

The Twenty-Ninth Day

Stephen Livesey Ashworth

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~ 1 ~

“Father, Mother...”, said Joel Steinbrook, and paused to savour the feeling of anticipation. His family were looking at him expectantly: his mother seated in a velvet armchair, his father standing in front of a smouldering heap of coals under a veined marble mantelpiece, hands behind his back. Joel’s younger brother and sister were sharing the sofa. Across the richly furnished room, in an alcove behind a large pot plant with long, dark leaves, Wibbles was pouring glasses of pale dry sherry. The bottle sparkled in reflected lamplight as the butler carefully tilted it with white-gloved hands.

“...Jared, Judith”, Joel acknowledged his siblings, glanced back at the half-closed polished mahogany doors through which he had entered only a moment ago, and turned back to his waiting family. His eyes were bright, his breathing shallow. “Allow me to introduce you to... Miss Rebecca Moon!”

Hearing her name, the young woman standing just outside the double door nodded at the maid. With a mechanical curtsey the maid opened the door wide, and Rebecca made her entrance with a rustle of her long dress.

“Rebecca, this is Father, Mother, my brother Jared, my sister Judith”, Joel made the introductions.

“I’m very pleased to meet you”, Rebecca said as she smiled at each one in turn. “Joel has told me so much about you.”

Father’s greeting was marred by a skeptical frown, which persisted while Wibbles passed around the glasses of sherry on a silver tray. “Am I to understand”, he asked his son once everyone had been served, “that you are proposing to initiate a relationship with this young woman outside the normal family channels?”

“Not at all”, Joel replied quickly, and took a hurried gulp of sherry. “That’s why I’m introducing Rebecca to you now, so that family protocol can be satisfied.”

“Family protocol requires me to introduce her to you, not you to me”, Father growled.
“Where did you meet?”

“In the company. Rebecca’s just been taken on as personal assistant to Lord Abimellick.”

Father looked incredulous. “You mean, she has to *work* for a living?”

There was an embarrassed pause. It was broken by Mother, who looked up and smiled brightly at Rebecca. “Tell me, my dear”, she asked, “are you at all related to Sir Albert Moon of the Moons of Huntingdonshire?”

“I believe I am”, Rebecca replied. Her voice was cultured, but gentle. “I’ve been told that Sir Albert is my father’s second cousin’s uncle.”

“Have you ever met him?”

“I did once. There was a big family gathering when I was little – four or five years old, I think. It was in Huntingdon Hall. I have a recollection of seeing him there. He had big side-whiskers. I remember how he tickled me when he bent down to give me a kiss.”

Father sniffed. “She met his whiskers when she was a baby. Not the sort of family connection we would recommend for our firstborn son.”

Mother glanced up at him coldly. “And how would you remember someone when you were that age. She’s a Moon, that’s all that counts. Wibbles, bring that chair. Rebecca, you may sit down beside me, child.”

The butler brought the chair, and Rebecca sat down beside Mother.

Meanwhile Jared and Judith were whispering to each other. Jared looked up and grinned. “I think Jolly’s not yet said everything he means to!”

Joel looked from his brother to Rebecca, and then to his father. “Father, the fact of the matter is... that is, Rebecca and I...”

Father broke him off. “If you’re planning to get engaged to this office girl, you can forget it. I’ve already had discussions with Abimellick, and we’ve agreed that one of his nieces will be suitable. The introductions will be made before you leave for Hesperica.”

“Father! If Rebecca’s an office girl, then I’m no more than an office boy!”

“You’re a professional architect, my boy – heir to the company when I pass on. I’m not getting any younger, and when I see that angel standing there before me I want you to be ready to play your part. Abimellick & Steinbrook has a tremendous opportunity on the other side of the Western Ocean. It won’t be as an office boy that you’ll be meeting our partners in Hesperica in two months time. You must be ready to step into my shoes when I’m gone.

Your future wife, on the other hand, will require different skills.”

“But Rebecca’s personal assistant to Lord Abimellick himself!”

“So is Abimellick’s chambermaid, and that doesn’t make her an acceptable match for you.”

Mother gave Rebecca a sad smile and turned to her husband. “Abraham, it’s not polite to say such things in front of the poor girl.”

Father glared back. “In that case, she has my permission to leave the room.”

Joel shuddered, turned to Rebecca and offered her his hand.

“Miss Moon”, came his sister’s voice behind him in a poisonous tone, “kindly take a letter. And when you’ve done that, won’t you water the aspidistra?”

Rebecca rose and took Joel’s hand, but before she allowed him to lead her out she smiled at the family and said in an innocent voice, “May God bless you all.”

Joel gave her hand a little tug and led her away through the double door.

~ 2 ~

On Sunday, Joel sat with the rest of his family in their usual places in the front row of the gothic church that, together with the Steinbrook mansion, dominated their village. The congregation rose to sing a hymn, then sat down to hear the sermon.

“Dearly beloved”, intoned the elderly priest, the Reverend Rehoboam, his voice echoing off the stone walls and columns and the painted wooden ceiling. “All flesh is mortal and is but a poor thing in the sight of our Eternal Father in heaven. For as King David sang:

*When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
The moon and the stars which thou hast established;
What is man that thou art mindful of him,
And the son of man that thou dost care for him?”*

Joel quickly grew bored with the stream of platitudes. One of the deacons happened to have left a silver censer on top of the pew in front of Joel, and he began experimenting with using its well-polished surface to see the people sitting behind him. Somewhere near the back of the church, Rebecca would be sitting, but his attempts to spot her reflection were frustrated by his brother mischievously joggling his arm to knock the makeshift mirror out of alignment.

“Someday the angel of the Lord must come to us all”, the reverend droned on. “For as

our Saviour said to his disciples in the Gospel of Saint Matthudah, chapter 24, verse 42..."

He coughed and opened the big book on his lectern, finding the place marked by a strip of embroidered cloth. He fastened a pair of little round spectacles over his nose and began to read aloud.

"Does a wise master send his servants out on a long journey without giving them time to say goodbye to their loved ones, to collect up what they will need and gird their loins for travel? Even so little would your Father in heaven demand that you leave the world behind without allowing you time to prepare. For he comes not like a thief in the night, not like a sudden assassin who would steal up on people and rip their lives away from them without warning. Could Almighty God, creator of the universe, behave like a criminal? Could he be like an unruly drunkard whose capricious actions shock us with their sudden and arbitrary nature? That would be impossible. Rather he treats us like a loving Father, like a King who is in love with divine law and cosmic order. Therefore he sends his angel to each one of us four weeks of seven days before our time is due, to announce to us the day of our departure, so that we may be ready to meet him."

Joel grew bored with trying to use the censer as a mirror and put it down again, sticking his tongue out at his brother as he did so. Jared responded by jerking his thumb towards the back pews and then drawing his finger across his throat with a grin.

The Reverend Rehoboam closed the holy book, paused, smiled at his congregation and continued, "Thus we see the divine mercy and forethought for our frail nature while we are still mortal beings. Thus we see the irrefutable proof of God's authority over all nature and all time, delivered to each one of us personally in such a way that cannot be denied. And therefore let us give thanks to Almighty God, who has consented in his infinite mercy to take his servant Lord Abimellick up into heaven."

A rustle of surprise and concern rippled through the worshippers. Joel directed a questioning glance at his father, who nodded in confirmation of the unexpected news.

The reverend continued, "His lordship came to me only yesterday to ask me to share with you all the news that he has seen the angel of God. The day of his departure from this world is now fixed, and while the manner of his departing is still unknown, Lord Abimellick has assured me of his complete submission to the will of the Almighty. Whether his parting is destined to be through fire or water, slow disease or sudden accident, sacrificial knife or lightning bolt, his lordship will accept it joyfully and prayerfully, and in the sure and certain knowledge of his bodily resurrection into the better world prepared for us all by Almighty God in heaven. And his lordship has asked me that, when the day announced to him has

arrived, he may sit in this church and pray, and so go to meet his God fully cleansed and purified and ready for the life to come."

