.

Christian gave out a long groan as the muscles of his body spasmed causing his legs and arms to strain against the bonds and his head jerk upwards and back again, side to side and up again. His face took on an expression of moving through a speed barrier as the cheeks flapped and billowed, exposing a mouthful of broken and bloodied teeth, his muscles beginning to paralyze as Ignatious watched. He died in that position.

Before releasing the corpse, two other tribesmen ensured that Ottomier was awake and aware of what was going on, forcing him to look toward his dead companion. Karakta released the body and dragged it ignominiously to the crematorium, while the villagers once more allowed a pathway for the remaining prisoners to see. Karakta single-handedly lifted Christian onto the pod and laid him out, notably omitting the placing of the feathers against the thigh. He then stepped back and lit the fire. As with sister Vasquez, the transparent flame began the spectacle, followed by the sudden sheet of flame that turned the carcass into fuel.

As Ottomier was approached, he began to shake even more violently, dreading the oncoming attack from the Giant Amazon. He gasped with relief as he felt his bonds being unfastened. Could it be that he was to be set free? Had he suffered enough? He prayed to God, as he had not done for so many long months in this paradise gone wrong. Muttering unheeded thanks and falling to his lacerated knees as he was moved from the post to which he had been attached over the last four days, he begged the forgiveness of the tribe. "I have learned my lesson, now," he croaked. "It will never happen again. Please, forgive me the error of my ways. The good Lord above will punish me as I deserve."

He then felt himself being dragged painfully to his feet and urged along toward the funeral box. Bewildered, he shuffled forward without resistance until he felt himself again being bound, this time at the wrists with his damaged arms behind him, and then at the ankles. Before he had time to take in the new turn of events, he was lifted into the pod, which was now empty of its hot ash and once more covered with earth and bracken.

Desperate to escape from his prison, Ottomier began to wriggle furiously, ignoring the extremes of pain that the struggle caused him. He screamed for clemency and pleaded for his miserable life but forgiveness was not forthcoming. He heard the dreaded roar of the crematorium fire as it shot into life. The comfortable bed on which he lay began to get warm, the fuel smoldering at its base. Ottomier wriggled and cried, still calling for mercy. The heat became stronger and began to burn and peel the skin from him. The fire was building slowly now, unlike the usual burial, designed to inflict the maximum pain.

The priest, a rapist and a murderer, smelled his own flesh burning, the pain more intense than anything suffered so far. His good eye roamed downwards and he observed blisters appearing wherever skin remained on his body, the now aptly named Fire Ants, streaming out through the open wounds, to be incinerated in a flash. In a final moment, Ottomier saw a bright light

somewhere in his subconscious, followed by the serene face of his Lord God. A mighty sheet of flame shot through the cooking body and he was no more.

By this time, the light was beginning to fade and the crowd, excited by the brutality, adrenalin buzzing, returned to the lone captive.

'This is it,' thought Ignatious. 'My Maker will receive me.' A strange calm overtook him; he was prepared.

Suddenly, the Elder appeared through the gathering and confronted the doomed priest. "You have suffered punishment by witnessing the torture and death of your companions," he began. "You are to die but not this day. As the sun will rise tomorrow, you will be put to death by injection of a poison unknown to you and your world. In deference to the good work you have done here, you will leave without pain and quickly. Your body will then be burned in accordance with our customs and you, unlike your friends, will be accorded the assistance to your destination of the Colibri -- the humming bird feathers." He then signaled to Karakta to bring food, drink and oils, instructing him to clean up the condemned man and give him nourishment.

"Farewell, young man," he said to Ignatious, "and may you sit in peace with your God." With that, he left.

The crowd began to disperse, leaving behind Karakta and two others. Ignoring Ignatious, Karakta went about his duties, bringing forward a rough, timber table upon which the others placed one of the compressed-air hypodermics and a liquid solution. This was the poison that was to be used on Ignatious and it was contained in a flask made from hardened animal skin. Ignatious absently noted that there would be far too much in the flask for the one dosage but he reasoned, it was probably the entire stock carried. The tribes-people were able to produce the poison in any quantity from the local vegetation, so there would be no lack of supply.

Finally, having completed his task, Karakta turned to his one time friend. "Gawain, my friend. I am truly sorry about this; it is beyond my control. I am not allowed to even speak with you and my heart hurts at your present situation. I take a great risk in speaking with you now and I must leave quickly. I want to tell you before I go, that our friendship was of great value to me and it will remain with me until I die. I wish you good fortune in your next life." A tear trickled down the face of the troubled Incuda, as he took one last, lingering look at Ignatious, before moving swiftly away to his dwelling.

Left alone, bound to the pole, Ignatious also shed a tear as the evening turned into night, stars beginning to twinkle in the clear skies. The ever-present sounds of jungle animals diminished to the odd roar or growl, with an occasional shriek from some unknown breed of monkey or bird. The night was warm and Ignatious settled to his prayer, dozing as far as his position would allow, his spirit now calm and prepared for the coming audience with his Creator.

Ignatious came from his sleep, his brain befuddled with the events of the dream. Slowly, order settled and he sat up. Putting his hands to his face, he wiped away the wetness covering his cheeks, emanating from the tears that had flowed freely in the night. He looked at the clock on the wall at the foot of his bed. It showed 7am.

CH019

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The pleasant warbling of the telephone next to Sallie's bed in the hotel,

awoke Graham first. He was pleased to feel the sensation of arousal as he cuddled into the soft, warm body of his lover, an arm wrapped around her as she lay facing away from him. A smile crept onto his unshaven face and he began to let his hand explore the firm delights of her body. Sallie grunted, a comforting, satisfied grunt, as she pushed herself to the protrusion nudging against her.

The couple lay for several minutes, Graham entertaining thoughts of

gentle lovemaking as a prelude to breakfast, and then he realized the phone was still ringing. Of course! The morning call!

To reach the telephone, it was necessary for him to roll across Sallie's body and, his leg straddling her, he was half tempted to ignore the infernal machine and surrender to his temptation. However, sense prevailed and he took the call, thanking the exuberant Landlord and apologizing for the delay. "Better things to do!" came the chuckled reply, full of knowing innuendo. Why else would he telephone Sallie's room?

Replacing the telephone, Graham began to return to his side of the bed. As he rolled back over Sallie's body, intentionally pressing to her, she opened her eyes. They were soft and dreamy, hitting at his sexual senses like a sledgehammer. He paused. To hell with duty -- let's get at it! However, exercising great restraint, he tumbled from the bed and stood, stretching.

Two wide and beautiful eyes watched him, admiring the muscular body with its unconcealed desire proudly displayed. She longed to drag him back in and smother him with her lust. However, somewhere at the back of her mind, she realized that as he was out of bed, despite his condition, duty must prevail. She sat up. "Good morning, sir. And who are you?" she said, playfully.

Graham spun around to face her. "Ah, so you're awake at last!" he joked. "Sorry you see me in such a state," smiling down at his undying projection.

"I'm not at all sorry," Sallie replied. "Do we have time to cure your ailment?"

Graham shrugged his shoulders, an apologetic expression on his face. "Wish we did have, but duty, unfortunately, calls." Blowing Sallie a kiss, he went to the bathroom.

By nine o' clock, Graham and Sallie were with George Flint in his office, drinking coffee. "Do we have an identification, yet, George?" opened Graham.

"Yes, we do. And it's something of a surprise," replied George, grim-faced. "He was identified as Thomas Singleton, father of the murdered girl, Debbie!"

For a few moments Graham did not speak, the news shocking him. His mind worked furiously. Once more, a connection with the Jesuit. How much of a coincidence is this? he thought. "Why would he kill him?" he said aloud, staring into space, his brain fitting facts into place. "What is the connection?"

"Who are you talking about, Graham?" asked George. "We can only answer your questions when we have a positive ID."

Graham shifted in his seat. "The Jesuit. That's who I'm talking about." he said, quietly. "That man is involved in these murders. I don't yet know how -- or why, but he is too closely linked with every murder."

The others looked at him in silence. Neither could believe that a man of God, a man with the aura of the Jesuit, could be in any way involved in such terrible crimes.

Sallie spoke, softly. "Graham. Just think about it, will you? You are accusing a Jesuit priest; a man dedicated to helping ease the suffering of others. Do you not think his involvement is purely that of a man carrying out his duties? He appears where there is suffering and, as he told us yesterday, he is specifically targeting those who are suffering the effects of a murder, or suicide in the family."

Graham accepted the sense of Sallie's words but, none-the-less, he had an uneasy feeling about it. "Well, perhaps I am on the wrong track but I can't help feeling there is something about the killings that points to him." He paused. "Before we go back, Sallie, I'd like another word with the Jesuit." Then, turning to George, he asked: "Where is he now?"

"Don't know I'm afraid."

"What?"

For what reason, I can't say, but I had a constable check on his motor home this morning -- and he'd gone. Wasn't to be seen anywhere in the vicinity

or in the village."

Graham stared at George, absorbing the news. "Did no one see him go."

"No. He parks on country roads, so it's unlikely that anyone would see him. May notice his vehicle but that's all."

"We'll find him okay. When the next murder occurs," said Graham, sourly. "Come on, Sallie. Time to get back to the Met."

Sallie remained seated as Graham rose to go. "No, Graham. I can't come back, I've work to do here."

Graham looked at Sallie in surprise. "Work to do?"

"Yes. The body will be removed to the local hospital and I will carry out my autopsy on it. I have all my equipment with me, so I may as well complete the job whilst I'm here."

"What about transport back, though, Sallie? We came in my car."

Sallie smiled. "I can get the train. I'm quite capable of that, you know."

Graham smiled back. Of course she could catch the train. He just didn't want to be apart from her at this moment, the pleasure of the previous night and the warmth of the morning encounter still fresh with him.

"Okay, Sallie. You're right, of course." Then, businesslike again: "Let me have your report as soon as possible, please."

As he stood and prepared to leave, he addressed George Flint: "Keep me in touch, George, especially if there's a sighting of the good Brother." The last bit said with undisguised distaste. "I'll contact you again when I get Sallie's autopsy report."

George rose and shook hands, bidding him goodbye.

* * * *

The sun shone from a clear, blue sky, beating down on the earth below. Those who weren't engaged in employment occupied themselves in their different ways. Some, finding the recent hot weather too much, preferred to remain indoors, curtains partly drawn to keep out the burning rays, windows opened to the full. Others simply lazed around the garden, increasing the depth of their sun-tans whilst others, still, enjoyed trips to the seaside or countryside. Three in the afternoon and only the young felt energetic.

Thirteen-year old Emma Fairweather had gone on a bicycle ride with two of her school pals; Gerry Parkinson a lad of the same age who fancied her, Carol Gracewell, another thirteen-year old and Candice Moreton, a friend seven months senior to Emma.

Pedaling along a pleasant country lane on their way home, they passed a motor home parked at the side of the road in a naturally formed lay by. Immediately following that, a sharp bend appeared in the lane and the pals had to brake hard to negotiate it. The road then led into a long decline, with gentle bends allowing the cyclists to 'free-wheel' the rest of the way down.

Unfortunately, Emma was a little late in braking as she passed the motor home and she lost control, wavering and skidding into the soft, thick bushes that lined the lane, saving her from injury. The accident went unnoticed by her two friends as they were ahead of Emma at the curve and, having steered their bikes safely, were able to move away and enjoy the rush of air into their faces as the cycles picked up speed.

Emma sat up, a little dazed but effectively unhurt. She checked for bruises and cuts and was pleased to find there were none of any note. However, looking at her bike, which had landed a few feet from her, she was horrified to see that the front wheel had buckled from the impact with the low banking. Not relishing the long walk home, she hoped against hope that her pals would soon realize she was no longer with them and return.

"Are you all right, dear?" The voice startled Emma, as she had not noticed anyone approach. She turned to the speaker and saw a man, dressed in a loose-fitting T-shirt, denim shorts and wearing Reebok trainers on bare feet. She took in the strong tan and the muscular legs of the stranger, before looking into his face. She studied him quickly, liking what she saw, and then replied that she was okay, thanks, and wasn't injured at all.

"Your bicycle looks to have fared worse than you, though," he said, smiling. Emma rose to her feet and went over to the damaged machine, dismayed at its appearance.

"Don't worry about it," said the stranger. "Bring it to my motor home and I'll fix it for you. Get you cleaned up, also." The voice was rich, warm, and calming. Emma looked again at him. She had had it drummed into her from early childhood not to trust strangers and, as she had matured, she had realized to some extent why.

This man, however, was different. He looked into her mind, into her heart, and invaded her soul. A feeling of awe began to overtake her; she was in the presence of someone of another planet. Her eyes met and held his. She felt mesmerized yet aware. Picking up the bike, she trundled it along, following the man, who was walking slowly backwards toward the motor home. Rude thoughts entered her mind; the sort that she had been experiencing more and more when in bed at night; thoughts that she must keep secret. Hold me! Squeeze me! Touch me! Kiss me! Do THINGS to me! Teach me!

Reaching the motor home, the man eased the bike from Emma's grip and laid it on the ground at the far side of the vehicle, out of sight from the road. He then led the bewitched girl into the interior.

"My name is Brother Ignatious Saviour," began the man. "I am a Jesuit priest, so you need have no fear of me, whatsoever." Pointing to the middle of the home, he told her to go into the small bathroom and clean herself up. Emma obeyed without hesitation.

Even as she washed, the impure thoughts would not leave her; they were persistent and as though put there by someone else. On finishing, she looked in the mirror and, satisfied by the reflection, she left the cubicle and sat across from the priest who was seated at a small table.

"That's better," he said. "You look much brighter now." Taking her hands in his, he asked: "Would you like a drink of some sort? Coffee? Tea? Pop?"

Emma felt a surge from the strength of the firm hands that held hers. "No, thank you," she stuttered, fighting to resist the naughty thoughts constantly entering her mind. Strip me! Take me, as I am -- a virgin! Take off your clothes I want to see you!

"What is your name?" asked Ignatious.

"Emma."

"Ah, Emma. A name I have always been taken with." Emma's face beamed. You can have me! Don't ask. Do it! The firm hands still gripped hers, gently, surges of some unknown impulses flowing through her whole being.

"How old are you, my child?"

"I'm thirteen. I shall be fourteen in August." She shifted her position constantly, crossing and uncrossing her legs.

"Do you believe in God, Emma? Do you follow His teachings?" the gentle voice continued.

Emma forced her dry mouth to speak. "Yes. Yes, I do," she croaked.

"But do you sin, even so?" asked Ignatious.

The embarrassed girl blushed, remembering the thoughts that had just now been invading her -- and still were! "Er, er, yes, well ... I suppose so," she murmured.

"Do not be embarrassed, my child, we all sin. God is all forgiving. There is nothing you can have done of which He doesn't already know about, and nothing you have done can be all that bad, now, can it?"

Never had Emma felt so comfortable, even though a little self-conscious, in talking to an adult. She was ready to bare her soul to this man. She spoke again. "No. I haven't done anything really bad. I've kissed some boys and I've had some rude thoughts." Dash! Why did I tell him that? "I never steal things and I don't tell lies -- even if it means I get into trouble, I still prefer to be truthful." She spoke quickly, hoping to deflect any questions on her thoughts.

At that moment, Emma's friends were passing the motor home in search of

her, having realized that she was no longer with them. They pedaled on unaware of how close by she was.

"What religion do you follow?"

"I am Church of England -- I go to church every Sunday," she hastened to add.

"Do you have any problems, Emma? With parents, teachers, friends; anything you feel you are unable to speak about?"

The young girl pondered. She didn't want to speak of her unexpected thoughts. "I sometimes wonder what it's like doing 'it' with boys," she blurted, surprising herself.

The expression on the priest's face remained calm, unaltered. "Quite natural for someone of your age," he said. "It does not mean that you are about to indulge in a sexual encounter." Emma blushed again, unaccustomed to an adult speaking to her so frankly. "Nor does it mean that you want to. Merely adolescent curiosity."

"But I wanted you to touch me!" she said, breathlessly, now no longer able to control her words. What is happening to me? she thought, horrified.

Ignatious knew full well the thoughts she would be having; he was planting them there, perhaps not directly but entering her mind and clearing it of all obstacles. His presence affected females in that way and, through his past experiences, he was fully aware of the phenomena. Like the female pathologist, Sallie; he knew that she would have had sex with him, without compunction, had the opportunity arrived.

"Again, Emma. These thoughts are quite normal. I am an older man, mature and experienced in life. I probably appear attractive to you. However, it would be wrong of me to take advantage of the situation and, rightly in my view, it would also be illegal."

He stood without releasing his gentle grip on the girl's hands and led her from the table to the rear of the vehicle, which was the bedroom. It was surprisingly large, as, from the outside, it would not seem possible for such space to be available.

Once through the opening, Ignatious let go of Emma's hands and watched her walk to the bed where she lay on her back. She needed no prompting; she was under the Jesuit's spell.

"I will relieve you of your troubled thoughts, Emma," he said in his quiet, warming tone. "You will travel to a place of peace and happiness. You will see the Lord thy God. You will have no need for this world and its archaic and primitive desires. You will be in complete bliss."

All the time he was talking softly, preparing a slim, reed hypodermic. The poison was to be one he'd discovered back in the Amazon -- a completely unknown one, very powerful and, used in the right way, creating a truly miraculous cure for malaria and such diseases. The other use of it brought quick and spectacular death.

He leaned over the girl, stroking her arms. She murmured softly and smiled, her eyes closed. She was happy and comforted. Emma had had all the usual childish injections to combat the various viruses that were waiting to pounce on the young and Ignatious easily found a suitable scar high on Emma's left arm.

She felt nothing as the reed slid into the circular immunization scar, the surge of fluid providing a pleasant sensation. She smiled and grunted contentedly again as the poison rushed through her bloodstream.

Ignatious stood back to observe, anticipating the action to follow. Emma's body began to shudder; her limbs started to jerk and fly outwards and then back again, the pattern repeating itself many times. She began to spasm, giving the appearance of a teenager on the dance floor, although Emma was still on her back, on the bed.

Suddenly, the twitching girl's eyes flew open and she shot upright, staring around unseeing. With a spectacular movement, Emma's body arched backwards, her bottom leaving the bed and, for several seconds, she stayed in that position, the only part of her touching the bed being her heels. Falling

back, she began to choke, her face turning a bright red, then blue. Her muscles started to paralyze, from the feet, up the legs, through the body and onto her face. With eyes still wide open, she presented a horrifying figure, loud grunts escaping the restricted throat. At that point, Emma died, her movements quickly subsiding, the paralysis remaining.

The tinkling of bicycle bells reached into the room as Emma's friends passed by on the way back home, their search having proved fruitless.

Ignatious knelt at the bedside of the deceased girl and prayed: "Oh, Holy Father, please accept the soul of this sweet young being. She will come to you clean and pure, ready to do your divine bidding. I have made her happy and prepared for you in your infinite goodness. I leave her in your sweet, loving hands. Amen."

He rose, looked at the body, now relaxed and seeming at complete peace, and left, going outside to survey the immediate vicinity and check that no one was around. Peering over the nearby hawthorn bushes, he saw that they surrounded a clear field of unharvested wheat, waving mesmerisingly in the soft breeze.

Returning to the bedroom he picked up Emma's lifeless body and carried it effortlessly to the outside. He walked with her through a nearby opening in the bushes and placed her down, a couple of yards into the wheat.

Here, he produced the small bunch of 'Colibri' feathers and laid them just under her left thigh, leaving about an inch protruding. The sun caught the feathers in its light, activating the iridescent features and creating a beautiful picture. Ignatious stared at the inanimate objects, thrilling to the display as the colors flicked and changed like a small rainbow, the hundreds of small sub-feathers combining magically.

"Speed safely on your journey, sweet Emma," he said with his head bowed reverently, hands clasped. He remained for a few moments then returned to the vehicle. Reaching into a canvas hold all, he produced a set of tools: screwdriver, wrench, rubber-headed hammer and a flat piece of steel.

Satisfied with his selection, Ignatious went again outside and retrieved the damaged bicycle. This he stood on its seat, balanced by the handlebars, and began to remove the twisted wheel. After twenty minutes of work, with skilful use of the rubber-headed hammer, using the steel bar as a solid base, the wheel was in a near-perfect condition once more.

It took only a matter of minutes to reconnect the wheel and properly align it. Once done, Ignatious set the bicycle upright and placed it against the hedgerow, roughly in line with the spot at which Emma's body lay. He returned to the vehicle, replaced the tools, cleaned himself up and drove away, contentment settling through his body. He had done another good job; provided the Lord with a further pretty subject.

CH020

CHAPTER NINETEEN

As soon as Graham entered his office unit, Clive Miller intercepted him and told him that the Chief wanted to see them both immediately. Graham went to his office to put down his briefcase and then went along with Clive to the CS's office. "Any idea what he wants?" asked Graham.

"Not exactly -- he didn't say -- but I expect it to be about this spate of killings. I don't suppose you're any nearer after your visit to Penn?"

Before Graham could reply, they arrived at the boss's door and went in.

The severe looking man behind the desk looked at the men over his reading glasses as they entered. "Harrumph," he mumbled, waving them to the two leather chairs in front of him.

"Good morning, Sir," said Graham as he sat. It was now after eleven in the morning.

"Oh, er, yes. Good morning, Graham." The Chief took off his spectacles and slid a slim folder across from the side of the desk, and opened it. Replacing the spectacles, he took a cursory glance at the neatly typewritten

sheets in the folder. Then, again peering over his glasses, he spoke: "Been getting a bit of flack from the top on this little lot," he said in clipped tones. "Need a result -- and pretty quickly."

By the top, he meant the Home Secretary. Politicians always see other people's duties as simple to carry out -- if there's a murder solve it! Simple.

C.S. Longfellow continued: "Where are we up to with it, gentlemen? Any nearer?" It was not necessary for him to state the case to which he was referring.

The two officers exchanged glances before Graham answered. "It is a very difficult case, Sir. One that is without anything solid to go on."

The steely voice of the Chief cut in: "Yes. Quite. You should know that murderers don't intentionally leave clues. They don't leave notes telling you who and where they are, do they? That's where your job comes in! You investigate, question, take in the over-all picture; use your brains!"

The detectives shifted uncomfortably in the comfortable chairs. "If I can update you on what we have and what we suspect, Sir," answered Graham.

"I wish you would!" came the snapped response.

Graham controlled the rush of blood to his neck, muting the anger that almost exploded. In a calm voice, he went on. "Firstly, we know that all the victims died from poisoning. The poisons were administered by injection through a fine hypodermic needle, or, in the case of Mary Stewart, by a compressed air method. Two of the poisons were Opium, one was known as Gelsemium and the other, Strychnine. All were delivered into existing immunization scars. The murderer appears to have had some medical knowledge."

"Yes. I was here when that fellow, er, erm, Wray! Yes. That fellow Wray, when he told you."

The sharp interruptions were annoying but Sampler kept calm. "The method of killing and the weapon, if I may use the term weapon, tie the murders together. The killings have taken place roughly within the same area, which adds to the links. There is also one other link, and one which I feel is of significance."

"Which is?"

"Bird feathers, sir."

"What?" snapped Longfellow. "Bird feathers? Have you taken leave of your senses, Detective Sergeant?"

The angry murmurings needed to be controlled once more. "If you will allow me, Sir," the tone still controlled. "The killer leaves a small bunch of bird feathers near the body. He has done this in every case."

Longfellow was upright in his chair, the steely eyes, once again free of the spectacles, looking at Sampler as if he was something distasteful. "And you feel this to be significant, do you?"

"Yes, Sir. I do."

"Well, in what way significant?" the voice now a couple of tones higher.

"With respect, Sir. It is clearly a calling card -- a signature of some kind."

Clive broke in. "I've arranged for an Ornithologist to examine the feathers, Sir. To find out what kind of bird they are from. They are unusual in that they seem to consist of many smaller feathers making up one. And they are iridescent."

Longfellow looked toward Miller with a hint of contempt. "Iridescent, eh?" he said with sarcasm. "Big word, detective." He resisted the temptation to ask Miller if he knew what the word meant. Then, turning back to Sampler, he asked: "And what do you hope to achieve by finding out which bird shed their feathers?" The sarcasm was heavy and it was uncalled for.

Still outwardly calm, Graham replied: "Well, Sir. It is possible that the bird is peculiar to a certain district and, if so, it gives us an extra clue to follow up. The person may keep an aviary, or maybe work at one, or a Pet Shop. The bunches may be sold from a particular Fancy Goods Shop --

again, another lead."

Showing exasperation now, Longfellow sat back and sighed. "Is that the sum of it Detective Sergeant?"

"I do have one suspect, Sir."

Longfellow leaned forward. "A suspect? And it's taken you until now to tell me?" He puffed noisily. "Who the hell is he, then?"

Graham steeled himself. "A priest, Sir. A Jesuit priest."

For several seconds, the two men stared at each other, the silence electric. Instead of the expected explosion, the Chief spoke with quiet resignation. "So. What we are looking for, then, is a bird-loving priest who has a desire to send his fellow humans to their Maker. Good." He studied his officers in silence before pointing to the door. "I suggest that you two get your act together and start finding real clues. If you are incapable, I will take you off the case and give it to someone who has their feet on the ground. Now get to it!"

The two left hurriedly, smarting with anger and feeling like schoolboys chided by their headmaster. As the door closed, Longfellow picked up the telephone. "Get me the Home office Minister immediately," he instructed the operator.

It was five minutes before the Minister was obtained and Longfellow brushed the side of his hair into place as he spoke, as though the Minister could see him in all his importance. "Hello, Minister." He smiled ingratiatingly at the phone in his hand. "I have had a word with my two officers in charge of the recent murder investigation and I am satisfied that they are well on the way to solving the matter. I am assured that an arrest is imminent." He listened to the words of congratulation. "Thank you, Sir. I will pass on your comments. Goodbye." Replacing the phone in its cradle, he sat back, smiling smugly at the ceiling.

Back in Graham's office, the two exchanged heated comments on the ignorance of their Chief and his lack of understanding, wondering how he had ever reached the position of Chief Constable, letting their anger be spent. When they calmed down, Graham observed: "There is one thing he said that may have made some sense, though."

"Oh? And what is that, Graham?"

"He said, sarcastically, of course, that the priest wants to send his fellow humans to their Maker. I wonder if that is what he is doing?"

Clive considered the statement. He had not suspected the Jesuit before but, suddenly, there was a hint of a possible motive here. "You mean he feels he is acting for God?"

There was a gleam in Graham's eyes now. "Precisely! So you do suspect the priest, after all, Clive?"

"I'm not too sure. What you say makes sense, but are we not making the theory fit the crime? Could that scenario not be attached to any series of murders?"

"It could, possibly. However, have you not felt, as I have, that the bodies have been left with some kind of respect. Not mutilated, no signs of anger, nothing stolen, no mementoes taken?"

"Yes. I have to admit that it crossed my mind. Even with Maddigan, the beating appeared to be without malice and, though he left the body naked and bound to the trees, he still took the time to leave the feathers."

Graham was once more calm, an air of anticipation about him. He felt that they were moving in the right direction. "Tomorrow, Clive, we pay another visit to Penn. We'll speak to Father McGiven again and, possibly, take a trip to Watford for a chat with Mrs. Johnson." He rose, unable to contain the smile that crept over his lips. "Lunch time, Clive."

Over the pub lunch and into the afternoon, sweating in the heat of Graham's office, the pair pored over the murder files yet again, making notes and assembling a new 'summary' file, where all relevant details were entered; dates, times, the Jesuit's reported whereabouts at the times of death and so on. At one point, Clive stopped the proceedings to ask if the facts were

really fitting the Jesuit's movements, or were they in danger of 'fitting him up?'

No. Graham felt that they were on the right track and confirming that the Jesuit did have time to carry out the murders. After all, details of some of his movements had been accepted purely from the priest's words.

They worked until late afternoon and then decided to call it a day. Graham had now to endure the guilt he would certainly feel on going home to his lovely wife.

* * * *

It was then five-fifteen and Mrs. Fairweather, looking through her front-room curtains, saw Carol, Candice and Gerry casually cycling past as they went to their homes for tea. She considered that Emma must have stopped off at a shop in town, so expected she would be home soon.

CH021

CHAPTER TWENTY

After 'saving' the girl, Emma, Ignatious traveled into Pangbourne and parked his motor home in a public car park, whilst he took a stroll around the town. He would kill some time here and then find a spot on the outskirts to stay for the night. Tomorrow would be soon enough to visit the Parish Church. Perhaps by then, the body would have been discovered and he would be able to offer his wisdom and comfort to the grieving parents.

He took evening meal at around six-thirty, in a pleasant cafe near to the car park. Once again, the weather had held and the premises had every available window open, which only slightly alleviated the heaviness of the interior. However, the service was friendly and the chicken salad fresh and quite excellent. Taking time to enjoy the meal and to rest his tiring feet following the lengthy stroll around the town, Ignatious munched his food slowly, studying the few other patrons who occupied the small dining room. He liked to study people, calculating what he thought their secrets and personal problems to be. He felt his assumptions would generally be correct.

At last, he rose from the table, paid his bill, with a decent tip for the bustling waitress and left. Back in the vehicle, he drove to the surrounding countryside and parked off the road, near to a range of hedgerows, that offered a fine view of the meadow as it meandered away from his position and down towards the inhabited parts.

For some time, he sat outside, soaking up the beauty of the area and the pleasure of God's gifts; the fading Sun as it created new colors and aspects, the gentle, warm breeze, the grasses, flowers and beautifully blossomed trees.

Finally, Ignatious went back into the motor home where he read the bible until tired enough for sleep. Stripping his clothes, he lay naked under the single cotton sheet and drifted away.

The exhaustion, coupled with the heaviness of the warm night, lulled Ignatious into a fitful sleep, filled with troubled dreams.

* * * *

He had become accustomed to his position, tied to the pole, uncomfortable that it was. Thankfully, due to lack of food and drink, his normal bodily functions had gone into neutral mode, so he did not have to suffer the indignity of performing them where he stood.

It was around two in the morning, the sounds of the jungle now muted, that he became aware of movement somewhere in the vicinity of his ankles. Something was sniffing around! He then felt a similar movement around his tied wrists. What kind of animal could this be? he wondered fearfully. Then, the binding ropes began to loosen and slide down his body. Keeping in the same position in which he had spent the last few days, he gingerly moved one of his feet forward. It moved! Trying the other foot, he was astonished to find that it, too, moved forward.

Cautiously, he brought his arms to the front, feeling the ropes sliding off him. He was being freed! But how? By whom? The ropes fell away to the

ground as a figure appeared from behind in the darkness. Peering hard, Ignatious was just able to make out the face of the girl with whom he had spent that last night before being hauled to his imprisonment.

He looked at the girl in amazement. What she was now doing could be the cause of her suffering a violent death. Before he could speak and whisper his thanks, she pointed toward the jungle. "Go!" she whispered harshly. "Go!" She then left quickly and silently.

For some moments, Ignatious could not move; he was in a small state of shock. He had not expected to be freed and had made his peace with his Maker, fully prepared to meet Him.

His muscles stiff and tingling painfully with the blood filling again the restricted tubes of his veins, he bent and stretched his legs, flapping his arms in an attempt to assist the renewal of his circulation. He realized that, whilst he was here, he stood the risk of discovery but he would not be able to move quietly on numbed feet. After several minutes, he felt more back to normal and paused to decide what next to do.

The happenings of the past few days had both shocked and angered him. Since before his prison days, Ignatious had learned to curb his anger and channel it into something positive rather than give vent to it. However, now he was burning with an anger that threatened to wholly consume him. He wanted revenge!

Noticing the table laid with the intended instruments of his death, he quickly devised a plan that would satisfy his fury. Gathering up the flask with its deadly contents, he moved swiftly to the edge of the village and climbed the ladder leading to the water storage tank that, only a few days earlier, he had helped to design and construct for the benefit of the tribe.

Reaching the top, he laid the flask down and scooped a handful of the pure water into his dry mouth, swallowing gratefully after first swilling it around. He then retrieved the flask and removed the stopper. He knew the poison would be of the strongest kind, designed to kill quickly; something he would have appreciated later this morning.

Leaning over the edge of the tank, he poured a measure of the pink-tinted liquid into the water, calculating that even a small amount would be sufficient to permeate the system, with enough power to do its deadly work. However, he wanted to be absolutely certain.

When the villagers awoke, their first action would be to feed the water to their children and then take it themselves. Ignatious hoped that the children would survive until the seniors took their drinks so that there would be no pre-warning. He sat with his back to the tank and awaited the oncoming of dawn.

* * * *

The light shaft of sunlight across Ignatious's face woke him from his slumber. Having no watch, he had to calculate from the sun's position, what time it was, estimating it to be around six. Looking out over the village, he watched the early mist rise from the dwellings, over the foliage to become temporarily lodged in the tall trees. The warmth was beginning to increase even then, indications that the day was to be hot again. Even during the frequent rains, the heat was never subdued.

The one thing that was immediately apparent to Ignatious was the unusual quietness, apart from the growing sounds of the jungle. There was no life to be observed in the village at a time when some signs would normally be evident. It seemed as though his plan had worked but there was only one way to be certain and that was to inspect the dwellings.

Picking up the flask, still quite full, he descended the ladder. Once on the ground, he went to the first of the dwellings. Going inside, he observed one of the tribesmen lying on the floor on top of a toddler, both with eyes and mouths open -- clearly dead. Next to the sink lay a tribes-woman, also clearly lifeless and, in the far corner, a girl in her early teens. The next three homes proved to be the same: all occupants' dead.

Feeling safe now, Ignatious went to his dwelling and dressed in his

traveling clothes, gathering up what useful items he felt would be needed including, and for no good reason he could immediately think of, the deadly flask. He placed all into a light backpack and continued his inspection of the village.

Seeing in one, the body of his one-time friend, Karakta, he felt curiously emotionless, while, in another dwelling, he felt some remorse at the sight of the lovely girl who had provided him with sexual gratification and who had been courageous enough to free him. He consoled himself with the thought that, at least, she looked beautiful and at peace.

In his sleep, Ignatious smiled, the reason for retaining the flask now evident following the most recent killing.

It took more than an hour to complete the scrutiny, leaving only the place of the Elders. There were three places allocated to them, the Chief Elder occupying one a little larger than the other two. Nervously, not entirely expecting the poison to have affected these strange men, he went into the first of the smaller buildings.