Joel felt his sister, sitting on the other side of him, pluck at his sleeve. "Why does the old codger want to do his dying in our church?", she whispered. Joel shrugged.

"While his lordship will be given a seat in front of the altar", the reverend concluded, "a select few from among his friends and family, who wish to see him off on his journey to eternity, shall be permitted to sit in the pews at the back and watch and wait with him. The funeral will of course be a public event, arranged for the following week, in Blestminster Abbey. And now all please stand for the next hymn."

As they were getting to their feet and rustling the pages of the hymnbook, Joel felt his brother's lips tickle his ear with the mocking words, "He'll want to see you married before he goes belly-up!"

"You marry his blasted nieces!", Joel hissed back. "I don't want 'em."

~ 3 ~

He met Rebecca after church in a little garden behind the graveyard. For a few minutes they stood together quietly and listened as, on the other side of the high stone wall, horses whinnied unseen and carriage wheels crunched on gravel.

"Where's Joel?", came his father's voice distantly from behind the wall.

"He said he wanted to walk home", his sister's voice came in reply.

Jared added in a mocking tone, "I think we all know what *that* means!"

"Damn his insolence!", his father replied. "That boy needs a good talking-to."

"Abraham", came his mother's voice, "the boy is twenty-three, and a graduate of Auxford. Someday he has to start making his own decisions."

"Not if they affect the future of the company. Driver, whip up the horses!"

There was a sound of horses' hooves and jingling of harness, and the unseen carriage rumbled into the distance.

"Your father's obviously still adamant", Rebecca said when all had gone quiet.

Joel shook his head angrily. "He won't listen", he grumbled. "Dash it all, it's ludicrous! I told him what I thought of Lord Abimellick's precious nieces, and he responded with a lecture about the future of the company and keeping it all in our two families. He thinks his word is law. Have you met his blasted nieces?"

“Did you tell him what you told me?” In response to Joel’s questioning look she added, “That you love me?”

“Of course I did, Darling! That was the first thing I said.”

“And he would not be moved? Very well. I think it’s time for more extreme measures.”

Joel looked at her distrustfully. “What do you mean?”

“When do you leave for Hesperica?”

Joel shrugged and shook his head. “There’s nothing I can say to Father that’ll make him change his mind. The only extreme measure that would have any effect on him would be if I stole his old army revolver and threatened to shoot him!”

“Joel, be sensible! What ship will you be sailing on?”

“I am being sensible... it’ll be the liner *Tritonic*, from Southharbour.”

“One of those new luxury liners? That’s wonderful! When do you sail?”

“In four weeks time.”

“First class, of course?”

“Yes, but why?”

“When the *Tritonic* sails... by the grace of God, I’ll be on board with you!”

“Darling?”

“We’ve just heard his lordship’s going to die a few days before the ship sails. So that’s when my job with your company comes to an end. The timing is perfect. If they ask me to stay on, I’ll tell them I need more time to grieve over his lordship. We meet in Southharbour and sail for Hesperica together. We can get married out of reach of your father, or mine for that matter.”

“But then what happens when I come back to Albion?”

“Joel...”

“Don’t look at me like that, Darling! You know this is only for three months; then I have to be back here to join the Board of Directors. I can’t live like a sailor, with one wife in Hesperica and one in Albion.”

“Joel, why would you *want* to come back?”

“Because Father...?”

“Because Father! Is that the best you can think of? Listen to me, Joel, you can have me and a new life in Hesperica, or you can have your Father and your company and your precious nieces. Both of them if you like! It’s your choice!”

She turned away from him decisively and with a swirl of her long skirt vanished through the trees.

~ 4 ~

The hoarding proclaimed in letters the height of a man: *JERICHO MAIN LINE STATION – GRAND OPENING*, and lower down in smaller letters: *ABIMELLICK, STEINBROOK & Co., ARCHITECTS, by warrant to his Albionic Majesty, &c. &c.* Beneath it a wooden podium had been erected, and everywhere strings of flags and brightly coloured bunting had been strung overhead to create a festive atmosphere. Crowds of people of the lower classes milled around, their needs tended by sellers of hot dogs, lemonade, fruit punch, and a variety of souvenir flags, models and postcards. Cabbies and coachmen hovered around the margins of the large public square in front of the newly built station, resting on their vehicles, or giving their horses a bag of oats or a rub-down.

The dignitaries on the podium wore their best frock coats and top hats. When Lord Abimellick stood up to speak, a respectful hush settled over the crowd. By now they had all heard that Almighty God had called the senior partner of the firm of architects to heaven, and that he had responded with dignity and meekness in the face of the inevitable.

Joel was not listening to his speech. Slipping between temporary wooden builders' huts behind the podium, he found Rebecca waiting for him. The secret lovers embraced, then Joel put his hand inside his jacket and pulled out a sealed envelope.

"And so we must all recognise", came Lord Abimellick's voice, muffled behind the wooden fence, "that when God calls, we penitents must all travel to him on the same road. There is no first-class route to heaven, no second class and no third class, but all must travel the same way, whether lord, commoner or peasant. Because in the sight of God we are all of such little account that our petty social distinctions count for nothing in his eyes."

Joel pressed the envelope into Rebecca's hands. She looked anxiously into his eyes. "How much?", she asked.

"Seven hundred. You said that'd be enough."

"I said I needed eight hundred."

"You said seven hundred for a first-class ticket."

"I need a new ballgown for evenings, Joel. I can't go around looking like an office girl on the *Tritonic*. People will talk."

"I'll buy you a new ballgown. I promised."

"I'll hold you to that promise, Joel. I've seen you eyeing me up and comparing me with your sister."

"Rebecca, how can you imagine I'd do such a thing?"

"And if you're short of money? And if Judith has dresses my size that she wouldn't miss until it was too late? Well, if I have to stay in my cabin for the whole voyage, at least we'll arrive safely in New Hudson, by the grace of God."

"Rebecca, you know I love you..."

She yielded to his kiss.

"...naked as the day we were born", Lord Abimellick's voice thundered behind them. "Naked before God, clothed in nothing but a humble heart and memories of a life devoted to the service of mankind. A life, in my own case, promoting the virtues of steam travel, designing and building the locomotives, rolling stock, sheds, signal boxes and stations that will allow men of all classes to explore the world they were born into before they must finally leave it for a better one..."

"Just think", Rebecca said with shining eyes, "another three weeks next Tuesday and we'll be on the Western Ocean together."

"It'll be another eight days to dock at New Hudson."

"No more second thoughts?"

"Darling, how could you doubt me?"

"No more coming back to Albion to please Father?"

"I've finished with Father. If he won't listen to me, I don't see why I should listen to him any more. It'll be a new life together – just the two of us!"

In the distance, as if on cue, there came the joyfully repeated toot of a steam whistle. The horses arrayed around the square shifted uneasily in their traces. The chugging of the locomotive grew louder, until at last it was drowned in the squealing of brakes.

The first train had arrived at platform one.

~ 5 ~

Joel was looking for Rebecca. He felt sure he had seen her in the carriage just a little while earlier, but now he couldn't seem to find her at all. Worst of all, his father was coming, and it would be a disaster if the two of them were to meet.

He checked all the seats one by one. Outside the windows he could glimpse fields and hamlets rolling by, and he knew that they would very soon be arriving at Jericho Station. He just had to find Rebecca before then.

He suddenly noticed his brother grinning at him. "Lost something?", Jared asked in that familiar mocking tone. "Or somebody? Somebody dear to you? I think I know where you need to look!"

"Leave me alone." Joel turned away from him and went down the central aisle of the carriage.

He glanced back and saw that Jared was following him. He quickened his pace. The carriage was strangely long, and there were so many seats where Rebecca might be hiding. In his haste to escape from his brother, he was afraid he would surely miss her.

He felt Jared's breath tickle his ear, and started to run. The carriage went on and on, seemingly without end.

He glanced round again and saw that it was not Jared at all, but the Reverend Rehoboam. He stopped in surprise. The reverend came up to him and said, "You marry his blasted nieces!", after which he shook his head sadly, walked off to one side and vanished into the vestry.

Joel looked around. The seats of the carriage had all turned into wooden pews, and they were full of worshippers who looked strangely at him. Somehow he knew that they were all waiting for him to marry the nieces.

Joel shook his head. "I'm sorry, I can't...", he began. Can't what? Why should he marry the nieces anyway? To himself or to each other? Wasn't this all very odd?

He heard a voice calling as if from a great distance: "Open your eyes! It's a dream! Open your eyes!"

"My eyes are open!", he shouted back.

Suddenly Rebecca was there in front of him. "Listen, Joel", she said, "You're dreaming. You need to wake up now!"

"Rebecca!"

He tried to embrace her. There was a momentary sensation of the solidity of her body, the smoothness of her silk dress, the warmth of her cheek, the perfume in her hair, but then she suddenly dissolved away into mist...

"Open your eyes..."

And this time he did.

Joel woke with a start and found that he was damp with perspiration. He felt disoriented. What was it he had been dreaming about? Rebecca...? Wasn't there a train... or had it been a church...?

He blinked the familiar outlines of his bedroom into focus, saw them faintly illuminated in a shaft of moonlight that had stolen through a gap in the curtains. He stretched and looked to his side. The only sound that disturbed the night was the regular mechanical ticking of his bedside clock. It showed a little before three o'clock.

He licked his lips. They felt dry. He sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, thinking of going to the bathroom to fetch a glass of water. He glanced at the curtains. There was no gap. So why was there moonlight in his bedroom? And why was it increasing in brightness even as he wondered about it? Surely not another dream? Wasn't he now wide awake?

Yet something was going seriously wrong with his perceptions, for he suddenly saw the bedroom physically expanding as it brightened. In the space of five heartbeats it had grown to the size of a cathedral in which Joel and his bed were an incongruous irrelevance parked against the back wall. At the same time he became aware of a smell of incense, while chords of solemn organ music resonated from echoing depths. The shaft of moonlight had now become a brilliantly coloured stream of sunlight pouring through a thirty-foot-high stained glass window that had somehow inserted itself into his bedroom wall. It all felt real, horribly real.

Joel struggled to his feet and immediately had to grab the post at the head of his bed for fear of losing his balance. Despite the firmness of the floor beneath his feet, which somehow managed to be both his familiar bedroom carpet and the stone tiles of some great gothic church, he felt that he was teetering on the brink of an abyss, in imminent danger of falling into a bottomless void.

Somewhere at the back of his mind, a dispassionate voice which strongly resembled that of his tutor at Auxford was pointing out details of the scrollwork on the columns, the type of limestone used in the walls, the pattern of the tiles on the floor, the arrangement of beams in the roof. Surely this was the fifteenth-century Church of Saint Abadonna in Chrome?

The shaft of light before him detached itself from the window, rotated into a vertical position and assumed the form of a column some nine feet high. With the speed of thought the column developed a head with a mass of curly golden hair, a square-jawed masculine

face wearing a solemn expression, a stocky body draped in a long white robe with a jewelled sword hanging from its golden belt, two muscular arms, and behind its shoulders two aquiline wings with golden feathers.

The apparition raised a scroll in its hands, unrolled it, perused the contents and looked down at Joel. "Are you Joel Steinbrook?", it asked in a deep, authoritative voice.

"Y-yes", he nodded breathlessly.

"Elder son of Lord Abraham Steinbrook, partner in Abimellick & Steinbrook, architects?"

"I... yes." He nervously licked his lips again.

"Joel Steinbrook: the Lord God Almighty, my master and yours, Creator and Lord of the Universe, has decreed that your time on earth is coming to an end. As is divine law and custom, he has sent me to give you notice that you have one month of twenty-eight days left on earth. On the twenty-ninth day you shall be taken up into heaven. I would advise you to prepare yourself accordingly. Do you understand?"

Joel nodded mutely.

The angel smiled. "Until we meet again", it said, with a friendly nod of its head. It rolled up the scroll and started to dissolve back into a shaft of light.

"I... no... wait...", Joel mumbled. He raised his voice. "It can't be... I'm too young..."

He was too late. The angel had fully transformed back into a beam of light, and as it exited through the stained-glass window both the intensity of the brightness all around him and the heavenly dimensions of his room were rapidly collapsing back to normal. The incense and the organ music faded and vanished as if they had never been.

Joel found himself in darkness, clinging to the post of his bed. In the distance a church bell rang three times and fell silent. An owl hooted.

Shaking, Joel stumbled to the window and tore the curtains open. The sky was overcast, with no sign of the moon. A light drizzle was falling, made faintly visible in the pool of yellow light cast by a solitary street lantern.

"It was a dream, a bad dream", he said to himself half aloud. "That's all it was. I must have eaten something that disagreed with me... a dream, please, God, say it was just a dream!"

He collapsed onto his bed and began to shake uncontrollably.

~ 6 ~

“The Teutons have launched another dreadnought”, said Joel’s father from behind his Saturday morning newspaper. “Damn their insolence! If it comes to war, the Royal Navy won’t be able to hold them in check.”

His wife was buttering a slice of toast. “I really don’t see why it should come to war”, she replied, and turned to one of the maids. “Maisie, bring another jug of milk.” As the maid scurried off towards the kitchen, Mother added, “How could the king ever have such a violent disagreement with the Teutonic emperor – his own cousin! – that it should lead to war? – Joel, there you are! You’re late. I was wondering what had happened to you. – Maisie, tell Wibbles to bring in Joel’s porridge at once!”

“Good morning, Mother, everyone”, said Joel in a quiet voice, and sat down.

His father turned over a page of the newspaper. “Now they’re having military exercises on the border with Gallia Belgica. Highly provocative.” He glanced over the top of the page to catch his wife’s eye. “I wouldn’t blame the emperor, my dear. It’s the generals whom I blame for rising tensions. And the admirals. They’re an ambitious, ruthless lot, always thinking of their next dreadnought. They give His Teutonic Majesty poor advice and he knows no better than to accept it. The same with his Albionic Majesty the king. In the end it could still lead to war despite all the royal goodwill in the world.”

“What I don’t understand”, Joel’s brother Jared said, “is how soldiers and sailors can bear to fight, knowing for certain that they’re going to die. Isn’t it true that all the people who fall on the battlefield must have seen their angel four weeks before?”

“Your porridge, sir”, said the creamy voice of Wibbles, and Joel found a steaming bowl being placed in front of him.

“On the contrary”, Father replied, “that knowledge makes them fight all the more heroically.”

Jared thought a bit about this. “I don’t think I would do so. I’d want to run away and hide – wouldn’t you, Jolly?”

Joel did not respond, and their father continued, “You’d be an officer. It’s the lower classes that take most of the casualties.”

“Yes, I suppose it is...” Jared turned his head and saw the butler standing aside from the breakfast table, quietly waiting for his next order. “Wibbles, what would you do?”

“Sir?”

“Suppose you were in the army and you’d seen your angel, and four weeks later you were about to go into battle? Would the knowledge that you were certainly going to die that day make you fight harder?”

“I really couldn’t say, sir.”

“But you’d know that you couldn’t possibly come out of the battle alive.”

“I do not accept that I could ever be certain of that, sir.”

“But you’d just seen your angel, for heaven’s sake!”

“So they say, sir. Or it might be that I’d seen a hallucination which I imagined to be an angel.”

Judith laughed. “Give it up, Jarry. Don’t you know Wibbles is an unrepentant atheist?”

“All the same...”, Jared frowned, “they do say, that angel puts on a pretty convincing show. Bright lights and incense and music – the whole shebang. What do you think, Jolly? What did they say about it in Divinity at Auxford?”