To Ignatious's amazement, all three were completely empty of beings! In the Chief Elder's residence, the puzzled missionary discovered an assortment of the hypodermics used, together with their reed needles, and phials containing the various fluids. Two of the hypodermics were of the compressed-air type. Again, without fully understanding why, Ignatious collected the hypodermics, needles and phials and put them in his pack. The liquids were familiar to him by their colorings and he knew which drugs, or poisons they contained.

In the time spent here, mostly happy, Ignatious had come to know how to use different plant types to obtain the fluids. Even in the Western world, he would be able to mix the brew from existing plant life, understanding which types would be of similar genus to those found in this sweltering place.

There was one final thing his curiosity led him to satisfy, and that was the so-called Gods. What action, if any, would they be likely to take?

Going back to the village square, he began the journey up the hillside, picking his way through the dense bushes, until he arrived at a few feet from the top. Squirming upwards, as Karakta had previously advised him, he peered carefully over the edge. The sight that greeted Ignatious stunned and shocked him.

The three pyramids were slowly and smoothly sinking into the ground, the earth around them churning and bubbling. It was clearly an organized operation. In unison they slipped further and further until a mere foot of each protruded. Stationary for many minutes, the shining peaks suddenly disappeared below ground, the churning continuing for some time. Then, all was still, peace and quietness returning. Where the amazing structures had once stood, there remained only large patches of earth showing amidst the rich green of the surrounding grasses. In less than two weeks, the area would once more be uniform, the greenery appearing totally undisturbed.

Unwilling to believe the evidence before him, Ignatious stared and stared, tears, unaccountably, slipping from his eyes. What had he just witnessed? Was it a miracle, magic, or some alien occurrence? Who could possibly know?

He shuddered and allowed himself to slip, face downwards, from the top of the rise to the bushes immediately below. Even here, he could not bring himself to move, his mind in turmoil, trying and failing, to make some sense of the scene. Eventually, he stood and made his way back to the square where he gathered his belongings and set off. On the way from the village and its lifeless occupants, he collected up some fruit to serve as sustenance over what he expected to be a difficult and tiring journey.

At the end of the village area, Ignatious turned to take one last look at the paradise that was, noticing the thin clouds of airborne insects already gathering around the buildings. His heart wept for his stricken companions, even Ottomier who had brought the tragedy upon them all. Pictures entered his mind, of Father Christian, a tough, once dedicated missionary and friend, the

two young nuns whose lives had been prematurely ended, and the Australian who never got the chance to experience the happiness that, for many months, had been enjoyed by the survivors of that awful storm.

It had been a long journey with many truths being brought to the missionaries about their own vulnerabilities and failings at a time when their faiths had come to be tested. Ignatious had learned a lot, not only in practical experience, but about himself -- and he felt strong; felt that he had, with only a couple of diversions, come through it all with his commitment to God in good shape.

Putting the tribal deaths out of his mind, he moved on. As he would later tell the parents of Kylie Johnson -- he got up and walked off while they were sleeping.

Making his way to the clear-water river, he filled one of the animal-skin flasks with the pure liquid and secured the stopper tightly. Taking a deep breath, he walked towards the forbidding foliage that marked the beginning of the jungle.

Without the assistance of his companions, it took Ignatious until dusk to finally reach the position where the boat had been left all that time ago. Even if still there, he doubted if the craft would be in a fit state to engage the unpredictable waters.

Almost at exhaustion, he hacked his way over the final stretch of jungle and fell into the small bay. While lying on his front, he offered up prayers to the Good Lord for delivering him safely. There had been many dangers to be faced en-route, causing him to use his gradually tiring brainpower to repel the various animals; some purely mean-minded, some mischievous and two or three downright dangerous predators.

His worst moment had come when, finding it difficult to concentrate, he had been confronted by the rarely seen and deadly Bushmaster snake, the bite of which is highly poisonous. It had slithered across his path two or three times before sliding quickly and menacingly directly towards him.

Concentrating with all the power he possessed, Ignatious watched in dread as the cold reptile continued in its mission, with jaws beginning to open, ready to deliver the fatal bite. The sweat poured from the horrified priest as he realized that his powers might not, after all, be enough to save him now, when he most needed them.

'Go! Go! Back!' he urged in his mind, even using Spanish and Portuguese translations in his urgency, not considering that the thought-waves bore no language, being merely electrical impulses.

At a distance of no more than a foot from his exposed legs, the snake started to rise up in striking mode, the evil jaws now wider, cold, evil eyes looking at him with deep malice. And, in that position, it stopped. Ignatious braced himself for the strike that he simply did not have the energy to evade, his eyes fixed fearfully on the reptile. For several seconds, the two remained as they were and then, as if at a signal, the snake closed its mouth, dropped to its natural position and squirmed away into the dense jungle.

Rigid with fear, Ignatious remained where he was, gathering his spirits and his mind. At length, he moved but the trembling stayed with him for the next half hour, the task of hacking the foliage ultimately helping to concentrate his mind.

Raising himself wearily onto all fours, Ignatious crawled to the boat's docking point, the backpack weighing heavily as he moved. Through the gathering dusk, he could just make out the hull of the craft. It was still here! However, he wondered, what condition would it now be in?

Using tremendous willpower, he got to his feet and stumbled to the boat. Resting on the starboard side for a few seconds, gulping in huge breaths of warm air, he summoned more strength. Slowly levering himself along, he inspected the timber structure, both outside and in.

The rear of the craft was in the water and Ignatious found himself waist-high as he checked the rear, the relative coolness of the river being most welcome to the tired and hot body. Moving from the water, along the port

side, he slowly completed the task. Then he had to climb aboard and check the deck and roomy cabin.

Surprisingly, the boat was in decent condition, the thick paintwork on the outside providing ample protection. One or two of the deck boards had warped but, all in all, miraculously, it was in good shape. Too tired to continue, Ignatious gathered his belongings into the cabin and settled for the night.

* * * *

Many days later, a party of naturalists setting out on a journey down the Amazon, spotted a ramshackle boat drifting aimlessly along with the current, near to the opposite banking. Steering swiftly over to it, they were surprised to find that it was occupied. The rambling man they discovered, lying on the floor of the cabin, seemed, in his delirium, not to notice their presence and it was decided to get him to the nearest hospital without delay.

The care Ignatious received was second to none and he was nursed back to something like full health over a period of two months. Whilst there, the staff had made contact with the local Catholic Church, who had verified his position as a missionary and obtained permission for the man, who they now knew as Father Gawain Hadleigh, to provide service with them until he was ready to move on. It was from here that he was summoned to an audience with the Pope and subsequently given his present orders.

CH022

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

The two detectives were in Graham's office at the Met shortly before six-thirty in the morning. Clive stood as his Superior collected up the slim files and placed them into his briefcase.

They were about to leave for Penn once more, when Graham spotted something on the corner of his desk. There were two typewritten sheets, which had not been there when he left the office the previous evening. Picking up the first, he quickly read the contents. "Ah," he said to Clive. "It's a brief autopsy report from Sallie, on Thomas Singleton and it confirms that he was murdered by injection of a poison."

"What did he use this time?" asked Clive.

"Atropine, according to this. Does the poison mean anything to you, Clive?"

"Nope. Not a thing," he chirped. "What's the other note?"

Graham reached for the sheet and began to read. "Ah," he said, "It's from the Ornithologist." He read through the short report. "Seems the feathers are from the Hummingbird." A slow smile spread over his face as he related the last piece to Clive. "The crucial bit is that the particular breed is something of a hybrid and, although rare, is known mostly in the Amazon forests and jungles." The triumph in Graham's voice was undisguised. He added: "Now, Clive, where did our Jesuit say he had spent a couple of years?"

Brazilian Amazon," he said, acknowledging that his Superior's hunch was proving to be along the right lines. Not sufficient to convict a man but a giant step forward in the investigation.

Stuffing the papers into his briefcase, Graham followed Clive to the police car park where they took a vehicle for the journey to Penn.

Even at this early hour, traffic was beginning to build. However, it was much lighter than it would be in another half an hour and good progress was made to the A40. Once there, the going was steady and they were soon onto the M40 and the route to Penn.

Arriving at the local police station within the hour, they found it to be manned by a Sergeant Tim Brewster. Apparently George Flint was on his day off. Brewster was a portly, old-time type copper, nearing retirement, and just as genial as George. An over-large moustache drew attention immediately and the seasoned, brown eyes sparkling from the face, seemed to understand this.

"Good morning, detectives," he boomed. "Early morning journey, eh. Would you like a brew?" he asked before introductions had been made. The pair

from the Met wondered how he knew what they were -- was it so obvious?

Turning to put on the kettle in the small kitchen nearby, Brewster called over his shoulder: "You'll be Graham and Clive from The Yard, eh?"

The pair exchanged glances. "George told me all about you. Said you'd probably be popping back here again sometime." The chinking of cups reached their ears. "Knew you were fuzz," using the general description of the police force. "Takes one to know one ... or two in this case!" A booming laugh followed the rather weak joke.

Coming from the kitchen, precariously balancing three cups of tea on saucers, Brewster ushered his visitors into George's office. Over the drinks, Graham briefly explained his suspicions of the Jesuit and the new evidence on the feathers.

No longer being surprised by anything humanity threw up, Brewster grunted his agreement. "Yes. It does sound suspicious, I agree. Get the bugger in here; we'll soon have him talking," he added, the eyes twinkling.

"I appreciate the offer, Sergeant, but we need to make a few more enquiries yet," Graham responded. He did not want to do anything that might jeopardize the case. It had to be right; clear evidence that could be used in a court of law. "We'll pay a visit to Mrs. Singleton first, and then Father McGiven again."

"Yes, whatever you say Detective," came the toneless response as Brewster finished his cup of tea. "Better be getting back to the desk," he said, with a big smile, indicating that the hospitality was at an end. Emptying their cups, the two men from Scotland Yard offered their thanks and left.

Having the address of Mrs. Singleton together with a local town map, they had no problem locating her. The door was opened at the first knock, the bereaved woman having seen them arrive as she looked out from her front room window. Graham introduced them, showing his ID card. "Could we ask you a few questions about Brother Saviour, the Jesuit Priest, please Mrs. Singleton?" he opened.

She frowned, not really wanting to discuss anything more in connection with her beloved daughter and her ex-husband. The memories were still fresh; still painful. She had just about come to terms with the death of Debbie and accepted it in the light of the Jesuit's words.

"Well," she began hesitantly. "I think I've gone through just about everything with the local police -- and I don't really feel like talking about it any more. Is it really necessary?"

The woman was clearly troubled but Sampler needed to talk to her. She may just offer some kind of clue that could strengthen the case against the priest. "I'm truly sorry, Mrs. Singleton," he said. "But we will take up as little of your time as possible. I realize it must be painful to you but it could help to apprehend the person responsible for these crimes. We'd like to make sure he doesn't kill again, if possible."

Mrs. Singleton relented, the urgent plea in the detective's eyes softening her. "Oh, all right, then. Come in." She turned and led them into the room where Ignatious had so recently brought his holiness and aura to her.

Inviting them to sit, she followed suit, sitting upright betraying the discomfort she felt, her hands clasped together on her lap.

Graham smiled, hoping to relax her a little. "Firstly Mrs. Singleton, I understand that you received a visit from Brother Saviour, shortly after Debbie had been found."

"Yes. He helped me a great lot. He made me feel as though I was talking to God Himself." She spoke in a faraway, wistful voice.

"Quite. Did he talk to you about his past experiences, at all?"

Elizabeth thought for a while before replying: "No. Not that I can think of." She then decided. "No; definitely not. He came in and consoled me and put my mind on the right track. He made me realize that Debbie was now safe and she was happy. That is all I should want for her." She stopped to choke back a tear. "I miss her so much but I must not think of myself."

Debbie's happiness is all I ever wanted for her when she was alive, so why should it be any different now?"

Graham felt for her. To lose a child must be devastating. For a fleeting moment, he wondered how he would feel if anything happened to his little son, Nathaniel, while he was enjoying illicit sex with his lover. The thought was quickly brushed away, it not being welcome.

"Did he ever mention being in Brazil?"

Elizabeth looked at him in puzzlement. "Brazil? Why Brazil?"

"It's just somewhere he had lived for a while. I thought he might have mentioned it," he said, dismissively. "Did he mention Hummingbirds to you?"

The questions were getting silly now. "Detective," she said with some frustration. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"I appreciate that some of these questions may not mean much to you, but we need to build a fuller picture in our investigations."

Elizabeth stared at the two. "Surely! Surely, you are not saying that you suspect the priest?" she snapped.

"I don't imply anything at all, Mrs. Singleton. It's merely a case of gathering as much information as we can. Many questions help to exonerate a suspect -- not that I suggest the priest is a suspect," he added hastily.

"I should hope not!" She then calmed. "I have told you all I can, detective. Is that all, now?"

"Just another couple of questions, then we'll leave you in peace. "Did Debbie ever mention Brother Saviour to you? Or a priest, even?"

Elizabeth forced a tight-lipped smile. "For someone who you don't suspect, you're certainly asking a lot about him. No. She didn't mention him, or a priest. I felt she was going to meet someone that day but it wasn't a priest, I can assure you of that!"

"How can you be so sure, Mrs. Singleton?"

"Because, Debbie was wearing make-up and I could smell a faint aroma of perfume." She smiled. "It doesn't sound like she would be meeting a man of God, exactly, does it?"

Graham went on to his next concern. "Your ex-husband, Thomas, Mrs. Singleton."

"Yes."

"Was he present when the Jesuit paid you a visit?"

"No. He had to get back to his woman!" The bitterness was evident. "She used to be my best friend, too!" she spat. "What are friends for? Not for taking your husband, that's for sure! As much as I hated him then, it hurt me a lot when I found out he had been murdered."

The guilt again invaded Graham. "As far as you know, did the Jesuit visit him at his home, or somewhere?"

"Yes. I understand from Father McGiven that he spoke to Thomas at the church."

"Did Father McGiven tell you what the conversation was about?"

Elizabeth was becoming angry now. She didn't want all these questions. She'd had enough. "Certainly not! He is a priest you know! Confidentiality and all that?"

There was nothing to be learned here, Graham decided, so he offered his apologies, thanking Mrs. Singleton for giving them her time, and left. She was glad to be rid of them and began to dust and polish the furniture furiously, allowing the anger to dissipate with the effort.

"Father McGiven next," said Graham as they left the Singleton home.

"Well, we didn't learn anything there, did we?" replied Clive, "perhaps we'll have better luck with the priest."

Clive again took the wheel and moved in the direction of St. Mary's. "Do you think we will learn anything that we don't already know, Graham?"

A shrug of the DI's shoulders indicated a semblance of uncertainty. "What I'm looking for," he said, slowly, deep in thought, "is something to confirm my theories; some comment that may tie the Jesuit into the murders. Every little helps, Clive. Like with Mrs. Singleton. She proved that the man

has a powerful effect on people -- I've actually experienced it myself. He somehow causes confusion in the brain; his presence tends to take over. It's difficult to explain but, as you will find out whenever you meet him, you feel like throwing yourself at his feet and begging forgiveness for everything that you have ever done wrong. Weird."

Clive cast a sidelong glance at his boss, wondering if the case was tipping him over the edge. "Mmm," was his only comment.

"Mrs. Singleton," continued Graham, "has clearly been affected by him. You'd have thought my questions about the Jesuit were sacrilegious. And, one other thing, she told us that he had spoken to her ex-husband before his death."

"What difference does that make?" ventured Clive.

"It's the first time he has been linked to a victim prior to death. Before, we understood that he always arrived on the scene after discovery of the body. Small thing but another tiny step forward.

Arriving unannounced at the vestry of St. Mary's, the detectives were relieved to find Father McGiven in a welcoming mood. "Come in. Come in," he urged. "Let me get you a cup of tea and something to eat."

The offer was eagerly accepted as the men sat at the priest's invitation, while he called from the door leading into the church to Mrs. Collins, his general help: "Three teas and some hot, buttered toasted teacakes, if you will, please." Smiling her closed the door and returned to his guests. "So very nice to see you again, Detective Inspector. I expect you are here about the Jesuit, are you?"

Graham confirmed the nature of his visit and introduced Clive to the priest. "I'm sorry to trouble you again, Father," he said. "I'm trying to find some order in these awful killings and I must explore every avenue."

"Quite. If I can be of any assistance at all?"

The ensuing conversation went smoothly, the questions from the detectives being put in a conversational way, almost as though in praise of the mysterious Brother and showing keen interest in the stories he'd told to Father McGiven in their earlier meetings. The priest was enthusiastic in his recounting; it was clear that the Jesuit was some kind of a hero to him and, to Graham, demonstrated the effect transmitted by the holy man.

Without arousing their host's suspicion in any way, it was discovered that the first time he had met the Jesuit was after the death of Debbie. He was quite certain of this, the meeting having been occasioned as a result of the murder and the desire to comfort the bereaved. Graham had hoped that a link could have been made prior to the death but it was no great setback. However, Father McGiven confirmed that Brother Saviour had spoken to Thomas Singleton before his untimely end and that he had seen Thomas to his car afterwards.

"Did they talk again after the meeting here, Father?" queried Clive.

"Only at the car. They chatted for a few minutes and then Mr. Singleton left."

"How did Mr. Singleton appear to you as he left? Did he seem agitated, or worried at all?"

"Oh, no. Not at all. Quite the opposite I would say. Smiling -- relieved even."

Clive persisted. "Did the Jesuit tell you what they had chatted about, Father?"

"No. I never asked and he didn't say. Why, is it important?"