Joel stared at him miserably.

“What’s the matter”, Judith asked. “Are you ill?”

“I’m sorry”, Joel muttered, and stood up. He had not touched his porridge. “I’m feeling unwell.” He turned to go.

“Joel!”, his mother said firmly. “Your Father has not given you permission to leave the table.”

Joel made his exit with undignified haste.

“Insolent boy!”, Father said, looking out from behind his newspaper. “Whatever’s got into him?”

“Maisie”, Mother ordered, “go and send for the doctor at once. Tell him to give Joel a thorough examination.”

Jared whispered something to Judith, and the two shared a secret giggle.

~ 7 ~

Another Sunday, another sermon. This time Joel gave the proceedings his full attention.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?”, old Reverend Rehoboam read aloud from the Gospel of Saint Matthudah. “And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

He looked up from the holy book and gazed at the congregation over the top of his spectacles. "Thus we know that our Almighty Father watches over us every moment of our lives. And when we die, as each one of us must, we fall to the ground neither a moment before, nor a moment after he in his divine wisdom has predestined for us. Or, as King David sang:

*O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me!
Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up...
Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance;
In thy book were written, every one of them,
The days that were formed for me,
When as yet there was none of them."*

Joel fastened his eyes on the reverend's lips with an expression of fascinated horror.

When Sunday service was over the worshippers filed out, stopping on the way to shake hands with Reverend Rehoboam as was their custom, before exchanging their last greetings and returning home. But, as God had no doubt foreseen, this week Joel hesitated at the church door.

"Come on, Jolly", his brother urged him. "Don't keep us waiting."

His sister came to his side. "I hope you haven't forgotten that Father's arranged rather a special meeting this afternoon." She gave him a poisonous smile.

Joel looked from one to the other. "Of course", he said, and hoped they would not notice the uneasiness in his voice. "His lordship's nieces. I haven't forgotten. D'you know, that meeting will be so important for me that I think I need to talk to the reverend about it first. Will you please tell Father?"

Jared winked at his sister. "I smell a secret wedding about to take place!"

"Shut up, Jared! It's just me and the reverend. If you don't believe me, go and find Rebecca – she came out of church earlier."

"You must be home by two o'clock, or else!", Judith threatened.

"Or else what?"

"Or else Mother will call out the doctor again, and you'll have to spend another day in bed with a thermometer in your mouth!"

Joel snorted. "Rather than have to marry Esmerelda or, what's-her-name, the other one! – All right, I said I'll be there. There's nothing wrong with me, nothing at all. Really! I just need to discuss my plans for the future with the reverend."

When the last of the congregation had made their way down the gravel path towards the road, Joel asked Reverend Rehoboam for a private interview, and he agreed. They went back into the church together.

"How can I help you, my son?", Rehoboam asked as soon as they were seated together in his private office at the back of the church.

"Can I rely on you not to tell anybody?"

"Joel, any conversation held in private with one of my parishioners is always kept in strictest confidence. Anything you tell me will not go beyond these four walls."

"You won't even tell Father?"

"Not even your father, Joel. Nobody will know except you, me and of course Almighty God himself. Now what's on your mind?"

"I... the fact is..."

"Yes?"

"I'm in love with a woman but Father has forbidden us to get engaged."

"I see. That is serious. What are his grounds for refusal?"

"He thinks she's socially inferior. And he wants me to marry one of the blasted nieces of Lord Abimellick. Lady Esmerelda, or Lady somebody-else, I can't even remember her name."

"I see. And I suppose your heart tells you to run away with your true love?"

"You could say that."

"While your head tells you not to be a fool, not to defy your father and ruin your career?"

"Father thinks he can run my life for me. It's ludicrous!"

"What does God say to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you taken your problem to God in prayer? Has he given you a sign?"

"No..."

Rehoboam smiled. "Well there's the answer to your problem. Open your heart to God and let him speak to you. God always knows best. Are you quite sure he's not given you any sign at all? Perhaps something that you didn't want to recognise and so pretended to yourself that it was not God speaking?"

"Well... there was one thing..."

"Splendid! What was it?"

Joel looked at the floor and spoke in a strangled voice. "He sent me an angel."

"An angel?" His reverence looked puzzled. "To advise you on marriage? That would be most unusual. What did the angel say?"

Joel's voice sank to a whisper. "It gave me twenty-nine days."

There was a pause while the unexpected news sunk in. Rehoboam suddenly beamed with pleasure. "But that's wonderful!", he burst out. "Why didn't you say so straight away? When did it happen?"

"A week yesterday."

"Congratulations!... So it's all settled, then. In three weeks time you're going to heaven... two weeks next Saturday, indeed. Your earthly problem's no problem at all!"

"You don't understand", Joel objected, recovering his confidence now that the terrible secret was out in the open. "I don't want to go. Not Saturday, not any other day of the week. I've got a great future here with Rebecca. We've got plans, we're going to build a new life together in Hesperica, and suddenly, this..."

"Joel, all our life here is only temporary, only a brief preparation for our lives of glory with our Eternal Father in heaven."

"I said I don't want to go! Not yet. When I'm old and worn out, that'll be different, but not now. I'm only twenty-three. I'm a graduate of Auxford, for goodness sake! I've got a life to live, in the right here and right now."

"God says differently."

"But I've got to convince him he's wrong! How can I persuade God not to do this to me?"

"Joel, did you even listen to one word of my sermon? God has planned your life in every detail. Not only your own life. Take that woman you say you love. Do you want to marry her? But supposing that God has other plans for her? Supposing that it will be very important, fifty years in the future, that she has had a child with another man, so that that particular child can grow up to become prime minister and save Albion from some terrible threat?"

"What nonsense!"

"You and I cannot see into the future. God, who is eternal and all-knowing, can. That's the difference."

"Even if God does want to keep us apart, he doesn't have to kill me to do so!"

"Joel, God is not killing you. All of us are mortal. We have to accept that."

"It's easy for you to say that. How old are you – sixty, seventy? You've had your life, but I haven't – and *that's* the difference!"

"I was made for a life of at least sixty-six years. You were made for a life of just twenty-three years. Or would you contradict your own Creator?"

"Of course I would – and so would you if you were in my position. There must be some way to persuade God that he's made a mistake! There must be!"

"No, there mustn't. Joel, if God has given you twenty-nine days, then you must use that time preparing your soul to meet him, not in rebellion against him."

"Reverend Rehoboam, please help me!"

The old reverend nodded in agreement. "Firstly, have you made your will? God gave you this time so that..."

His words ground to a halt. Joel had stood up, and in his hand was a fat, black revolver.

"Reverend Rehoboam, you will help me to convince God to change his blasted mind, otherwise I'll kill you!"

The priest, too, slowly got to his feet. On his face was concern, but not for his own safety.

"Joel, you know you cannot shoot me. Put the gun away."

"If you don't help me, I can and I will."

"Death is in God's hands, and God's alone. I have not seen the angel. Therefore I know that, whatever happens, you cannot kill me. My time has not yet come." He started to move out from behind his desk to confront Joel directly, keeping his eyes steadily focused on Joel's at all times.

"God got it wrong with me, and I can prove he got it wrong with you, too!"

"This is madness. Joel, put the gun away. How can the Creator of the entire universe be wrong?"

"Overconfidence!"

"Shoot me, then. Just try to shoot me. But remember, you'll have to finish me off. If you only wound me, I'll still be able to tell the police what you've done. You'll not be able to keep it a secret any more. You'll lose your family and your career and the woman you love, and then when the twenty-ninth day comes...", he ended with a smile and spread his hands wide.

"I thought you said everything I told you was confidential?"

"It is. I said nothing about keeping your actions confidential too."

"You tricky, devious, lying..." – Joel looked around for inspiration and found none. "If you breathe a word of any of this to Father, I'll come back and this time I'll really do it! Because then I won't have anything to lose any more!"

Joel thrust the gun back into the holster hidden under his jacket, turned and ran from the room. His hurrying footsteps echoed through the church, and he was gone.

~ 8 ~

The building looked unremarkable in the dull evening light. It could have been occupied by an accountant's office, or a draper's shop, or a poor men's social club.

Joel rang the bell. The door opened, and he was greeted by a woman with long black hair, a rounded face, nut-brown skin and strangely curved oriental eyes.

"I've come to see Tenzin Rimposhay", he said.

The woman bowed silently and beckoned him to follow her.

They went down a clean, freshly painted corridor. From somewhere deeper in the building Joel could hear a low, regular grumble of many voices chanting in unison. His guide led him along another corridor and they finally entered a large but sparsely furnished room brightly lit by electric lamps. The walls displayed landscape paintings of the Central Asian Plateau, on which herds of wild horses wandered over grassy plains reaching to a distant horizon. In the centre of the room was a well cushioned sofa where the sage from the east was sitting.

The rimposhay was dressed in a saffron robe. His skin was brown and wrinkled, his hair was grey and a narrow strand of whitened beard fell to his waist, but despite his apparent great age his eyes shone with youthful energy. He smiled at Joel and offered him a seat on a low chair facing him. The silent woman went over to an urn in a corner of the room and returned with two small cups of tea without milk.

"In your religion", Joel said after taking a sip from his cup, "I am told you do not believe in God."

"That is correct", the rimposhay replied. His voice was high-pitched, but friendly and soothing. "For all sentient beings are one. How then can one sentient being be a creator but the others merely his creations? If they too share in the universal faculties of reason and perception, compassion and suffering, are they not equally creators and created together?"

Why not come to one of our Sunday evening meetings, where all this will be explained more fully?"

"So what happens when people of your religion die? Don't you receive a twenty-nine-day warning?"

The sage smiled even more sweetly than before. "Of course we do. We receive the warning just as you do. Everyone is told in advance when their life on earth is about to end."

"But if you see an angel, who sends the angel if not God?"

"Why does somebody need to send the angel?"

"You mean... the angel comes by itself?"

"Firstly, we do not call the messenger an angel. We call it a bodhisattva. It is not a mythical being from legends or fairy stories, but was once a human person itself, having made progress in its previous lives towards enlightenment. But instead of going all the way to Buddhahood – that is, total enlightenment – it has decided to linger in a state of semi-enlightenment. In this state it can still return to the material world and speak to living people. You can learn all about bodhisattvas, all about enlightenment and Buddhahood, at our Sunday evening meetings in this very room."

In the pause that followed, Joel noticed that the monotonous chanting coming from somewhere else in the building was still faintly audible. He fancied that it sounded almost like waves falling on a beach some little distance outside the house. He shook off the distraction, refocused his mind on their conversation and asked, "Why would the angel – the bodhisattva – want to do that?"

"Out of compassion. When we receive full enlightenment we go to live in a purely spiritual world, where contact with this one is no longer possible. A fully enlightened being, you see, is one who has transcended the cycle of birth, death and rebirth that we mortals are subject to. Why not find out more about our religion of compassion and peace?"

"I'm sorry, Tenzin Rimposhay, but I don't have much time. The fact is, a week and a half ago I received a visit from an angel myself."

The sage leaned forward, his eyes twinkling. "How interesting. Did you see a snowy mountaintop and an old hermit in a cave who gave you the news, like we do? Or did it appear to you in the figure of an angel from the legends of your own religion?"

"I want to know how to stop the blasted thing! And I've only got two and a half weeks left."

“Why?”

“What d’you mean, why! I’m young; I’m only twenty-three; I’m a graduate of Auxford! Of course I don’t want to die yet! I’ve got plans.”

“Do those plans include learning the path of enlightenment?”

“What? No; I mean, I’ve met the girl I want to marry, I’ve got plans to go out west... You say you don’t believe in God. So who was it who decided I must die now? *Who* made that decision to deprive me of my life?”

The rimposhay gave him a long, hard look with his sparkling eyes, before saying, “I think you made that decision yourself.”

Joel’s eyes widened in a show of both surprise and disgust at such an absurdity. “That’s ludicrous!”

The sage continued, “Deep down inside, in your innermost mind. You see, your attachment to the material world is holding you back from further progress towards enlightenment. Your spiritual state is one of crude animality: you think only of immediate gratification, the pleasures of the body. The virtues of detachment from pleasure and pain, compassion for others, the path of enlightenment – these mean nothing to you. For your own eventual good you know – subconsciously, despite yourself – that this state is holding you back. Therefore what must you do? You know you must die; you know you must be reincarnated in the form of a sentient being more open to the eightfold path of learning, less distracted by such passing sensations as those of marriage or job satisfaction. And when he saw you were ready to take that next step, your bodhisattva came to you to bring that fact into full consciousness.”

Joel stood up. “Thank you for your advice”, he said coldly, “I found it most helpful.”

“In that case may I look forward to seeing you on Sunday evening? We have a short talk on some aspect of consciousness and enlightenment, then some discussion, followed by a period of silent meditation...”

“Helpful – in the sense I can see you’re going to be no help to me whatsoever! Good evening to you, sir.”

Joel marched out, while the sage from the east and the oriental woman exchanged a wry smile.

~ 9 ~

“Well, all good things must come to an end, eh, Rebecca?”, said Lord Abimellick. “At least, on earth they must.” He toyed with the pipe in his mouth in a reflective mood.

“The company will miss you, m’lord”, Rebecca replied. She was packing the last few of his papers into a cardboard box in his lordship’s now bare office at Abimellick & Steinbrook. “I think I’ll miss you most of all.”

“Yes, we’ve been a good team, you and I.” He struck a match, put the flame to the bowl of his pipe, inhaled and blew out a cloud of blue smoke. “Will you stay on with the company?”

“I decided to take a few months away from work, m’lord. I need to reconsider my career options, maybe travel around a bit, before I settle down again.”

“Travel? Had you anywhere in particular in mind?”

“It’s always been my dream to cross the Western Ocean and visit Hesperica, m’lord. I’ve heard so much about how impressive the cities are, how vast the wide open spaces as you travel west. Of course, it’s not easy for a girl in my position to save up for a ticket, except on one of the smallest and oldest steamers.”

“Oh, what nonsense! How much d’you need then, eh?”

“How much, m’lord?”

“Yes, for a cabin on a good ship. What’s the name of that new liner they launched recently? Four funnels, the best accommodation on the entire Western Ocean.”

“That must be the *Tritonic*, m’lord.”

“That’s the one! Choose your cabin, find out the price, outbound and return, add ten per cent for travelling expenses after you arrive, take the sum to my butler. He’ll give you cash.”

“My lord, I’m overwhelmed! Thank you so much – that’s very generous of you!”

Abimellick waved his hand at her dismissively. “Why should I care about money any more? Tomorrow I’ll be going on a little journey of my own. A journey to a place where all the money in the world means less than nothing!”

They departed the office for the last time, Rebecca carrying the box of papers, his lordship puffing thoughtfully on his pipe.

In the corridor, Lord Abimellick spotted the son of his partner. “Ah, Joel!”, he called him over. “Now you’re to take good care of the company when I’m gone, and be a good

husband to my little Esmerelda.”

Joel glanced from Lord Abimellick to Rebecca and back again. “I have great hopes for my future, my lord.”

“I’m only sorry I can’t be here for the wedding itself.”

“Your niece is constantly in my thoughts, my lord.”

“And you’re to follow your father’s advice at all times, d’you understand?”

“Of course, my lord. Disobedience to Father would be a terrible sin.”

“He’s been in this business even longer than I have, and I have no doubt he’ll be getting a visit from his own angel very soon. I don’t expect to be parted from Abraham for long. Only thing is, where we’re going, business conditions are likely to be a little different from what we’re used to on earth, don’t you think, eh?”