Clive smiled. "Just trying to build the picture, Father. It's possible Mr. Singleton may have given some clue as to whom he was intending to meet," he continued.

The priest nodded. "Ah, I see. Yes, I suppose that could have been of some importance."

Graham then spoke. "There was another killing quite nearby, Father."

"Yes, a young teacher. Terrible business. This is a reasonably quiet area, yet we have had this spate of suspicious deaths and all in the course of

a few weeks. I fail to understand it." He shook his head in disbelief.

"Was he one of your parishioners, Father?"

"Yes, he was a regular at Mass and at confession. I understand he was an excellent teacher, also." He looked at Graham quizzically. "Is his murder linked, Detective Inspector?" he asked in surprise.

"There are still vital pieces of evidence as yet missing but, yes, I do believe that all the recent killings are the work of one person."

The priest sank back into his chair. "Oh," he said quietly. "And you think Brother Saviour may have obtained some knowledge, somewhere along the line, of whom the killer might be?"

Graham shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, Father, that's what I'm hoping. He has met people directly involved with the victims -- apart from Maddigan, that is -- and he has a way of opening people up. They will probably tell him things they wouldn't normally disclose. He could be of great value to us."

Father McGiven agreed -- the Jesuit had an overpowering persona. Answering the unasked question he said: "Mr. Maddigan lived alone. I believe his family live in Cornwall and his body was transferred there for burial."

"Do you know where Brother Saviour is at present, Father?" ventured Graham.

"No, I haven't heard from him recently. Is he not in his motor home?"

"Probably, but he has moved from the district and we don't know where he has gone to. Did he give you any idea of his next destination?"

Father McGiven could only tell them that Brother Saviour would be moving around the country at will, wherever the urge took him. He had mentioned no place in particular.

The detectives finally left, thanking Father McGiven for his time and asking him to contact the Met if the Jesuit got in touch. Again, a link had been established with one of the murders and the presence of Brother Saviour. At this stage it was tenuous, no evidence of any contact between the Jesuit and the victim but the fact that Saviour had visited the parish church of Lawrence Maddigan did, to some degree, tie him in. Also, it was the first the detectives knew that Maddigan had any connection with the Church. It was by now past lunchtime so the pair stopped at a small cafe as they left Penn to grab a bite to eat.

Almost an hour later, their hunger satisfied, the detectives were on the way to Twyford in the Thames Valley, where they intended to meet up with Father Conway Rafferty, the parish priest at the church of St. Thomas More. It was hoped the priest would be able to throw some light on any connection between the ill-fated Mary Stewart and the Jesuit.

As they arrived at the church, they saw the priest at the church entrance speaking to a few worshippers as they left following an early afternoon Mass. Allowing the people to go on their way, they approached Father Rafferty. He stood in the doorway ready to receive them, wondering who the strangers were.

On introduction, the detectives were impressed by the strength of character exuded by the man. Large-framed, he offered a crisp, warm handshake, the rather rough countenance breaking into a pleasant and welcoming smile. He took the two through to the vestry where he shouted to the ever-present Mrs. Collingwood to bring a tray of tea and buns. She called back that she would be with them in a couple of minutes.

"Well, gentlemen. What can I do for you?" asked Father Rafferty.

"We are investigating the incidence of several murders in the general area," opened Graham. "Our inquiries have shown that they are all linked to the same killer and we need to get as much background information as possible."

The priest eased back into his comfortable chair, "And you feel I may be able to help?"

"Well, Father, any piece of information may be of significance, no matter how small."

Just then, Mrs. Collingwood entered pushing a hostess trolley silently

across the carpet. It bore a pot of tea, sugar and a jug of milk. Laid beneath, on the lower tray, was a full Chocolate Gateaux ready sliced into eight decent sized portions and a plate containing several cream buns. A stack of four small plates and four silver teaspoons completed the set.

"Would you mind pouring, Bertha?" invited the priest as he introduced Graham and Clive to her. Often, when people discover they are speaking to policemen, their expressions fall slightly betraying the suspicion or the natural, if unaccountable fear. However, Mrs. Collingwood simply smiled brightly and poured out the teas, milk and sugar provided in accordance with the men's preferences. As she left the room, the questioning continued.

"When did you first meet the Jesuit, Father?" asked Graham getting straight to the point.

Thinking deeply before replying, Father Rafferty then informed the visitors of the confessions taken by Brother Saviour, that being the first time he had set eyes on the man. He went on to describe the startling effect the Jesuit had had upon him and also on his housekeeper, the effervescent, Mrs. Collingwood.

Clive began to realize that his boss was not going over the edge after all; the Jesuit seemed to affect everyone, even priests, who are accustomed to people of all kinds, especially those of the Cloth. "Do you know if he had any contact with Mary Stewart, Father?" he asked.

Casting his mind back, Father Rafferty pictured the congregation on the day of the Jesuit's visit. Through a faint haze, the faces appeared in his vision, one by one, going along the pews to the people dotted around the pews. Yes. Mary Stewart was there. "I recall the lady being in the church, awaiting confession," he began. "It is possible that Brother Saviour took her confession." He considered more. "Yes, yes," he added. "After a while one becomes used to the parishioner's voices and, on that day, I definitely did not hear Mrs. Stewart's confession. Therefore, assuming she did enter the confessional, and I see no valid reason for her not to as that was the purpose of her being there, the Brother must have heard her."

"Can you recall if he told you that he had heard her confession and what she spoke about?" Clive blundered.

Father Rafferty looked from one detective to the other in mild surprise. A patronizing smile broke onto his lips as he faced the young man. "No, my son, he did not. We do not discuss what we hear in the confessional box. Not even with detectives!" He chuckled at the embarrassed expression that crossed Clive's face.

"Sorry, Father. Of course, I should have realized. I'm sorry."

Graham again took charge. "Father, did the Brother talk of his past at all?"

The priest studied Graham for several seconds. Detective Inspector," he said. "Your questions are all about Brother Saviour. Surely you do not suspect such a holy man. If I didn't know better, I could have thought that he was Saviour not only in name but in person!"

The sincerity of the priest left no doubt about the impact the Jesuit imposed on people. "You don't suspect him, do you?"

"No, Father, not at all," lied Graham. "He has had contact with the families of the victims and, in some cases, the victims themselves. We must check every avenue and find out what we can. When a lot of small things come together, it is amazing how often a bigger picture is revealed."

"Yes, of course," replied Father Rafferty. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to question your professionalism. Everyone to their trade, as I have just demonstrated," he said, looking meaningfully at Clive.

The men from the Met were then given a long and enthusiastic account of Ignatious's past adventures, dwelling mainly upon the Amazon experience. Even though the story tallied with that told by Father McGiven, it made enthralling listening. However, it seemed that nothing more was to be gained here, so the detectives prepared to leave. Just as Graham was about to terminate the meeting, Father Rafferty dropped the bombshell.

"Strange how we all differ in our particular beliefs," observed Rafferty, "and have different religious icons, yet they all have one thing in common -- faith and belief."

Seeing the bland faces of his guests, the priest realized he was in danger of going on too long and decided to explain further. He wished to end the chat on a light note.

"When Saviour was with the last tribe," he continued, "he witnessed many strange occurrences and observed the way the tribes people practiced their particular faith. They believed their Gods were already with them in human form, for one thing. And their view of sexual matters can only be described as primitive although, when one considers it, there is a kind of logic and no one seems to have suffered from what may be deemed loose morals." He was becoming sidetracked again.

Getting back on track, he told of the strange funeral customs: "They cremated the bodies, Brother Saviour said, using an unbelievable extreme of heat generated by goodness knows what means and," he chuckled, "to send them on their way to happiness, they put a small bunch of bird feathers in the coffin. Hummingbird feathers." He chuckled again.

"They even had a special way of placing the feathers. For females, they were put next to the left thigh and for males, next to the right thigh! What this signifies escapes me -- feathers with which to fly to their destination, perhaps?"

The dumbfounded silence that followed this revelation puzzled Father Rafferty. "What ... what ... what is wrong, gentlemen?"

It was minutes before a dry-mouthed Graham was able to reply. "Oh, er, nothing Father. I was just considering something." Rising as one, the two men hurriedly made their exit, thanking the priest for his hospitality and also warmly thanking the hovering housekeeper for the drinks and the tasty food.

It was by then approaching evening and time to be getting back to London. However, whilst they were 'on a roll,' they agreed to forego a further meal and travel on to Watford to see the parish priest there.

On the journey, Graham took the opportunity to search through the file summaries to check if the priest's name was noted anywhere. There was no history of the church listed, simply the name, The Holy Rood, but there, neatly typed under the church name, was "Father Cobb."

"Not far to Watford," observed Graham as the car glided swiftly along the motorway. "Thank goodness for the light nights, eh?"

The "hmmpphh" from Clive belayed his concentration. Even on a short stretch of motorway, it was necessary to have one's wits about them. Even so, the pair could not resist discussing the stunning links revealed by Father Rafferty. Everything in the investigation was at last moving in the right direction.

In a little under forty-five minutes, they were easing along the one-way system of Beechen Grove towards Exchange Street where they would arrive at their destination at the junction with Market Street.

In minutes the impressive sight of The Holy Rood appeared before them, it's gritty exterior standing proudly in its stature. It was a church, as a church ought to be, welcoming yet aggressively displaying strength and the right to exist, in fear of nothing. Clive guided the vehicle to a spot near to a set of metal railings at the side of the building. Before alighting, he placed the well-worn Metropolitan Police badge on the windscreen to avoid any parking tickets that may be issued by a zealous traffic warden.

At that time, the early evening Mass had been completed and the parishioners had gone on their way soothed by the warmth of their faith.

The detectives met Father Cobb as he pottered around the altar tidying things and placing the various religious ornaments in readiness for the next service. The hospitality offered by the various clergy had, to now, been first-class and Father Cobb's was no exception. He seemed pleased to receive his guests at the same time wondering what on earth the police could want with him. However, he was always glad of new company.

The men from the Met had never before had as many really good cups of tea and waist enlarging cakes in a single day -- and they enjoyed every morsel!

The priest was willing to talk on any and all subjects but, with gentle prodding, the experienced Graham guided him to the main purpose of the visit: the Jesuit. "Oh, yes," he enthused. "What a remarkable man is Brother Saviour. He has had so many tests of faith for a man of his years; more, probably, than most priests with twice the service. As far as I can gather, he has come through his experiences virtually unscathed with faith in the good Lord above ever-more strengthened."

Graham disagreed mentally with the view that Saviour had come through unscathed. It was his growing opinion that the Jesuit's experiences had left permanent scars; indeed, rather than scars, open wounds with the blood dripping onto his unfortunate victims. "Yes, Father," he said. "I have met Brother Saviour and I must agree, he is a most remarkable person. I have to confess; his presence had an unnerving effect on me, in the sense that my thoughts were frequently confused. That is something I am not familiar with. In my work, it is essential to have a clear mind."

"Quite," said Father Cobb. "Even though I am accustomed to speaking with people in the clergy; the Pope himself on more than one occasion, I have to say that I was similarly affected. I can only describe it as being in the presence of God Himself, ridiculous though that may sound."

Graham then asked if Saviour had spoken in any detail of his jungle adventures and if there was anything particular that he had referred to. Again, the story of the tribes was related with the same startling evidence emerging as from Father Rafferty.

As the priest spoke, his eyes widened and took on a rapturous look. He even joined his hands as in prayer. Clive and Graham exchanged concerned glances. How could a single human being impress his personality on people to such an extent? It was truly uncanny.

On ending his tale, Father Cobb licked his wet lips, lips that were near to salivating. He swallowed hard, his expression now vacant, staring ahead not seeing. It was several minutes before Graham's three-times repeated question pierced his brain. "When did you first meet Brother Saviour, Father?"

"Er -- when? When? Oh, let me see." He was gradually regaining his full sensibilities now. "I got an e-mail message from Cardinal Patrick O'Leary around about the first of June to advise me of the Jesuit's visit and he arrived two days later."

"Can you be more certain of the dates, please, Father?"

Getting up from his seat, Father Cobb went to the nearby desk and consulted the diary that lay there. "Ah, Yes," he said, thumbing the pages back and forward. "The e-mail was received on the first and Brother Saviour arrived here on the third." He turned to his guests. "He called merely to introduce himself so didn't stay for long -- half an hour perhaps."

"Did he visit you again?"

"Yes. He called again on the fifth and this time he stayed a while. He even took confessions on that day. Over evening meal, he regaled me with his tales of adventure and I could only sit, enthralled. He explained his mission here and I was pleased to see that The Church was moving a little with the times." He smiled. "The wheels of the Catholic Church mechanism move very slowly, you understand. One change in twenty years is rather adrenalin-pumping!" He chuckled at this observation.

Graham chuckled with him, Clive joining in a little late, not particularly appreciating the humour. "Is that the last time you saw him?" enquired Graham.

"No. He called after the awful murder of the young girl to tell me how he had got along with the poor parents. I had contacted him earlier on his mobile to ask if he would pay the couple a visit. It had been suggested by their vicar, Reverend Gutteridge."

All this talk of e-mails and mobiles seemed strangely at odds with

Graham's idea of religion. Then it struck him! Mobile? That meant that the missing Jesuit could be reached! "Do you have Brother Saviour's mobile number, Father?" he asked, suppressing the excitement that tended to overtake him.

The priest went again to the desk. "Why, yes. I have it right here," he said, opening the diary. He read the eleven-digit number out and Clive jotted it down in his notebook.

Graham rose, followed by his assistant, "Thank you for allowing us so much of your precious time, Father; it is very gracious of you. And thank you for the food, too. I reckon we will have added a few pounds to our weight today," he laughed.

"Nice to have the company, detective. It's not every day that I have a visit from the police, let alone the Metropolitan force." He led them to the door, remaining to wave as their car moved into the sparse traffic and off back to London. The topic of conversation on the way back was, predictably, about the evidence now beginning to build against the Jesuit -- the prime suspect. It was eminently clear that Graham's suspicions had been well founded and that Brother Ignatious Saviour was, indeed, the killer.

Before making an arrest, though, the evidence had to be sifted and analysed. Circumstantial evidence and hard evidence were two quite different things. It was considered that all the circumstantial evidence they now had would become very powerful once a DNA test had been carried out on the Jesuit and it would then allow them to obtain a search warrant for the motor home. Many cases had been completed once a suspect had been held on such evidence and a warrant obtained. A person's home almost always revealed the vital hard evidence required. Stolen goods, insignificant items picked up, hairs, soiled clothing, particles of glass or soil; all these things could lead to a successful prosecution. The two men journeyed on, each smiling contentedly, more than happy with the day's work.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to sort out the various clues and their value. Then, a call to the Jesuit's mobile and they would have him! Yes, tomorrow was to be another good day. That was the thought, anyway -- until the finding of a young girl's body was reported.

CH023

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Bethany Sampler sensed that something was going wrong with her marriage; a marriage she had assumed was near perfect. During the last week, she had awakened each morning with an uncomfortable gnawing in her stomach leading to an unshakeable feeling of apprehension. The first suspicion of a problem had begun about three weeks ago and had built gradually to the present state.

Although outwardly Graham was the same, attentive and loving person, there was an almost imperceptible reaction to any physical contact with her. Enough, though, for her to realize that a change had come about. At first, Bethany had told herself that it was Graham's work. The current case was truly awful and there seemed no way of finding the killer so it would be a great worry to him.

However, her instincts, usually reliable, told her that the problem was of a different nature -- an age-old one -- another woman! She had thought the situation through, knowing that Graham loved her deeply and would not be attracted by another; yet, the instincts. Yesterday, Bethany had sat down and let her mind drift to her first suspicions. Every day together and every move he had made. She thought back to their lovemaking, which was still regular and satisfying. A smile played on her lips at the sexy thoughts but it quickly gave way to an expression of concern, then sadness. It was then she had known for certain that, unbelievable though it may seem, Graham had found someone else!

She sat on the rug beside the fireplace, staring at nothing, her mind in turmoil. A trickle of a tear slid from her eyes, running slowly down her cheek and lodging at the chin. Then another, larger tear sprung from her large

and staring eyes, swallowing up the clinging ones and falling onto her shuddering breasts. The floodgates opened as Bethany allowed the emotion to overtake her, the wetness covering her face, the endless cascade dripping from her with no attempt being made to stem the flow.

At that time, Graham, together with his assistant, Clive, was rushing to Pangbourne On Thames, their worst fears being realized -- yet another body and again a young girl. With all the gathered information on the Jesuit, Graham had dearly hoped to have had his man under lock and key by now. However, locating his man had proved to be difficult; he had simply disappeared from the scene.

The journey was completed in relative silence, both men with their individual thoughts on the case in hand. Graham had spared only a fleeting thought to his lover, Sallie, and that was business, knowing that she would already be at the scene with her team of forensic officers.

On finally arriving, he was greeted by Sallie, as the forensic team was about to set off back with their little plastic bags of suspected evidence, including various grubs and insects. An ambulance stood by, waiting for the detectives to carry out their work before removing the corpse.

"Hello, Detective Inspector," she began, smiling warmly at Graham. "My boys have finished their work so it's safe to enter the area now."

Graham's countenance remained grave; he was deeply worried about the continuing murders. "Any clues?" he asked gruffly.

Sallie responded in an official manner. "Too early to say, yet. Quite a lot of samples have been taken and we have also taken plaster-cast impressions of some tire tracks from just near to the hedges here." She waved her hand in the general direction. "We found a girl's bicycle propped against the hedges, too, and that has gone off for inspection." Turning to lead the way to the pathetic body, she added: "There is one major clue, Inspector, and that is plainly evident."

"Oh, and what's that?"

"Feathers. I recognize them as being from the Hummingbird. I instructed my team to leave them in place for you." It was easy for Sallie to adopt her official pose, that being the norm on such inquiries. However, she was concerned about the effect this latest killing had had on her lover; he was clearly rattled. She updated the men on her clinical findings, age of the victim, lack of sexual activity, slight abrasions and bruises, but not from a struggle, and so on.

The girl was lying neatly a few feet into a field of waving corn. The wheat stood erect and largely untrampled -- no signs of struggle. The hot weather had encouraged swarms of flies to the stench of the dead flesh as it began to deteriorate. It became a constant battle for the trio to keep the insects from the girl as the two men walked slowly around the figure, hearts heavy with pity and horror at the sight. Stopping at the feathers, nestled at the left thigh, Graham muttered: "Let's hope, my sweet little one, that the feathers did fly you speedily to the Heaven in which you now belong." His face was grim, the hardness covering the tenderness beneath. He knelt and, using a pen, removed the feathers.

For several minutes he knelt, staring at the bunched object as though trying to glean from it just what had taken place -- and why, in God's name! Without turning, he spoke: "That's it, Sallie. We're done here." He rose and Sallie called to the waiting ambulance to remove the poor victim back to the pathology department at New Scotland Yard where a thorough examination could be carried out.

Before returning to their cars, the three walked to the far edge of the roadway, surveying the sprawling town and countryside below. Absently, Graham spoke his thoughts aloud: "What a lovely area this is. So beautiful, so serene." Clive and Sallie glanced toward him as he spoke.

It's when you think that this is where the author, Kenneth Graham, was inspired to write "Wind In The Willows" from his church cottage; no doubt a story that the young girl has read. It has seen such as the celebrated actor,

George Arliss..."

"Who?" enquired Clive.

"George Arliss, made silent movies in twenties America. You won't know of him, I suppose. You will know of D.H. Lawrence, though. He stayed here a short while, too, with his wife." Graham fell silent, his colleagues respecting the mood, appreciating his suffering. "And now we have this!" he spat. "A young girl, no more than thirteen years old, all her life in front of her." He banged a fist into the palm of his hand. "Taken away by a bastard of a priest -- a man of God!" He turned quickly and, muttering a swift "See you back at the Met," to Sallie, he hopped into his car followed immediately by Clive. The pair shot off, leaving a slightly bewildered forensic scientist watching after them as they disappeared around the bend of the dipping road.

Three hours later, Graham was back in his office, having brought his Superior, Longfellow, up to date on the events and having suffered some more unprofessional sarcasm from the man. Clive was in the outer office, poring yet again over the thickening file on Brother Saviour, searching for any extra clue there may be.

Sitting back in his comfortable chair Graham reflected on the frustrating case before him. He had known instinctively from very early on that the Jesuit was his man and the clues, sparse that they were, had slowly built into compelling evidence to support his gut feelings. The inquiry files listed the person, his vehicle type and license number and the general area in which he was operating; yet he had not recently been seen. It seemed incomprehensible that one of the police forces had not been able to trace his whereabouts. The priest was not likely to be in hiding as he was, as far as Graham knew, unaware of just how close the Met was in it's suspicion of him.

Hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling as he pondered, Graham failed to hear the tiny knock at his office door. He only realized that someone had entered by the slight draught that wafted across his face when the door closed.

Bringing his hands down from his head and placing them on his desk, he was surprised to see Bethany standing before him. "'Er ... hello, Beth," he stammered, recovering from the initial surprise, "What are you doing here?"

The sweet smile warmed Graham instantly. She really was special. For the briefest of moments, he wondered why he had gone astray with the enchanting Sallie, faint guilt pricking tamely at his conscience.

"I just called on a whim. I had nothing special to do this afternoon and, as I was in town, I decided to come and see you -- offer support. Moral or otherwise," she added with a grin.

Graham studied Bethany's lovely, fresh face, captivated by the warm mouth as if seeing it for the first time. His heart beat faster and it was with some effort that he controlled the almost irresistible urge to leap over the desk and press his mouth to those warm, inviting lips and taste the sweet nectar. "Oh, well. I'm glad you did. I'm never too busy to see you, Beth. Would you like a coffee or something?"

Bethany studied her husband in the same way he had just studied her; wondering if, and why, he had found someone else. She found it hard to believe but her instincts were usually so reliable. "Yes, thanks, love," she replied, her voice bright, giving no hint of the inner turmoil.

Going to the door, Graham asked a nearby police officer if he would bring a couple of coffees - one with cup and saucer for Bethany.

There was a short period of awkward conversation before the drinks arrived, unexpectedly served on a wooden tray, with a bowl of sugar, milk and a couple of teaspoons. Quite a change from the usual beakers -- normally chipped at that! Graham offered his thanks and laid the tray on his desk.

The coffee was sweet and welcome to Bethany, helping to calm the inexplicable nervousness that was invading her. The very presence of Graham had always relaxed her, giving her a feeling of safety, of dependability. But now, since her suspicions had been aroused, his attitude had definitely changed; changed in a subtle way and one that only a wife could sense. Even

here, in her husband's office, the atmosphere was suspect. It wasn't only her, Graham, too, exuded an air of discomfort. It was as if he would be happier if she left; if she had not called at all.

Then, for the most brief of instances -- half a blink and she would have missed it -- his expression altered. In that snippet of time, Bethany saw a horrified look, a look almost of panic, and then all was restored. It was so quick she could have imagined it. However, she knew what she had seen and it puzzled her.

Almost in the same moment, the office door swished open and Bethany turned in her seat to see the visitor. It was in that instant she knew her fears had been realized. This was the woman!

The eyes of the two women met as time stood still, Sallie pausing in her stride into the office, Bethany frozen in position. To both females, this was as momentous as The Big Bang.

Graham was a terrific detective and very successful in his career. But, he was a man and, as such, the significance of the moment completely passed him by. "Ah, Sallie," he said, standing. "Would this be the autopsy report?"

Time fell once more into step and Sallie moved forward. "Yes, Detective Inspector, it is," she said in an official voice. "If you have any questions, please feel free to give me a call."

Still on his feet, Graham took the offered folder. "Oh, Sallie. I'd like you to meet my wife, Bethany," he said extending an arm in her direction. Bethany stood as her husband completed the formalities of introduction to his lover. The polite handshake took the form of fingers quickly into palms and even more quickly withdrawn. There was no smiling small talk and no appearance of friendship. Sallie left hurriedly, closing the office door sharply behind her.

Bethany's head was spinning with the suddenness of the event and she just wanted to leave. Turning to Graham, she thought: For a detective, Graham, you didn't do very well there. You so totally missed the atmosphere! "I'd better get moving, Graham," she said. "Any idea what time you will be home, tonight?"

"Not sure, sweetheart -- as always, it depends if anything comes up."

Bethany hated the term 'sweetheart' at that very moment. It was a term she normally loved but the presence of that woman, so close, made it seem the utmost in insincerity. Instead of leaning to Graham for the expected kiss, she turned and left. Graham was only mildly puzzled by the action and put it down to PMT, or something. Returning to his seat, he began to plan the next moves in the chase for the deranged killer who was still at large.

Outside, Bethany hailed a taxi, one of the robust looking black cabs, commonly known as "Bombers," and fumed all the way back, pictures of the pretty rival filling her thoughts, images that beat and destroyed the loveliness.

The cabbie looked into his rear mirror with the intention of carrying on polite conversation but, noting the thunderous expression of the face of his passenger, he decided otherwise and spent the rest of the journey in unaccustomed quietness. At least, he received a handsome tip as the lady paid the fare. His last glimpse was of an obviously furious woman stamping up the drive to her front door.

Meanwhile, Graham had called his sidekick, Clive, into the office to show him the interim autopsy report handed to him by Sallie. All the usual signs were there showing that the murder had been carried out by the same man, with one significant difference -- this time, the poison could not be identified. The feathers had been confirmed as being from the hummingbird and that just about tied it all together.

Several times during the day, Graham had tried to contact the Jesuit on his mobile phone, but without success. However, he felt certain of one thing -- the Brother would make contact with the bereaved as soon as the story hit the streets, and that would be in the evening editions of the newspapers. Acting on this, he telephoned the priest at the church of St. Cecelia,

followed by a call to the Reverend Francis Beesley at St. James The Less -- was there a James the Greater? he wondered -- in the village of Pangbourne. At that time, neither had had any contact with the Jesuit but agreed to let Graham know if and when there was.

Other murders were being investigated, also, and it was Graham's responsibility to oversee them and direct the course of action to be taken. Whilst not being directly involved in the other cases, it took time to organize and issue his directions, relying on officers of lesser authority to make sure they were carried out.

The day passed quickly enough, the amount of work keeping the detective fully occupied, but he was impatient to conclude the main investigation and prevent more murders being committed. His mind continually drifted to the case and the awaited call from the clergy.

At five-fifteen in the afternoon, Graham was ready to clear up and leave, pondering whether to go home, as he should, or to engineer a sexual meeting with Sallie in the pathology lab. Sallie was just about winning the argument when the phone on his desk shrilled. Picking it up, wearily anticipating a request for further advice on one of the inquiries he had been dealing with during the day, he became suddenly alert. The call was from Father Edward McCahill, head priest at St. Cecelia's and he had been contacted by Saviour!

Apparently, the Jesuit had read of the awful discovery of a young girl's body and wondered if the family was Catholic. On being told that they were, indeed, he had asked for an audience with the priest, prior to a visit to the parents to offer solace and advice. The time of the meeting had been arranged for ten-thirty in the morning, following completion of the morning Mass. Graham and Clive would be there!

Replacing the phone, he attracted Clive's attention and told him of the development. "Yes!" he exclaimed, "At last we can get him!"

"Get yourself off home, now, Clive," instructed Graham, "And get a good night's sleep. We need to be fresh and alert tomorrow." The broad smiles on the men's faces seemed in danger of becoming a permanent fixture.

As Clive left the still busy office, Graham picked up the internal telephone to speak to Sallie. His adrenalin was pumping now -- and he needed sex! Another excuse to Bethany for his lateness home.

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CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

The following morning, at ten twenty-five, the two detectives observed the approach of a motor home as they sat parked outside the Catholic church on Horseshoe Road in Pangbourne.

As the vehicle came to a halt a few yards from their position, the Jesuit could clearly be recognized through the windscreen. Graham and his Sergeant moved out of their car and walked casually toward the Brother as he alighted.

Recognizing the policemen, Ignatious greeted them with an open smile.

"Ah, detectives," he boomed. "So nice to see you again." He held out his hand. "What brings you here?"

Ignoring the extended arm, Graham spoke. "Ignatious Saviour, I am arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Kylie Johnson, on, or about, the tenth of June two-thousand and one. You do not have to say anything..." The usual caution was issued as Clive snapped the handcuffs into place. Then, first checking that the motor home was secured, Clive led Ignatious to the police car and sat beside him in the rear. Before setting off, Graham contacted the Met. and arranged for someone to collect the motor home and take it back for inspection by himself and forensics. After all this time, all the investigating, all the soul-searching, the arrest had been completed so easily and quickly.

Later, after securing the brother in a cell, Graham and his assistant searched the now impounded motor home, together with a couple of forensic

officers. In a cupboard, they found two bags containing bunches of hummingbird feathers, while in another cupboard, they discovered a number of small bottles containing fluids labeled with the names of various poisons; names that had become familiar to Graham from reading the pathology reports on the recent victims.

In the same cupboard, Clive spotted an unusual container, around six inches in height with a widening body to approximately twelve or fourteen inches circumference at the base. It resembled a bag of some kind and appeared to be made from leather or something like that. The smell of the container was of burnt timber. He removed the stopper, his hands protected by fine latex gloves, and sniffed. A bitter and unpleasant aroma invaded his nostrils causing him to recoil momentarily.

"What do you make of this, Graham?" he asked. Moving to his colleague's side, the Inspector sniffed at the bag, his mind trying to locate the scent from deep into his subconscious. It was like nothing he had previously encountered. He thoughtfully replaced the stopper and told the forensic boys to mark this one as urgent and to have it analyzed as quickly as possible. "I strongly suspect that it's another one of the Jesuit's poisons," he remarked to Clive.

In a drawer, one of the forensic team found a batch of unusual implements, decided to be hypodermic syringes, beautifully fashioned, with dozens of carefully packed, small reed-like slivers next to them. They were carefully labeled and bagged along with all the other samples. The bed coverings were also removed and placed into larger plastic bags and, again, labeled.

Having seen nothing to otherwise link the Jesuit with the victims, the detectives left. They decided to have a quick lunch in the canteen and then interview the prisoner. Ignatious had already said that he did not have a solicitor but accepted the services of a local one, suggested by Graham, although he did not really care if he was represented or not.

By the time Graham had arrived at the interview room, fitted with all the necessary recording equipment, Ignatious's solicitor, a Mr. Dennis McArdle, had arrived at the cells and taken brief notes from his client.

Joined by Clive, Graham rang through for the prisoner to be brought up.

Several minutes later, Ignatious was ushered in, flanked by two police officers and accompanied by his brief. Once everyone was seated, one of the officers left while the other remained close to the door, stood at ease, hands clasped behind his back.

McArdle lit up a cigar, without first seeking permission, as Graham explained to Ignatious what they were about to do. The interview was to be conducted on a question and answer basis, recorded, and Ignatious was free to explain his actions in fuller detail if he desired.

The recording equipment was switched on using two tapes, one for back up, and Graham began by stating the date and time and then detailing the names and ranks of those present.

He then moved to the questioning.

"Are you Brother Ignatious Saviour?" He looked into the Jesuit's eyes and immediately regretted it. His head began to swim and he had a feeling of panic. Gathering himself together with some effort, he realized that, with this suspect, it would be better not to follow the normal pattern of studying the face for clues of lies and evasion, so he decided to direct his concentration more on the man's chin. That way he would seem to be looking directly at the man and still able to glean something from the body language.

"That is the name my Holy Order has bestowed upon me," answered Ignatious. "And the one which will remain to the end of my earthly days. However, my first given Christian name was Gawain Hadleigh." His attitude was calm and controlled.

The questions went on to establish the Brother's credentials; if he was, indeed, a true Jesuit priest and the dates of his entrance into priesthood and the brotherhood. The date of entry into Britain was elicited

and the towns and villages visited, with dates and times given for each journey.

Ignatious described his given mission with enthusiasm, adding comment that he intended to continue with it into the future. Graham thought wryly how much of a future that would turn out to be. He fully expected a life term to be handed down by the courts.

"Can you say," continued Graham, "that part of your mission is to end lives?"

"My concern, Inspector, is to save souls rather than lives. Lives are merely a preparation for the hereafter and to judge the goodness or otherwise of the feeble person. Feeble, that is, as compared to the awesome might of the Lord."

Still directing his gaze to the Jesuit's chin, Graham asked: "Do you believe, then, that those who do wrong go to a place called Hell in the next life.?"

Ignatious remained calm, conversationalist. "I believe, Inspector, that the souls of the good will enjoy everlasting contentment at the next stage. Enjoyment and contentment will not be as we on earth understand it, as we will not possess bodies and nervous systems. We will be entities with a greater power of the earthly brain. You see, Inspector, the brain is our entity in our human form and it controls everything. It is not fully understood, as it was in the times of ancient Egypt, Greece and China."

It seemed like a sermon, yet Graham was prepared to listen for as long as the Jesuit wished to speak. Such was the aura of the man. "And those who are considered to be bad?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. They die and their souls die with them. They have nothing."

"Will you be nothing, Brother? Killing is wrong; it is bad."

At that point, McArdle came to life. "Excuse me, Inspector. My client has not admitted any killings. Please withdraw the question and keep to what is proved or admitted."

Ignatious smiled and patted his solicitor's arm. "Do not worry, Mr. McArdle. I freely admit to 'killings' as you put it; I send people to my Master. He craves the company of the good and the sorry and I merely send them to him. It is part of my mission. When I am instructed to comfort and to console, I see that as taking the physical form of comfort and also the spiritual. Spirits released are happy spirits." He turned back to his inquisitors.

The detectives exchanged quick glances. The Jesuit had clearly admitted killings and it had been recorded on tape! It was time to get to the hub of the matter.

"Brother Saviour. You have just admitted to killings -- in the plural. I would like, therefore, to ask you to be more specific." The tapes whirred silently on.

"Yes, Inspector. As you wish."

"Early in July of this year, the body of Kylie Johnson was found in a field in the district of Watford. She was ten years of age. Did you kill her?" Graham's emotions were well under control. No matter the subject or the horror of it, this was professional police work and emotions needed to be held in check.

There was neither sorrow nor delight in the Jesuit's bland reply: "Yes. I did."

"Why?"

"I happened to see her sat in the field picking daises and making chains with them. The day was so beautiful, the field colorful with flowers and the child, sitting, humming to herself, a wonderful example of beauty and innocence. The Lord wanted her." Ignatious smiled at the pleasant memory. "I went to her and chatted awhile. She impressed me as a bright and considerate child. She spoke of her parents, grandparents, friends and neighbors and it was clear that she had a desire to help and please everyone."

"She did not attract you sexually?"