Joel nodded. “I expect they will be, my lord. I trust you’ll have no objection if I come to church tonight to see you off on your journey?”

“Objection? None at all. I expect you to be there. You too, Rebecca.”

“I consider it my last duty to you, m’lord.”

“I was baptised in your church, you know”, Abimellick added in a confidential tone. “Spent some of the happiest years of my childhood in your village, before Uncle died.”

“We will be honoured with your presence, m’lord.”

“There’ll be some of my family there too, close friends, that sort of thing.” He gave them both a benevolent look. “So, until tonight, then!”

~ 10 ~

Despite the late spring warmth in the air, after sunset the church was cold and draughty.

Lord Abimellick, the Reverend Rehoboam and the friends and family who were to see him off on his journey to heaven assembled at eleven o’clock in the evening of his lordship’s twenty-eighth day since his angelic visitation. The priest served hot, sweet coffee to help his visitors stay awake during the night, and possibly the following day as well, for the exact time of his departure had not been announced in advance.

Rebecca found Joel hovering outside the church door.

“What’s the matter?”, she asked him. “Come inside and join the rest of us.”

“I’ll come in, in just a minute”, he muttered, but was unable to hide his uneasiness. “Is Rehoboam there?”

“Of course he’s there, in the nave, talking to your father. Would you like me to ask him to come out and see you?”

“No!”

“Joel, what’s going on?”

“We had a... disagreement. I’d be embarrassed to see him right now.”

Rebecca gave him a thoughtful look. “It must have been a serious disagreement.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll come in when the vigil starts.”

“Can I bring you a coffee?”

“Yes, please. – No, better not. He might see you.”

“That must have been some disagreement! You don’t have to stay at all if you don’t want to.”

“I want to. When the angel comes for him the last time...”

“Will an angel come?”

“I hope... I think so. I want to see it happen.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Do you want to see the grace of God working in action?”

“You could say that.”

“That’s wonderful – so do I!”

“And I want to be with you, Rebecca – you don’t know how much I want to be with you!”

“Naughty!” She pushed his hands aside. “There’ll be time for that later. But not during his lordship’s vigil.”

Joel sighed. “No, not during the vigil. Rebecca, I love...”

But she had already turned away from him and was going back inside.

Only when the bell rang twelve times for midnight did Joel allow himself to slip inside and quietly close the heavy church door behind him. In the candle-lit gloom Joel spotted the figures of Lord Abimellick and his father sealing their last farewell with a firm handshake. His father then sat down in the pews while his lordship walked solemnly up the aisle with slow, echoing footsteps, finally to take up a kneeling position on a small stool in front of the altar. Meanwhile there was a rustle of feet and clothes and whispers as the rest of the congregation occupied the half dozen pews at the back of the church.

When Abimellick was in position, the priest asked the worshippers to stand and led them in a couple of verses from the hymnal. Everybody then sat down again and devoted themselves in their own way to their thoughts and prayers. Joel took care to find a seat

behind everybody else and as far as possible from both Rehoboam and his father.

And then there was nothing left to do but watch and wait.

Clearly, Joel realised, old Rehoboam had kept his promise of confidentiality. But Joel would still not trust himself to handle a public meeting between the two of them, especially with Father present. The priest would inevitably show displeasure in his face and manner at seeing Joel again. Father would notice and ask awkward questions. Joel could easily lie or brush such questions off with a laugh, but he would not trust the reverend to do likewise if confronted with a direct question.

So why not abandon the whole operation and go home? Joel had turned the matter over in his mind again and again, and always come to the same conclusion. If God was going to take Abimellick's life at some point in the next twenty-four hours, and if his lordship was not going to oblige his heavenly Father by standing on the edge of a windy clifftop, or getting his butler to tie him to his own company's railway tracks as the morning express was steaming towards him, or smoking his blasted pipe in a room filled with barrels of gunpowder, then the Lord God would have to take more direct action. The most probable form that action might take would be that God would surely send an angel to do his dirty work for him.

But Joel knew about angels. This time, he would not be shy about the appearance of a supernatural being. He would be expecting the distortion of his perceptions of space, the unearthly atmosphere, the music and the vertigo. He would not be intimidated a second time. As soon as the effects began to appear, and even before the angel had begun to materialise from a shaft of light, he calculated he would have time to rush to the front of the ghostly Church of Saint Abadonna. The angel would not be able to escape before Joel had made his plea for life and demanded a review of his case at the highest level.

That his lordship's family and friends – including Joel's own father – would be witnesses to his confrontation with the supernatural was a nuisance, but an unavoidable one. The only preparation which Joel had not made, and which he now profoundly regretted, was that he had not shared his secret with Rebecca. He had privately resolved to confess his experience to her, and had indeed already tried to bring the conversation around to that theme on a number of occasions, but something had always held him back. Perhaps it was his suspicion that the pious girl would advise him to submit gracefully, or perhaps a feeling of simple embarrassment that he had not told her earlier. How could he explain why he had spent the last two weeks pretending to her that all was well, when in her eyes the

claims of religion trumped those of love every time?

Despite the chill in the air, Joel's senses blurred, and the next thing he knew was that the congregation were singing another hymn into the candle-scented semi-darkness.

Damn!, he cursed himself, *I've got to stay awake!*

He stood up and moved to take up a position leaning against the back wall of the church. The singing came to an end. The clock chimed two. The night dragged on. Sometime later the clock chimed three. Joel found himself unable to resist the urge to sit down again.

When he next opened his eyes he saw that the candles had burned down and the morning light was already pouring in through the stained glass windows. Joel heard footsteps. He shook his head and looked up. Reverend Rehoboam was walking cautiously towards the altar. Something was wrong: his lordship was lying in an untidy sprawl on the floor. The priest reached him, bent over and examined him.

Rehoboam looked up. "It is over!", he said loudly. "His lordship's heart failed during the night. Such a simple, painless transition from this world to the next. Ring the bells for another penitent who's entered heaven!"

Joel scowled and slipped away without even trying to speak to Rebecca again.

~ 11 ~

He took a late train out to the village of Much Hallowing. When he arrived the station clock was already showing ten o'clock in the evening. A raucous sound made him look up: a murder of crows was shrieking and circling around a nearby copse of elms, performing their evening ritual dance before settling down for the night. Joel found a single unmarked black cab waiting behind the station, and seated himself in it as per his instructions. The driver clicked his tongue without waiting for any other passengers, and the horse drew the cab out into the road.

After an hour's ride through increasingly remote and gloomy country lanes, they drove through a pair of rusted wrought-iron gates and entered a long, dark driveway between rows of brooding foliage. They finally pulled up in front of a dilapidated old manor house.

Joel let himself out of the cab and without a word the driver immediately set his vehicle in motion again, disappearing around the back of the house. The full moon was high in the sky, its pallid light picking out the silent contours of a garden overgrown with rank

vegetation. The darkened house itself was showing only a single upstairs window faintly illuminated from within.

Joel shivered and went up the steps to the front door. After he had fumbled for the bell pull in the shadows there was a long pause, but at last he heard the rasping of a bolt and the creak of hinges, and the door opened.

The man standing there in a butler's suit gave him a critical stare before asking, in gutteral accented English, "You have an invitation?"

Joel pulled a card out of his pocket and presented it to the man. "I was invited by Mr Myers", he explained. "From the Society for Paranormal Research. And you must be... Vanych?"

The butler nodded. "You have brought the money?"

Joel nodded and pulled out an envelope. "Fifty pounds, in cash."

Vanych took the envelope, studied it without opening it, weighed it in his hand, but then said, "Guineas. It must be guineas."

"For a one-hour consultation? That's a bit steep!"

The butler simply stared at him, and Joel was obliged to fumble in his pockets for an additional two pounds and ten shillings. Only when he had paid that over was he allowed over the threshold.

"Madame Guiragossian will see you presently, sir", the butler said as he ushered Joel inside and took his hat and coat.