For the first time, the Jesuit's countenance showed some irritation. "Certainly not! I do not condone sex with children, even when it is part of a culture."

"Go on," urged Graham.

"I searched her arms for signs of immunization and found a fairly recent scar on her upper left arm. I had with me a hypodermic syringe, filled with poison -- Opium in liquid form -- and I inserted it into the existing scar. The 'needle' I use is made from reeds as found in the Amazon. They are extremely fine and hollow down the center. They cause no pain when being inserted. I injected into her and watched her soul slip from the human form and speed to the God Almighty."

The expression of 'fond memory' on the Jesuit's face momentarily angered Graham but he quickly curtailed the feeling. "Did you have no conscience about taking the life of such a young, defenseless girl?"

The Brother looked surprised. "Why, no. I have just explained about human life, haven't I?" He continued: "I replaced her clothing so that she would be discovered in a decent condition and I said powerful prayers over her. I also placed the feathers of the hummingbird next to her and this would speed her to her Heavenly destination. She is happy and contented. More happiness than you or I will ever know in this world."

The admission was good. It gave motive, however flawed that may be, method and description. It placed him there at the relevant time.

"So, you admit the unlawful killing of Kylie Johnson?"

"Well, unlawful by the dictates of the West. Yes, I admit it."

Mr. McArdle sat, spellbound, the presence of the priest having its usual effect and with the unabashed admittance of the crime baffling him. He was more accustomed to his charges lying, squirming and becoming violent.

"Now, Brother," started Graham, "We are investigating a number of murders in the general area and you are our prime suspect in all of them."

"Would you like me to explain the killings in the order that I did them, Inspector?" came the surprising comment.

This man really was something new! Not only was he prepared to admit the crimes but also willing to help the interview along by openly volunteering the chronology of them.

"I do a lot of good, you know," said Ignatious, feeling that he was being viewed as some kind of monster. "The people I have met and comforted are decidedly happier after my visit. You will have found that out, won't you?"

Graham was becoming resigned to surprises being thrown at him by the remarkable Jesuit. Aside from the disturbing effect he had on everyone, he took his activities to be no less than normal and everyday. "Yes. I have been told of the benefits you have bestowed upon sufferers and I am fully aware of the effect you have on people. However, in my view, and in the view of any sane person, your wrongdoings far outweigh the good."

"Are you saying I am mad, Inspector?"

Graham paused before answering. "No, Brother Saviour. I do not regard you as insane. I think you have been fully aware of your actions and fully in control of yourself when carrying out the deeds." That was particularly for the tapes. There could be no plea for "balance of the mind being disturbed" or anything of that nature at a later date.

Immediately returning to the subject, Ignatious began again to talk about the murders. "I relieved the poor girl from her suffering. The girl, Debbie, in the lovely Penn. She was grossly unhappy until she met me. I put her mind at rest, gave her confidence and then allowed her the greatest experience of all; I sent her to her Maker."

Ignatious went on to describe the meeting with Debbie, the words he had spoken to her and how he had carried out the killing. Admitting to having performed sex with the girl, he said that she needed the act in order to restore her self-esteem and to feel truly fulfilled. At the time she was 'dispatched,' as Ignatious put it, she was at the very height of contentment

and perfect for the Lord. In reply to the next, obvious question, he had replied: "No, Detective Inspector, it was not from any sexual urge on my part. I merely granted her desires and carried out my duties to the Creator."

Without prompting, the Jesuit then moved on to his next victim, the unfortunate teacher, Lawrence Maddigan. By chance, he had overheard a group of schoolboys, lounging outside the school premises, chatting and giggling. The object of their attention had been Maddigan. One of the group had openly admitted having performed sex acts on him in return for a five, or ten-pound note, dependent on the act performed. Although Maddigan had tried to persuade him with the promise of more money, he had refused to "go all the way." The boys broke up on seeing the teacher coming from the school building.

Ignatious approached Maddigan as he left the school gates and told him of the children's conversation. Explaining his profession and the mission upon which he was engaged, Ignatious arranged to meet the teacher on the following day, to go for a stroll into the countryside where he would offer words of comfort and advice. He liked the man. He appeared as a genuine, warm-hearted person who had been saddled with an unnatural affliction and who was deeply troubled by it.

On meeting as arranged, they had found a secluded spot where Ignatious poured out his wisdom, offering solace and encouragement, reassuring the man in his tortured mind. Finally, Ignatious had acceded to Maddigan's request and secured him, naked, between two saplings. He had then fashioned a birch-type lash from the surrounding vegetation and proceeded to scourge the sinner until he was near to unconsciousness.

The beating had been administered to the entire length of the body, front and back, including the genitals, causing deep lacerations and removal of some of the skin and flesh. As Maddigan slumped, groaning, Ignatious had decided that the teacher had been completely purged of his sins and so was ready and fit to meet the Lord. The body was so damaged that the insertion of the 'needle' into one of the lacerations, gave no sensation whatever. However, the poison, named by the Jesuit as Gelsemium, caused a short but spectacular reaction and Lawrence Maddigan hung dead in his bonds, at peace forever.

"Was the attack brought about because the man was of a homosexual nature, rather than at his request?" asked Graham.

Saviour looked surprised. "Why, no. A person's sexual orientation means nothing to me."

"It didn't bother you, then, that he abused little boys?" The hint of sarcasm could not be kept from Graham's voice.

"Yes. It did. However, it is not for me to judge and the man did seek advice. He was not happy with his urges. Same-sex activity is against the Lord's wishes and intentions, of course. He created Man to procreate so that, with the numbers increasing throughout time, amazing developments could come about -- as they indeed have -- and an awareness of the Greater Being would become fully integrated into the soul.

The nature of things is so designed that the female is attractive and acquiescent to the more dominant of the species -- the male -- and will bear him children. Males are designed by the Lord to impregnate as many females as is their wish, whilst females are designed to seek out as many males as they desire with the sole purpose of producing offspring. It is the development of various cultures and the unworthy dominance of many religions that have resulted in modern-day restrictions.

The sexual act is engineered to be highly pleasurable and there is no wrong in using the act for that purpose, whether productive or not. Same-sex activity is brought about by flaws in the genetic make up, sometimes merely a psychological problem, and is therefore a mistake in nature and against what is normal. As such, it is, by definition, a perversion and an impurity, which the Lord cannot accept into His Kingdom."

"Do you believe, then, that genetically imperfect people cannot be received into Heaven?"

"No. The good Lord will cure all, in the hereafter. That means, upon

death, the soul of the afflicted is purified."

The interview was again slipping into a sermon and, interested though Graham was in the priest's beliefs, he wanted to keep to the matter in hand. However, it gave an insight into the next murder, that of Mary Stewart.

This time, the Jesuit related the events without slipping into any rhetoric. The woman was troubled, he'd calmed her, given her self-belief, then sent her to the Holy Virgin by injecting liquid Opium into her arm. He seemed to derive some pleasure from describing in detail the movements of the victim after the dose had been administered. On the question of the sexual activity, it had been as before; merely pandering to the sinners wishes, bringing to her "The Staff of God."

Thomas Singleton was, indeed, a sinner. A wretched man who had deserted his wife and daughter for another woman -- his wife's best friend! He had further sullied himself by indulging in sex in the marital bed. However, the death of his daughter had made him re-think his life and given him the notion that, had he stayed at home, she would now be alive. This was very hard for him to come to terms with and he suffered immensely from it. At the same time as bringing him contentment, Ignatious had decided that punishment was also due and so the poison given caused a more prolonged death, stage by stage.

The silence of the other persons in the small room was total, all listening with fascination to the calm, controlled Jesuit as he described the murders. It was as though he was presenting a report to the Annual General Meeting of some multi-national company. Whenever Ignatious's stare fell upon any of those present, whether the PC at the door, McArdle or Clive, they had the immediate urge to fall to their knees and beg forgiveness! Deliberately avoiding the Jesuit's eyes, Graham managed to keep a clear head and was able to put the relevant questions at the proper stages.

Finally, Ignatious reached the thirteen-year-old Emma Fairweather. Her mistake that day was to be a pleasant and pretty young girl. She qualified for God's bosom on that alone. He had been so nice to her, so concerned and caring, and yet he had ended her life as easily as buttering bread. He'd even fixed her bike after she was dead! As with each victim, death had been administered by poison, but this time the substance was unknown, one that he had discovered when in the Amazon.

Graham was glad to reach the end; the confession, excellent in content that it was, was disturbing. An intelligent and most unusual man who clearly did not see the wrong in what he had been doing.

"Well, Brother Saviour," he said, "if that is all, we'll return you to your cell and arrange a hearing for you tomorrow morning."

As he went to switch off the tape, he was halted by the Jesuit's next words: "But Detective Inspector, that is not all."

For a few seconds, Graham remained half out of his seat. Not all? The words slowly sank into his head. He sat and faced Ignatious, again carefully avoiding direct eye contact. All other eyes were on the Jesuit.

"No. While you have been chasing me, I have relieved another soul." He sat back in the wooden chair, perfectly at ease, as he had been throughout.

"Go on," said Graham almost in a whisper.

The priest smiled benignly. "My work is never at an end," he said. "Another poor soul who came across my path needed my guidance."

"Can you name this person?"

"Yes. He told me he was Andrew Clements, a drifter who hailed from the Midlands, down here seeking work. His marriage had broken up some months ago and his wife had left the area with his two young children, whom he adored. He confessed to having been forced to thief at times in order to live but he regarded himself to generally be a good person."

What age would he be?"

"Said he was thirty-six."

Graham sighed. "Okay, Brother, tell me what you can."

The usual story unfolded; a lost soul, unhappy, desperate for solace and overcome by the Jesuit in whom he was willing to confide his innermost

secrets. It was suggested that they meet again early the following morning and go to a spot close to nature. Clements had suggested Woburn Safari Park, a place he had planned anyway to visit while in this district, reasoning that you couldn't get much closer to nature than with the wild beasts. Ignatious had thought the selection perfect and readily agreed.

It transpired that the couple had found a spot next to the fencing surrounding the park, out of sight of the main tourists, hidden by thick bushes, where Ignatious had listened, counseled and finally sent the man to Heaven, using the special poison discovered in the Amazon.

At the end, Graham asked: "Is that everything, now, Brother?"

"Yes. I have no more to say. You may now return me to my cell."

The audacity of the man was amazing. It was as though he was speaking to servants!

Before leaving, Ignatious unnecessarily thanked his solicitor, as he had been no more than a spectator, but the thanks were sincere none-the-less. Two police officers escorted him, in handcuffs, back to the cells below.

With the tapes now switched off, the conversation was about the cool unruffled attitude of the accused priest and the wicked murders he had perpetrated. Even McArdle joined in, confessing that he had never represented, if that could be the right description, anyone so willing to admit the crimes and be so unconcerned about them.

Later in the day, Graham and Clive returned to New Scotland Yard and began the task of collating all the evidence and putting it in order. This included transcripts of the recent interview. Besides the confession, solid evidence was now in hand and it was just a matter of how soon the case could be put to the Prosecutor and the CPS -- The Crown Prosecution Service -- for it all to be heard in court. The lab reports and the DNA evidence were expected within the next few days and then the emotionally taxing case could be brought to a conclusion.

In the meantime, a call had been put to the management at Woburn Safari Park informing them of the possibility of a body being near to the perimeter and warning them that a team of police and forensic officers were on their way to the park as they spoke. It was late afternoon when the report came back that, despite an extensive search, a body had not been found, nor any clues that anything untoward had taken place.

Clive arranged to meet Ignatious in his cell and hurried off to question him further. The Jesuit's explanation that he had hidden the body just inside the fencing, where some of the animals roamed, irked Clive as it was given in a manner of mock surprise at having forgotten to mention the fact. He asked the priest if he would be able to remember the spot if taken to the park.

"Oh, yes, Sergeant," he replied. "I don't forget things like that. I'm sorry if I have caused you any inconvenience, it just slipped my mind."

Clive did not accept the apology as genuine; he knew the priest was playing games with them. "We'll arrange to take you there first

thing in the morning," he said, "and you'll be handcuffed and under heavy guard," he added.

Getting back to Graham's office, the pair discussed the new situation and discussed if there would be any possible chance of escape. They decided that, if the prisoner was 'cuffed and properly guarded, it would be safe. It was considered that the animals could well find a dead body by its smell but, if that were the case, then an inspection tomorrow would be soon enough. Even if eaten, the likelihood would be that clothes and personal possession would remain -- and the ever-present hummingbird feathers.

They decided to call it a day and to get an early night for the excitement of the following morning. Just how exciting that would be, could never have been imagined. Graham went straight home to Bethany that evening.

CH025

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

For the Sun to shine in Britain for five weeks in succession, coupled with temperatures up in the 70's and 80's, was tantamount to tropical climates. Already the tabloids were awash with such "expert" forecasts as the country turning into a 'dust-bowl,' with water becoming scarce and disease and pestilence ravaging the population. Palm trees sprouting up all over with exotic plants springing forth were also envisaged. Such was the novelty of weather that may seem normal in many other countries.

The saving of water had been encouraged since the third week and now hosepipe and garden sprinkler bans were in force throughout the land. The populace was advised to bathe in no more than six inches of water and married couples and partners were urged to take a bath together.

At six o'clock on this particular Tuesday morning, it was muggy, the air not having been able to cool from the intensity of the preceding weeks.

Getting up early offered no problem for Ignatious, nor did the sultry weather. His time in the Amazons had conditioned him well. He walked elegantly between two police officers, shackled to the one on his left by handcuffs. The one to his right was walking so close as to have his left arm snug into the back of Ignatious's right arm.

As they walked into the yard from the cells, the low Sun bathed the priest's face in a red glow, reflecting golden from his burnished skin. He raised his face to the life-giving planet and breathed in as though absorbing the rays into his lungs. The doors at the back of the van that awaited the party in the rear courtyard were wide open, revealing a posse of four prison officers, dressed in black, heavy looking trousers, black socks and highly polished boots. The only concession to the climate was that each sported a spotlessly clean, white shirt with short sleeves. However, a black tie was knotted in place, causing the wearer to experience a slight sensation of strangulation and ensuring fingers to be frequently digging into the collar to allow circulation of whatever air there was. To add to the officer's discomfort, each was obliged to wear a protective helmet.

With military precision, the prisoner was handed over to the officers in the van and the doors closed with an unnecessarily loud bang, followed by a couple of smacks against the doors to signal to the driver that the prisoner was aboard. Ignatious was just able to catch sight of Sampler and his assistant, Miller, in a car with its engine running, waiting to lead them to Woburn Safari Park, before the doors shut. He also took note that the woman, Dunning was with them.

The windows of the van were darkened so that no one could see into it but they allowed perfect vision looking out. Ignatious was now handcuffed by his right hand to a steel rail running along the interior and he was placed between two officers once more. Looking through the rear windows, he noticed another van but was unable to identify it. In fact, it contained six forensic officers, ready to do a detailed search of the area where the body was to be found. Behind that vehicle, there came a police car, which served as an escort.

The convoy began the journey, feeling confident that the roads would be relatively empty at that early hour and that was the reason for planning it. Even the very well used motorways that led to and from the Capital would make for easy traveling. And so it proved; they arrived at the Park within the hour, occupants of the M1 consisting mainly of heavy, slow-moving trucks that were passed with ease.

Driving through the ready-opened gates, the party came to a halt and Graham got out. The gates were then re-closed. The Park would not be opened to visitors until the police crews had left.

He was met by the park manager, a tall, slimly built man in his early fifties, a Mr. William Shankley-More. Streaks of silver-gray protruded from the otherwise impressively black hair and the brown, intelligent eyes oozed confidence. His handshake was dry and firm as he took Graham's offered hand.

"Good morning, Detective Inspector," he opened. "Sorry that you have to visit us on such a distasteful mission. Most people come here for pleasure."

He smiled warmly.

Graham took to Shankley-More immediately. "Yes. I'm sorry too. However, we hope to get this thing sorted very quickly. Our prisoner is an intelligent man who is not likely to waste our time." He then asked: "Is it likely that a body could have been hidden inside there," he pointed to the enclosure, "without the animals getting scent and going for it?"

"Generally, I would say no. I would expect any animal to pick up the scent of a human, especially a dead one. However," Shankley-More stroked his chin, "it is also likely that our Rangers would have spotted the extra activity that would certainly have taken place. Predators, you know."

"Well. Let's get the thing done and dusted. How do you propose we go in, Mr. Shankley-More?"

As he spoke, the manager signaled to his Rangers to come over with their vehicles. "As you can see, the Rangers travel in a canvas covered Jeep. There is also the Range Rover that you will observe, also canvas-covered at the rear and I suggest that you, the prisoner and up to six others follow in that." He squinted his eyes as he looked at the other van and the police car. "Did you intend to have the occupants of the other van enter the enclosure?"

"Yes." Answered Graham, "They are the forensics team and they will want to sift the spot for clues." That brought Graham to his main point of concern. "Will my team be safe, Mr. Shankley-More? I know you will have taken all precautions but, after all, these are wild animals."

"Oh, you have no need to worry on that score," he said hurriedly, eager to assure. "The dangerous ones; the Lions and the Tigers will remain locked in until the search is completed. My Rangers will be carrying rifles with tranquillizer darts, anyway, and the animals have all been fed so they are more likely to be drowsy than anything else. The forensic people will be able to travel in their own van. Unfortunately, I have no other vehicles to spare as we have to keep two on stand-by in case of problems."