The spacious hall was dimly illuminated in candle-light; there would of course be no electricity this far away from the nearest town. Vanych began to lead Joel through the hall, but before they were halfway across, a door suddenly opened on one side and a young woman dashed across their path.

"I won't do it!", she was yelling in a high-pitched voice, "d'you hear, I won't do it! Not for you, not for Mother! It's *evil*, I tell you!" She wrenched open a door on the other side of the hall, darted inside and slammed the door loudly behind her.

Meanwhile a young gentleman had followed her out into the hall. He stopped, glanced at the butler and Joel, muttered "Oh, God!", and made his own exit through another door.

"This way, sir", said Vanych smoothly as if nothing had happened, and started to climb the wide staircase.

Joel hesitated, then hurried after him. "What was that all about?", he asked when he

had caught up.

The butler gave him a cool glance and did not reply.

On the landing halfway up they passed a grandfather clock showing a quarter to midnight. At the top of the stairs they found a group of three young men in their shirt sleeves working on an apparatus consisting of boxes connected by coils of rubber-coated wire. Some of the boxes had light bulbs installed in them, others had switches and buttons. One was full of empty beer bottles. In the centre of the upstairs hall someone had erected a pair of metal posts with a connecting lintel, forming a doorway without a door. More wires led from this structure down to the boxes on the floor.

The young men looked up as Joel and Vanych approached, and one of them asked cheerfully, "Is the seance about to begin?"

Vanych threatened them with a raised finger. "You are not to make a nuisance of yourselves. Madame demands absolute silence while she is in the transcendental state."

"Oh, don't worry about that, old man!" He turned to Joel. "The honourable Joel Steinbrook, isn't it?" He held out his hand, and Joel allowed the man to give him a firm handshake. "Herbie Myers. Dad told me you'd be coming. Don't mind us. Just a few measurements. Scientific progress, you know."

"Does Madame Guiragossian know about this?"

"Oh, it's all above board. Official investigation by the Society for Paranormal Research." He turned to one of his fellow researchers. "Power on?"

The other man was looking at a gauge, and Joel watched as he tapped on its glass cover with a fingernail. The needle swung across the dial to come to rest against the number twelve. The man nodded and said, "I'm getting twelve volts here."

Joel asked, "But surely there's no electricity in the house?"

Myers grinned and gestured at a bundle of thicker black wires snaking away down the upstairs hall. "We've got a whole roomful of low-voltage batteries. The high-voltage apparatus is jazzed up with a Van Der Graaf Generator. Now, if you'd be so kind...?"

He was gesturing at the metal archway. Joel glanced at the butler, but Vanych's face was blank. Joel shrugged and walked through the arch.

"Interesting...", muttered one of the young men behind him, studying his gauges, "interesting..."

Vanych came to his side. "This way, sir", he growled, and led the way through a normal doorway into a large drawing-room.

Again, the only illumination was provided by candles. The room was heavily curtained on all four sides, but as he entered Joel caught a gleam of reflected light on some more metallic apparatus that had not been fully concealed. In the centre of the room two chairs had been placed facing each other across a small circular table, and Joel was now invited to sit in one of them.

“When will Madame Guiragossian arrive?”, he asked after waiting for a few moments, but the butler had vanished.

The three young men were there, though, having quietly slipped into the room behind Joel. One of them immediately went behind the curtains, and Joel could trace his progress by the billowing of the curtain as he passed behind it. The other two ran a cable from a box near the door to one positioned directly underneath the empty seat.

“What are you doing”, Joel asked.

“Don’t mind us, old chap!”, was the reply.

“I do mind you. I’ve paid rather a large fee for the privilege of a seance with Madame Guiragossian. What are all the wires for?”

“Measurements”, Myers said. He stood up straight, put one hand in his pocket and gestured with the other like a man giving a public lecture at the Royal Institution. “Every spirit, you know, makes its own impression on the psychic energy field. Just as a planet has gravity, or a magnet has magnetism, so a human spirit has an influence on its surroundings that we call the psychic field. At present there are four people in the room – that’s yourself, myself, Algy there and Bertie behind the curtain – you all right there, Bertie?”

A muffled voice replied, “Can’t find the fuse box...” A patch of torchlight flashed briefly through a gap, the curtain billowed, and the voice continued, “Ah. Got it.”

“So, four people”, Myers continued. “And when Madame makes her entrance, there’ll be five. That’s five people, so five centres of radiation into the psychic field, exchanging energy at a rate of five Man-Ergs per second. We pick them up on the psychotron – that’s our detecting apparatus over there. But when she does her business, you know, goes into the transcendental state, she brings another spirit into the room to share her body. We can detect that as an additional disturbance in the psychic field, so we can scientifically prove it’s a genuine manifestation. You know. From the other side.”

Joel thought about that while the two researchers were finishing their preparations under the empty chair. “Supposing it’s not a human spirit?”, he asked. “Supposing it’s an angel?”

“Aha! That’s just the question we’re addressing this evening. Until now, you know, there’s been no scientific proof of the existence of angels.”

“Why not? Everybody sees an angel before they die.”

Myers patted his shoulder. “That’s why the seance will be so interesting, old man!”

He and his assistant retired to somewhere behind Joel. For a few minutes there was silence and Joel was left alone with his thoughts. The grandfather clock on the landing started to chime twelve o’clock midnight. Joel counted the chimes, then suddenly looked up, alerted by some slight change in the atmosphere of the room. His heart missed a beat: the lady who was his host had already entered noiselessly through some concealed door and was now staring down at him.

She was wearing a motley dress that was a patchwork of different patterns and colours, and her hair was covered by a scarf of the same design. On her hands she wore several rings with large gemstones, and long earrings were dangling down her cheeks. Her face was tanned and lined but her eyes had something of the same sparkle in them that Joel had observed on the face of the Buddhist sage he had visited a week before.

Joel quickly got to his feet. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Madame Guiragossian. I’m sorry to disturb you so late at night.”

“Sit down Joel”, she said, and took her place opposite him. She rested her elbows on the table, and gave Joel a penetrating stare. “I always work after midnight. That’s when my mind is most receptive. My friend Mr Myers tells me that you wish to consult the spirits of the departed about a personal problem.”

Joel recognised the same foreign accent as the one which her butler had used. He nodded and cleared his throat. “I need to speak urgently with an angel of the Lord God.”

“That is unusual. Generally people prefer to avoid contact with angels. How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Have you ever seen an angel before?”

Joel nodded.

“Recently?”

“Eighteen... no, now it’s nineteen days ago.”

“I see. That would explain your wish to renew that acquaintance. My contacts on the other side are all departed souls, but we shall see if one of them is willing to take a message for you. I trust that will suffice?”

"I suppose so... Are they in heaven, or...?"

Madame Guiragossian laughed. "Hell!", she said. "You see, you can speak the word quite freely with me. But I do not think my spirits are in heaven or hell. Sometimes they have peace, at other times they have problems, just as they did on earth. One of my contacts is the spirit of a Chroman emperor who used to crucify his enemies in their thousands along the main roads leading to the capital. One was a priest whose sexual adventures brought disgrace upon his church; another was a courtesan who shared the beds of kings, and afterwards shared her lovers' secrets with foreign powers. Have they been forgiven their sins? I don't know, and I don't think they know, either. I believe they live now in a kind of limbo while they wait for the final judgement. Shall we see who is willing to talk this evening?"

Joel nodded again.

"When the spirit speaks through me, you must reply", the medium instructed him. "I shall not be aware of anything happening in this room until the spirit leaves me." She placed her hands palms down on the table top, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. For several minutes there was no sound but the faint whisper of five people breathing quietly.

Joel looked at the wrinkled skin on her hands, then at the faint gleam of polished wood in the candlelight. The table top was curiously carved with complex intertwining patterns of serpentine beasts.

Madame Guiragossian suddenly groaned. Her head swayed from side to side, then her lips moved and Joel heard the words, "Who are you? What is this?"