That being agreed, Ignatious was brought from the prison van and seated in the Range Rover, behind the front passenger seat, Graham next to him with Sallie and Clive immediately behind them. Two of the prison officers took up the two rear seats and the remaining officers made up the driver and mate.

"Right, Brother Saviour," said Graham, "How far in the enclosure is the body?"

Ignatious was quite unruffled by the occasion. "About two miles, I would guess. I'll be able to spot the particular bush under which I hid him; it's quite distinctive. Just follow the Drive."

With that, the Rover trundled forward and into the enclosure, followed closely by the forensic van and escorted by the Jeep, which was driving on the short, grassy parkway alongside. The police car brought up the tail. Two Rangers closed and locked the gates as soon as the vehicles were clear and stood watching as they moved slowly along the route.

There was a plentiful smattering of animals dotted about, mostly Gazelles of varying kinds grazing casually under the rays of the gradually warming Sun. Here and there could be seen a number of Giraffes, some Elephants, Zebras and a couple of Rhino's. All went about their business in a quiet and unconcerned manner.

The convoy had traveled only a hundred and fifty yards or so along the road, when they were halted by a group of docile-looking Antelopes that had wandered across the path. Instead of grazing, as they had been, all were looking towards the lead vehicle. The Rangers drove toward them, shouting as they went, with the intention of frightening the timid animals away. To their surprise, they remained where they were. Reacting to this, the Rangers inched the jeep forward until it was touching the nearest Antelope, nudging it gently out of the way. The convoy moved again, following the jeep and making a way through the assembled herd.

In the distance could be heard the roar of the lions and tigers. To the experienced ears of the Park Rangers, the roars were more of a desperate kind; more disturbing. As they listened, still moving forward slowly due to the

Antelopes re-grouping and persistently bunching in front of the vehicles, they noticed the Elephants and the Rhinos slowly ambling in their direction. It was something of a puzzle as the usual reason for moving towards visitors was in the hope of food and all had recently been fed. Sometimes, curiosity attracted the beasts to visitors but this movement seemed wrong somehow.

Ignatious, from his position in the Range Rover, smiled; his mind was at work, disturbing the animals, encouraging them to frenzy. Looking in the direction of the increasing sounds of the lions and tigers, he directed the two rhinos to the place. They trotted unhurriedly away from the convoy and in the direction of the big cats, watched idly by the Rangers as they became swallowed up in the mist that was rising.

After making slow headway for about a mile, the vehicles came once again to a halt, this time due to a large Bull Elephant standing in the way, its little tail swishing and its trunk swinging left to right in an agitated manner. It began to stomp on one front leg then the other, trumpeting loudly as it did so, as if warning the crew not to go any further.

The occupants of the Rover began to get nervous; this magnificent beast was, close-up, bigger than any of them had ever imagined. He was awesome! Just then, uncharacteristically, a Gemsbok Antelope leapt onto the bonnet of the Jeep, its hooves clattering against the warm metal. It stared into the cab for several seconds before leaping off again and bounding away.

One of the Rangers fired a dart close by the Elephant's head, knowing that, big as they were, Elephants were upset by noise. It had the desired effect and the beast lumbered slowly out of the way, snorting as it went, with its companion striding slowly behind.

The noise of the Elephant and the increasing moaning and twittering of the Antelopes, drowned out more serious sounds coming from the direction of the Lion House and the Tiger House. Incredibly, the rhinos were putting their efforts into battering into the breezeblock walls containing the cats, sensibly ignoring the steel of the doors. In no time, the bricks began to crumble and crack. Once the breach had been affected, the rhinos began to charge ever more frantically until, amidst dust and grit, a lion bounded forward, followed by another and another and yet two others, both female. Next appeared two beautiful, graceful tigers, roaring their pleasure at being freed.

As if not quite sure as to what they were doing, the animals dashed back and forward with no particular direction in mind, running between the cumbersome rhinos. Then, as by a signal, they all paused in their activities, sniffing the air, contemplating the mixture of smells reaching them across the expanse of the Park. Then, purposefully, the dominant lion, with his impressive mane, trotted toward the convoy, as yet out of sight, followed by the remaining lions and tigers. The rhinos, also, began to lumber forward, taking a route a few feet to the side of the majestic beasts but still in the direction of the convoy.

By this time, all the humans were in a state of nervousness at the unusual antics of the animals, a sense of danger in the air. The vehicles moved slowly on, Ignatious pointing to a spot a few hundred yards ahead where lay a cluster of thick bushes, indicating that that was where the body had been hidden.

While the attention of the crew of the Range Rover was focused on the bushes, they failed to notice the movement to their right as the big cats emerged through the now dissipating mist, with the rhinos trotting at an angle to them heading for the forensic van at the rear.

By the time anyone realized, the rhinos had moved surprisingly fast and charged into the side of the van, sending it slithering off the road and into the perimeter fence. It struck with a loud screeching as it scraped along the chain links, temporarily out of control. The rhinos split, with one continuing to push the van while the other took a short run and barged again into the dented side of the vehicle, shattering the windows in a loud explosion.

Inside, the frightened members of the forensic team were thrown

together in a heap, those propelled from the point of attack groaning with their injuries. The two female members were screaming loudly, their panic getting the better of their attempted restraint. Men were screaming, also, in shock at the unexpected attack and out of sheer terror.

Suddenly the rhinos ended their attack and charged at the police car, which was turning to speed back to the entrance gates. Both hit the car in unison with tremendous force, causing it to bounce into the air before landing on its side with wheels spinning and the engine roaring harshly as the drivers foot became jammed by the damaged door onto the accelerator pedal. The car slithered along the grass before turning on its head only to be battered again and rolling like a falling boulder to come to rest once more on its head, the wrecked doors flying open. The policemen, trapped in their seats, were knocked unconscious.

Back at the damaged forensics van, one of the lionesses had trotted over, attracted by the sounds of pain and the smell of humans. Leaping onto the side of the vehicle, it looked through the broken windows to see a gang of writhing people, each trying to back through the steel wall away from the impending danger. A large paw reached in and slashed across the nearest victim, spilling his innards in a delayed gush of blood. The attempted scream never materialized as the lioness dug her head in and pulled the man from the van. In a frenzy, it tore and bit at him until he was shredded over the van and the surrounding grass. Immediately, the 400-pound animal squirmed its upper body into the opening of the broken windows and began to slash with its claws and bite wherever it could. It then slithered back from the van and onto the ground, a no longer struggling woman in its mighty jaws. For several minutes the magnificent lioness chewed at the flesh and bones of the two forensic officers, before rising, sniffing the air and then trundling off to meet the pride. It had left two alive, though seriously injured.

At the same time as she had attacked the van, a lion and lioness had struck at the Rangers vehicle, leaping onto the canvas top, ripping it with their claws. The lion with the strong mane, nine-feet long and 560 pounds in weight landed behind the Rangers before they had chance to bring the rifles into action. In one movement, it was through the flimsy canvas backing of the cab and had the driver by the neck, its teeth burying into the soft flesh as it choked him. A heavy paw came over and tore an arm from him just as the lioness struck at the other Ranger. Her lunge hit him in the chest, biting into the flesh and bone. Slightly less in size than the lion but still a most formidable eight feet carrying 450 pounds, it sent him crashing through the windscreen and onto the bonnet, where it literally tore him to pieces.

Graham and the occupants of the Range Rover were shocked and sickened at the terrifying sight, the driver frantically turning the vehicle back in the direction of the main gates. Misjudging the speed in his panic, he turned too fast and toppled the Rover over onto its side. The driver and his mate, who had suffered a broken arm in the crash, scrambled free and made a run for the fence. Before they had covered twenty feet, two sleek and beautifully marked Tigers were upon them. The driver was caught by the leg and dragged bleeding to the ground while the other prison officer found himself covered by a 450-pound beast and felled.

The pig-like snuffling of the Tigers as they ate their screaming prey could be heard by those still struggling to free themselves from the stricken vehicle. Knowing that their chances of survival were remote if caught in the Rover, the decision was instantly taken by each individual to take their chance outside and scale the high perimeter fence. Fortunately for them, at that very time, the beasts of prey were engaged in their present attack, the two remaining lions finally reaching inside the police car to feed on the horrified officers within.

As the men got out and ran to the fence, Graham behind Clive, expecting Sallie to be on his heels, Ignatious, now freed from his shackles, looked into Sallie's wide and frightened eyes. "You are safe with me, child," he said, his voice incredibly calm in the mayhem going on about. "I will take you out of

here. Do not worry."

Sallie was mesmerized, shocked by her thoughts. "_Wonderful God that you are, take me here, in this hell. Take me! Rape me! Hurt me!"_ Part of her wanted to rush to the fence with her lover but the strength of the Jesuit's aura bound her mind in a vice-like grip. She was utterly powerless to resist.

Reaching the fence and realizing that his love was not with him, Graham turned in alarm. He saw her exiting the Rover with the Jesuit close behind just as the nearest tiger stood away from its victim, eyes red and shining, face covered in blood. It looked to the men scrambling up the fence then back at Ignatious and the girl. In that moment, Graham, heart breaking, realized that he could not save her and, the will to survive taking over, he leapt up the fence and began to race frantically for the top.

The tiger turned again and its mate also arose, attention now all on the fleeing men on the fence. As one, they hurtled forward, growling and leaping at the fence, tearing the feeble humans from it with mighty paws. Clive had just reached the top, which was protected by razor wire and, in a moment of bravery, he reached down to grab the arm of his Superior and drag him a vital foot higher up, causing the measured leap of the tiger to miss him by inches. Screaming in pain as the razor wire sliced into his body, Clive draped himself over the barrier and urged Graham to quickly climb over him to safety. Not hesitating, Graham slipped over Clive's body, placing as little weight as possible on him, and prepared to drop to the ground. Unfortunately, at the vital moment, he slipped, instinctively grabbing his partner and pulling him from his position and further onto the wire. Both men hurtled to the ground, landing in a stunned heap, where they lay unconscious.

On the other side of the perimeter, lions had approached the tigers and were joining in the unexpected feast, to the accompaniment of the trumpeting of elephants and the nervous whinnying of the antelope.

By the time the Rangers arrived, some staying on the outside of the enclosure, the gruesome affair was over. Those entering the inside of the compound had been delayed by the rhinos who were in an aggressive mood for many minutes after being hit by powerful tranquillizer darts and threatening to charge the insignificant jeeps. They reached the devastation as the animals casually dispersed, walking off as though nothing out of the ordinary had taken place.

None of the Rangers had had the time to wonder at the man and the woman who had emerged from the melee and walked calmly past the attack scenes to the gates, and who were just being allowed through by stunned Rangers there. The couple moved through the gathering crowds to a taxi rank and entered the first vehicle. "St. Cecelia's, Pangbourne, please, driver," instructed Ignatious.

CH026

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Sitting close to the Jesuit in the rear of the taxi, Sallie could not shake the feeling of rapture, even though, somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she hated it. _Why not have me here, in the back of the taxi? Take me now, as I am -- whatever you wish!_ The wicked thoughts invaded her again and again.

At last, the cab arrived at the church, where Sallie paid the fare plus a reasonable tip for the driver. Ignatious ushered her to the vestry door and knocked.

Father McCahill was surprised to find the Jesuit on his doorstep, especially after seeing him arrested and his vehicle towed away by the police. "Hello, Brother," he boomed, happily. "I didn't expect to see you here." He laughed. "I thought you must have committed murder at the very least! Come in. And, who is the young lady?"

Ignatious smiled pleasantly. "Thank you, Father. This is Sallie; she is a friend of mine. She wanted to come along with me and see your interesting little room."

"Ah," said the priest. "I can understand anyone being interested in

that."

In the short telephone call of two days ago, when Ignatious made the appointment to visit, Father McCahill had mentioned a special room in the church, which he would like the Jesuit to see. It had only recently been discovered and dated back at least three centuries, probably more. He had said no more than that, but it had been enough to gain the interest of Ignatious.

Once inside, the three sat down to the usual tea and cakes as Ignatious began his tales of adventure in the Amazon after convincing the priest that the arrest had been a dreadful mistake. Father McCahill was fascinated by the stories and strangely drawn to the wonderful being that had entered his domain. He had wanted to ask about the lovely young woman but his brain would not move in that direction, the Holy Brother filling his head.

* * * *

The Safari Park had become a scene of frenetic activity. Ambulances, T.V. crews, newspaper reporters and police were jostling around the entrance gates waiting for the all-clear from the Rangers within the enclosure, who were hunting down the wild beasts and sedating them with darts. Cameras were flashing constantly, even though there seemed little to photograph at that time.

As soon as the word came, the gates were opened and in drove two ambulances, hurrying to the scene of horror. Hardened to sickening sights through their experiences sorting out motorway victims, the paramedics went about their grisly work in a quietly efficient manner. Not a single body was intact. However, the occupants of the breakdown truck that had come to remove the wreckage were amazed to discover two injured, but alive members of the forensic team, huddled together in a recess of the vehicle, shuddering in shock in their unconsciousness.

On the perimeter, the two detectives had been assessed and treated on the spot before being whisked away to hospital in a low-slung vehicle. The elder one, Graham, seemed to be suffering only from concussion and a few scratches and bruises whilst the other was badly lacerated along the front of his body where the razor-wire had sliced deeply into him from the weight of his companion. Whilst Graham would be released from hospital within a couple of hours, after undergoing a thorough examination, Clive would remain there for another two weeks and would not return to duty for a further month.

* * * *

The conversation in the vestry finally came around to the hidden room, a conversation from which, strangely, Sallie allowed herself to be excluded. She rose to follow the priest and the Jesuit as they made their way into a conservatory that backed onto a wall of the ancient church. In here, the priest, smiling knowingly, gripped a protruding stone and pulled. Amazingly, a section of the wall moved silently and smoothly inwards; the mechanism, untouched since its installation, working as easily as any modern day appliance. The door slid back into place once the last person stepped in.

The room beyond revealed an area of around sixteen feet square, lit by a narrow window of thickened glass, measuring about six feet by one. Along the walls were several oil lamps placed in the original torch holders and being the only concession to modernization. There was no mistaking the intent of the room -- it was clearly designed for torture.

Dotted around the walls were several sets of shackles around which dark stains and splatter marks could be seen. These would be the entrenched marks of blood carried down the centuries.

In one corner, stood a mediaeval brazier with the various iron implements still stored in it and, next to that, a small, thick wooden table was secured into the brickwork. It resembled a smaller version of a butcher's table and on it lay several iron items, designed no doubt, to inflict agony on the unfortunates brought here.

The focus of attention was two other wooden tables that took up the center of the room, standing side by side. They resembled, even more, butcher's tables except that they were adorned with straps and shackles. The

telltale stains were again in evidence.

For several minutes Ignatious stood silent as the ghosts of the place came to him, soaking into his body, invading his mind. He could plainly hear the screeching and pleading of the victims as they sought relief from the expertly delivered pain.

Breaking from his trance-like state, he turned his gaze upon Sallie. She looked at him in alarm for a brief moment and then her face relaxed and she smiled -- a smile of undisguised lasciviousness. _Yes, my God! Yes! I am yours. You desire me now! I want you -- take me!_

She began to peel off her blouse, the eyes, dark and clouded, looking into her Saviour's. Next came the skirt, and then the shoes, kicked off in wild abandonment, and the stockings she chose in preference to the sexless tights, followed by the bra. She stood, attired only in her flimsy panties, her firm breast standing firm and proud, as the men gawped at her; even the Jesuit being gripped by the beauty.

The ghosts of the ancients shrieked into the room as Sallie, without spoken command, climbed onto one of the tables and lay on her back, arms and legs outstretched, the smile still playing on her lips.

Ignatious turned his attention to the transfixed priest, boring into his mind. "Yes, Father," he said quietly. "I can read into your thoughts and into all the thoughts you have ever had."

Father McCahill heard yet did not. He was staring at the near-naked woman on the table with his mind held by the invading forces.

"Secure her to the table, Father. Use the straps at the edge of the table to fasten her left arm."

The priest moved forward and carried out the Jesuit's bidding. The spirits screeched ever louder. Sallie was fully compliant, even making it easier for the fumbling man to do a proper job by moving her arms and legs into the various positions. At the end, she was firmly strapped with arms and legs apart but able to move her head.

"Now," said Ignatious, his voice calm as usual. "Touch her Father. You want to, don't you? She's not too old for you is she, Father? I know you like them quite a bit younger."

As Ignatious spoke, the priest began to run his hands over the imprisoned woman; tenderly at first and then more vigorously, kneading the firm flesh, squeezing at the exposed breasts. The thing he wanted most in the world at that time was to get onto the woman, get inside her. His lust was a raging inferno.

"No, Father," the quiet voice again. "You cannot have intercourse with her. To touch is sufficient. Better than your dreams, Father; your fantasies as you lie in bed. This is the real thing. Enjoy it while you can."

He watched as the inflamed priest extracted his lustful pleasure from Sallie, touching wherever he could, his desire reaching fever point. He turned to the Jesuit, with eyes pleading to be allowed to complete the act.

The stare that returned was cold and hard. "You are a disgraceful sinner, Father McCahill. Your memory has told me that this is your third parish and that you have been moved due to your activities with those whom you are sworn to protect. Age and marital status have meant nothing to you, have they? You have preyed on those unfortunate beings and satisfied your evil urges."

Father McCahill turned away from the still smiling Sallie, and dropped to his knees in front of Brother Saviour. Holding his arms upwards, his hands clasped, he begged for forgiveness. Ignatious, however, was not in a forgiving mood and castigated him further until the wretch was in a blubbering heap facedown on the cold, stone floor.

"Get up now," commanded Ignatious. "I want you to go into your garden and pick me some flowers." Ridiculous though this sounded at a time like this, the priest raised himself to his feet and listened as Ignatious detailed the varieties he required. "Bring them to me together with a bowl of boiled water. Go now. Hurry!" he said.

Father McCahill rushed to the door, pulled at a small stone set in the wall near to the doorway and hurried through as soon as enough space was cleared. The door closed to on his exit.

Turning to the prostrate woman, Ignatious said: "Sallie. I want you to do something for me."

The lascivious smile returned as she looked toward him. "Yes. Anything." Now is the time. Now he will come to me!

"I want you to phone a mutual acquaintance. Will you do that?"

"Yes. Yes." Hurry, my God. I need you.

Reaching inside Sallie's handbag, he found the mobile and turned it on.

"What is your ID, Sallie?" She offered it up immediately. "6742" Ignatious punched in the code and waited for a line.

"Tell me the home number of Detective Inspector Sampler," he said then. Again, the number was offered without delay. On hearing the dialing tone, he put the phone next to Sallie's ear. "Get Mrs. Sampler here, urgently," he commanded in his quiet voice.

Bethany's voice came through clearly so that Ignatious was able to hear but not quite make out the words said. "Hello. Beth Sampler speaking."

"Oh, hello, Bethany," opened Sallie, as though speaking to a life-long friend. At the other end of the line, Bethany froze, recognizing whom this was. "Graham is on his way here and he wants you to meet up with him. Now. It's very important."

"Very good, Sallie," murmured Ignatious.

Bethany forced herself to speak through gritted teeth. "Why didn't he tell me that himself when he phoned a quarter of an hour ago?"

Unfazed, Sallie continued: "I've only just contacted him and he didn't have time to get back to you. He asked me to give you a call."

Asked her to contact me? thought Bethany, infuriated. "Where are you and why do you need me there?" she asked, icily.

"I am at the church of St. Cecelia's in Pangbourne. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes I do. Now, why am I wanted?" asked Bethany sternly.

"Oh, I think you know that," came the mocking reply. "We both know what we need to talk about." A loud click told Ignatious that Bethany had slammed the phone down. He took the mobile from the smiling Sallie. "That was very good, Sallie. Very good indeed."

Just then, the chastened Father McCahill returned with a steel bowl containing steaming water and carrying the required flowers in a pocket of his priestly gown. "Where shall I put these, Brother," he asked, his eyes diverted to the floor in deep humility.

"Put them on that small table in the corner, there and then kneel and pray beside the young woman that you have just defiled."

"Yes, Brother," he said, almost in tears as he shuffled speedily to the table. "Please give me your forgiveness and allow me into Heaven. I am wretched. I am a sinner most foul. I beg your absolution."

"Do as I say," said Ignatious in return.

The priest hurried to carry out his orders, ending as instructed, on his knees by Sallie's position.

Scooping up the petals from the table, Ignatious placed them into the bowl and, using one of the ancient implements, began to stir them in one direction and then the other until the water became a deep rose color.

In order to allow the poison, for that was what he had brewed, to settle, he had to let it cool. Turning to the praying priest, he told him to bring the woman into the secret room when she arrived, which would be in about forty-five minutes. The intonation of the prayers hummed on, the whispering of the ghosts adding to the eeriness of the occasion.

Whilst the mixture was cooling, Ignatious addressed Sallie again:

"Tell me the mobile number of Detective Inspector Sampler," he said. Again, the number was offered without delay. Ignatious punched in the given digits and, on hearing the dialing tone, he put the phone next to Sallie's

ear. "Get him here," he commanded.

As the sound of Graham came to Sallie, she spoke: "Hello, Graham. I was just wondering how you were. I saw you climbing the fence but didn't know if you had made it. Are you okay?"

Graham was astounded to hear Sallie's voice; he really thought she had perished in the horror at the park. "Sallie?" he said, asking the unnecessary question. "Sallie? Is that you?"

"Yes. Yes, darling it is me. I was rescued by the Jesuit and he now has me held captive."

"What?" thundered Graham. "Where? Where, Sallie. Where is he holding you?"

Sallie faked a tremulous voice. "He has me in St. Cecelia's, Graham. Please, come quickly. I think he's going to kill me!"

There was no time to think; no time to consider the situation. "I'm on my way now. Hold tight and don't do anything to upset him."

"Graham. Please, come alone. He's insisted on that."

"Right -- anything. Just stay calm."

"He says if you come, he will explain things to you and let me go. All he wants is his freedom."

"Freedom? I'll kill the bastard!" he hissed and then hung up.

Ignatious was delighted with the unprompted story. "Excellent, Sallie!" he said. "That was first class." The mumbling of the penitent priest continued, unabated. The intensity of the wailing sprits increased. Ignatious wondered if the others were able to hear the unnerving sounds.

While awaiting the arrival of Bethany, Ignatious picked up a knife-like instrument, ancient but rust free, and began to clear one of the stems brought in by the priest, taken from a rose bush that bore the deepest burgundy flower the Jesuit had ever seen. He carefully stripped away the sharp thorns until just two remained, one near to the top of the stem and the other an equal distance from the bottom. He then cut the stem into two pieces of around six inches each. Satisfied with the result, he placed them both into the bowl of thickening poison, ensuring that the thorns were covered.

Having finished the task, he raised the priest from his kneeling position and sent him into the church ready to receive Bethany. "Bring her immediately to here," he instructed. "I may allow you to further sully your cesspool of a mind by letting you secure the new one to the other table."

Momentarily, the priest's eyes lit up and then quickly clouded as though caught doing something he should not. He shuffled away and out through the secret exit into the vestry. Almost running into the empty church, he knelt at a front pew facing the altar, where he began again to pray.

Sixteen minutes later, a highly agitated and angry Bethany stamped into the church, her high-heels stabbing loudly onto the tile flooring. Spotting the now turning priest, she increased her step, bearing down menacingly upon him. For a moment, Father McCahill felt a spasm of fear, as he stood erect. This was a woman in deep anger and liable to do anything. He tried to speak but the words would not form.

"Where is the woman?" Bethany screamed at him. He cowered. "Er, er, she is in a room off the vestry," he managed.

"And where the hell is that?" she asked sharply, not caring about the apparently abusive language, considering where they were.

"Follow me," mumbled Father McCahill. "This way." He moved swiftly from the church, into the vestry and to the wall covering the defunct torture-room, with Bethany no more than inches from his heel. _Hell hath no fury like a woman!_ He thought, _Full stop!_

At the tug on the brick, the mechanism operated as smoothly and as quietly as ever, the entrance becoming instantly cleared.

The priest was bundled roughly aside as Bethany stormed in. Inside, she first took in the strapped-down figure of her rival and then the calm, smiling Jesuit beyond. She halted in her tracks at the unreal and bizarre sight before her. Instinctively, a hand flew to her mouth as her eyes widened. Then she

looked at the Jesuit. His twinkling eyes looked into her, searching her secret thoughts, upturning the ones she tried to bury, the one's that shamed and embarrassed her. She fought against it, rebelled; she hated this man! You want me don't you? I'm yours now. I'm yours whenever you want me. Oh, my lovely God, take me -- hard!_ She fell to her knees, unable to control her actions any longer.

"Get up, Bethany. Come, stand near to the table." Ignatious's quiet, controlling voice wafted across the room. She did as told, standing looking down at the near-naked figure of Sallie. She took off her jacket, followed by the white blouse and the rest, until, like Sallie, she wore only her skimpy briefs.

What a lucky man that Graham is! thought Ignatious. _Two really beautiful creatures from which to take his pleasures._

He then addressed the priest: "Put her on the table alongside the other, Father." Still the quiet, unruffled voice. The priest moved swiftly to do his Master's bidding, smiling lecherously as he did so.

In no time, Bethany was secured in place, her right arm almost touching the left of Sallie. Both women were calm, influenced by the magical aura of the mysterious Jesuit.

Like a dog awaiting its master's command to "fetch," Father McCahill looked expectantly to Ignatious. A full minute passed as the men's eyes locked. Finally Ignatious spoke: "Get away from her, you miserable sinner!" he hissed. "Get down onto your knees and pray to the good God above that he offers you salvation!" The crack of bone on stone floor echoed through the room as McCahill dropped to his knees as if pole-axed.

By then, Graham was ten minutes away from St. Cecelia's, having torn down the motorway at illegal speeds, his mind concentrated on meeting the Jesuit and wreaking revenge.

Inside the secret room, Ignatious removed the thorn stems from the mixture and placed them on the bench. The poison had soaked well into the plants, covering the individual thorns and leaving a clear area of around four inches to the end. Going to the captured women, he looked at them, enjoying the double beauty. Both smiled, their thoughts for once in unison. _Come on my beautiful Master. I am ready for anything you may give. Come to me. Come to me._

Speaking to the priest through the raised voices of the long-dead spirits, Ignatious commanded him to get up off his knees and let the policeman in. Without delay, Father McCahill rose to his feet and hurried into the church to kneel at a pew once more.

Five minutes later, the second member of the Sampler family entered, equally angry and stamping in, his leather-soled shoes smacking loudly on the flooring. Seeing the priest, who had risen to face him on his entry, he called: "Where is she? And him!"

In response, Father McCahill murmured: "Follow me, please," and moved off in the direction of the vestry. Graham hurried behind him, his anger only just under control and threatening to break at any time.

As the opening to the room was revealed, Graham stormed in, as had his wife before him, and then stopped dead in his tracks. The scene caused his mind to spin and he was forced to support himself briefly on the wall that had closed behind. In one quick glance, he had taken in the figure of the hated Jesuit at the head of two adjacent tables bearing two almost naked women secured there -- _his_ women! The wife whom he had so easily betrayed and the lover in whose arms he had found sexual satisfaction certainly no better than what he already had but new and different. Man's basic instincts to the fore -- and the Jesuit knew! In this place of God; of religion; of evil and of ghostly presence. He shuddered.

His brain was still unwilling to accept the fact of what could be plainly seen; the Jesuit had his lover here and also, incredibly, his wife! And they were in danger!

Then the Jesuit spoke: "Ah. Welcome, Detective Inspector," the voice,

as always, calm, everyday, unruffled. "As you see, two of the most precious beings in your life have been spending their time with me -- and the lecherous priest here." He pointed to Father McCahill, to whom he addressed the next sentence. "Come here, Father. Stand by my right hand." The wretched man scurried over and stood, head down in shame, next to Ignatious.

At last, Graham's mind gelled. He made to move forward but was stopped by the Jesuits words: "Stop! Do not approach me, Detective Inspector or these two lovely females will die before you have traveled three feet." Graham halted, puzzled but recognizing the very real threat in the Brother's words.

"You will have noticed that I am holding two rose stems with rather wicked looking thorns very close to the skins of Bethany and Sallie."

Graham had not noticed before but his eyes now rested on the innocuous-looking items. Ignatious continued: "Be warned that the stems are impregnated with a most deadly poison and one prick to the flesh will cause death within seconds. It is a poison I learned of on my travels to the Amazon and it is deadly effective."

"You're bluffing," croaked Graham, his apprehension building.

"No. I do not bluff in such matters. See." In a blur, Ignatious shot his right hand sideways and back again, scratching Father McCahill with the thorn. The effect was immediate as the doomed priest instantly foamed at the mouth, his eyes bulging. He began to jerk uncontrollably in spasm before falling to the ground, his arms and legs flailing, his body jerking wildly. A yellow vomit poured from the open mouth, shooting into the air and falling back onto the now purple face. A long, low, disturbing moan escaped from his lips and, seconds later, the troubled priest fell dead.

"Go to your Maker, Father, and may he have mercy upon you," said Ignatious gravely. The demonstration was fully effective.

Before speaking again, he concentrated for a few seconds, releasing the victims from his mental grip. Both began immediately to babble, imploring Graham to save them. The words gushed out in such a terrified manner and at such a pitch that it was impossible for Graham to distinguish what was being said. The message, however, came across loud and clear.

"Now," the calm voice spoke again, "Graham, you have a choice. Possibly the worst choice you will ever have to make, and whichever way you choose, you will suffer unending heartache. In this way, you will be paying back to the Lord for your misdeeds. A necessary scourging of the soul."

"What the hell are you talking about, you demented pillock?" burst Graham.

The ghostly cries of anguish had settled to a whisper as Ignatious explained further. "How often have you wondered in your life, what you would do if given the awful choice of saving, say, your father at the expense of your mother, or vice-versa; or your wife or your child, for instance?" No reply.

"Well, I am giving you that choice now. I know what you have done. I know your preferences; I know your mind and your fantasies. I even know how you will choose." He allowed the words to impact on all three before carrying on. "If you fail to make your choice within ninety seconds from when I say, I will touch both with these stems from the beautiful rose and you will be able to watch them die in front of you. However, I will allow room for some redemption by giving you the choice. One has to die and travel to the wonderful Creator, while the other lives on. Whichever way you go, how will you be able to carry on your relationship in the beautiful manner it was beforehand? How will you erase the thoughts in your chosen one's head, that you have caused one to die?"

A shocked Graham looked into the Jesuit's eyes. His head suddenly cleared as Ignatious penetrated the recesses of his mind, concentrating him on the task in hand and the truly awful decision he would be forced to make.

The thorns moved next to the skin of the victims as Ignatious said: "Now," and began to count off the ninety seconds.... "One, two, three, four...."

Tears were now streaming from both women's eyes, their mouths opening to speak; to plead, but nothing came out. The terror restricted their throats, paralyzed their brains. _Please. Please, Graham. Save me!_

"Twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine."

Me, Graham. Me! You have _to save me!_ Both thought alike as the seconds moved inexorably on.

"Sixty-seven, sixty-eight, sixty-nine..."

Save me! _Save_ me! Time moved forward.

"Eighty, eighty-one, eighty-two, eighty-three..."

"Bethany!!" the single word cracked through the air, rebounding off the stone walls with their shackles, as the screeching of the spirits reached a crescendo.

A simple, instant movement was all it needed. The thorn pierced Sallie's arm, sending her into the same, terrible spasms of the priest. Within seconds, Graham's lover was dead and his heart was near to breaking point. He was unable to comprehend the horror of what he had witnessed and of his own major contribution to the horror.

As Graham fell to his knees, then to the ground, blubbering and screaming like a child, Ignatious calmly picked up Sallie's car keys and silently left. The spirits retreated to whatever place they occupied in the Netherworld.

The evil room was filled by the heart-breaking sounds of Graham's anguished cries as Bethany wept along with him, her thighs wet with the waters that had involuntarily escaped as the ninetieth-second was approaching. Their lives would eventually settle down; they would put this behind them. She loved Graham so much and he had proved his love for her in the most emphatic manner possible. Yes, things would be all right in the end, she convinced herself. _How could he have sex with her?_ The final thought put doubts on her resolve. Life was going to be difficult from now on.

As Graham finally dragged himself to his feet and began to release Bethany, Ignatious was moving onto the motorway in Sallie's Ford Mondeo, destined for a Jesuit farm situated at the beautiful and mysterious village of Avebury in Wiltshire, which dates back to around 2000 B.C. Here, Ignatious could recharge his aura, absorbing the atmosphere and the accumulation of spirituality amassed through the many centuries.

There was also another reason; at the farm he would be protected and given a new identity. He would rest for a month or two, ease into the new personality and then set out to continue with God's work, as he saw it.

* * * *

The relationship between Graham and Bethany had, immediately in the aftermath of the terrible experience, been very close, each feeling a need to smother the other with affection and love. However, now, two months later, little niggles had begun to creep in; silly, needless faultfinding and criticisms.

Whilst being pleased that Graham had saved her at the expense of Sallie, the fact that he had actually deceived her and compounded the deceit with lies, gnawed at her. How could she punish herself in this way, she had thought, time and again, doubting a man who had made the ultimate decision, made a terrific sacrifice for her and, beyond argument, had proved his love? She was also painfully aware that he was still grieving over his lover. For the marriage to survive, it would need a lot of soul-searching and possibly more than one frank and deep discussion. Bethany had to believe that, given time, their lives would return to normal. The Jesuit was still having an effect on their lives, even though he had not been seen since that fateful day.

The trail had gone cold -- as cold as the bodies he had left in his wake and that fact troubled Graham deeply, adding to the pressures on him. Clive had just returned to duty but he was on a course of counseling in an endeavor to rid himself of the terrifying memories of the experience with the animals, and had been consigned to desk duties for the immediate future.

With a sigh, Graham put away the bulky file on Brother Ignatious

Saviour, ready to turn his attention to other murder investigations that had been put his way. As the metal drawer slammed shut, the 10:15 am Eurostar railway shuttle from England to France was just setting off on its journey through the Channel tunnel.

Aboard was a clean-cut passenger, exuding fitness coupled with a worldly knowledge etched into his dark-skinned face. His passport showed the name: Doctor Rhamada Gupta, registered as an Indian National, and an archaeologist by profession.

Ignatious would travel under this name until reaching another Jesuit farm, situated in Southern France, where he would again adopt a fresh identity and wash away the skin coloring to once again become European. His Godly work was soon to restart.

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