Yet it was no longer Madame Guiragossian: her voice had completely lost its foreign accent, and it had deepened and taken on a masculine timbre. Her eyes remained closed, her body erect in her chair. A chill ran down Joel's spine as he recognised the voice.

"This is Joel Steinbrook", he said shyly. "Are you really...?"

"Joel! Why didn't you come to see me off, eh?", said the voice of Lord Abimellick.

"I... I did come, I was sitting at the back of the church, my lord. How are you getting on there? How are you spending your time?"

"Lots of work to do here. We're building the New Jerusalem, streets paved with gold just like it says. At first I thought it would be an architect's heaven, but they seem to have forgotten to supply the New Jerusalem with any railway stations. I've had the devil of a time trying to convince the angels that you can't have a modern city without them... The worst of it up here is that you can't seem to get good pipe tobacco anywhere... What about you, eh?"

Have you married Esmerelda yet?"

"Not yet, my lord. You see, there's a problem."

"I want to keep the company within our two families. Your father and I are fully agreed on that point."

"The thing is, my lord... I'm due to follow you soon. I've seen my own angel."

"But then who's going to take care of Esmerelda, eh? What about the company?"

"Lord Abimellick, please listen! I can only stay here on earth and marry your niece and save the company if God allows me to do so. First I must speak to an angel and get a review of my case. Can you put me in touch with an angel, please?"

"Angels? They're a pretty uncooperative lot, but I'll see what I can do..."

"Please, it's very urgent, my lord!"

There was silence for several seconds.

"Lord Abimellick?"

"Still here, Joel. I'll try this one..."

"Have you got an angel there? Please tell him I must speak to him urgently!"

Silence again.

"My lord, are you there?... Hello?"

Joel looked up and saw the room suddenly brighten all around him.

He stood up so abruptly that his chair fell over behind him. He was not mistaken. The drawing-room was expanding its dimensions, stone columns were appearing out of nowhere, the heavenly scent and the organ music were intoxicating his nose and his ears, and a shaft of light was materialising before him.

"This time, this time...!", Joel repeated to himself, and clenched his fists with determination.

The column of light began to take on the contours of a giant, winged humanoid figure in tints of white and gold.

At the same time a faint humming sound became perceptible behind Joel's back. It rapidly grew much louder and increased in pitch. It soared up the musical scale and ended with a deafening *bang!* The vision shook as if it had been hit by an earthquake and immediately began to fade away.

"No!", he shouted, and tried to run forward into what he thought was a wide open space in the nave of the hallucinatory church. He collided with the table and crashed to the floor.

When he had recovered his senses, he saw that he was back in Madame Guiragossian's drawing-room. She too was lying on the floor, apparently senseless, though Joel did not know whether he had accidentally knocked her over or whether she had fallen by herself.

There was a confused sound of urgent voices behind him, and a flickering light. He looked around. The curtains near the door were on fire, and the three young men were tearing at them. As he watched they managed to pull them down and smother the burning material on the floor. As they trampled the smouldering curtains with their booted feet the cause of the fire was revealed behind them: one of the paranormal researchers' boxes of electronics had exploded, and was emitting an evil-smelling smoke.

The door burst open and in rushed the young woman and young gentleman whose private family drama Joel had witnessed earlier in the hall. Ignoring the researchers and Joel, they ran to Madame Guiragossian and helped her up onto her seat. The old woman looked dazed, but was regaining consciousness.

"Grandmother!", cried the young woman, "have you finished with this foolishness? Don't you know it's sinful to talk with evil spirits?"

Joel stood up shakily and took a step towards them. "There were no evil spirits", he said. "I was talking to an angel of the Lord God himself. In heaven."

The young woman gave Joel a distrustful glance and returned her attention to her grandmother. "Is it true?", she demanded angrily. "Was there an angel here?"

The young gentleman joined in the questioning, but on his face was an expression of wonder. "Did you see an angel, Madame Guiragossian?"

The old lady looked at one and then the other, before saying, in her usual foreign accent, "Yes, I saw an angel."

"What did it say?"

Guiragossian's face slowly hardened until it had become an expression of hatred. "The angel gave me twenty-nine days!"

The young man looked puzzled. "What do you mean? Twenty-nine days to do what?"

The young woman stared at him. "Don't be a bloody fool, Frank."

Guiragossian's eyes found Joel's, and she pointed a bony finger in his direction. "He came here for a consultation", she hissed, "and thanks to his consultation I've been put on the death list!"

The young woman and her gentleman friend likewise turned to give Joel an unfriendly stare.

"I...", stammered Joel, "very nice meeting you. I hope I'll see you again soon..." He turned away and hurried to the door.

On the threshold, he stopped to glare in his turn at the paranormal researchers. Only Herbie Myers dared to look at him. "Sorry about that, old man", he muttered. "Slight overload of the Van Der Graaf Generator."

Joel opened his mouth, but immediately realised that threats of legal action against the Society would be futile. He closed his mouth again without speaking and left the room.

On the landing he ran straight into the butler. "Vanych, I need to leave, now!"

Vanych gave him a disapproving stare. "There is no train back to the city until six o'clock in the morning."

"I don't care. I'll wait on the station platform all night if necessary."

"The cab will be ready for you presently, sir", Vanych sighed, and accompanied Joel downstairs.

~ 12 ~

"Only four days to go!", Rebecca said, her eyes shining. The evening sunlight filtered through the leaves at the bottom of the Steinbrook garden, and in that soft illumination the luxuriant spring shrubs and flowers framed her face very prettily. "What's your cabin number?"

"C-20."

"I'm on C-deck too, cabin 62. So we won't have far to go to visit each other. We can pretend we met on the voyage, and you can take me in to dinner on your arm. We'll walk down the grand staircase together with royalty and millionaires, and into the glittering dining saloon, everybody dressed in their finest, while the orchestra plays the *Blue Danbury* waltz... Joel, is something wrong?"

"Wrong? Why? How could anything be wrong?"

"You look... I don't know. Thoughtful."

"I'm sorry, Darling. I was just thinking... about Lord Abimellick."

"Yes, wasn't it wonderful how he slipped away! No fuss, no bother, nobody even noticed the exact moment. I'm afraid your theory about an angel coming to collect him was wrong. At least, if an angel was there, it was invisible to us mortals. I'm sure his lordship saw it well enough. But never mind about that now. Don't you want to hear my good

news?"

"What's that, Darling?"

"I'm rich! I didn't tell his lordship about us running away together. I just said how much I dreamed of an ocean voyage on the *Tritonic*. And – would you believe it? – his lordship instructed his butler to give me all the money I needed for a ticket to Hesperica and back, and extra money to spend when I got there!"

"What will you do with two tickets?"

"Joel, don't be silly! Of course I didn't actually buy two tickets. So now we've got almost a thousand pounds more than we need. We can use it to set up our new life in Hesperica!"

"That's wonderful... well done... very clever..."

Rebecca gave him a puzzled glance, but then continued in the same bright tone as before, "Where do you think we should go?"

Joel looked at her blankly for a moment, but then said, "Well, the ship arrives in New Hudson... I suppose if we don't want to stay there we could try going north to Bostonica, or south to Floridiana... New Hudson's a big city, though. There must be plenty of opportunities..."

"You're an architect, Joel. If you set up in business in New Hudson, we're bound to come into contact with your father's company sooner or later. Then there'll be difficulties. No, I've got a better idea. I want to go west. I want to cross the entire continent of Hesperica and travel all the way to San Californio!"

"We can go on the railroad", Joel mused. "With your extra money we can travel anywhere we want."

"Freedom!", she gushed. And quickly added, "Thanks to the grace of God!"

"Freedom...", he nodded, but avoided her eyes, and seemed to be more interested in watching a beetle crawl across the pathway towards a flower bed.

"What is it, Joel? You don't sound convinced." She gave him a concerned look.

"Nothing... There may be problems, that's all."

"We can face them together! Won't that be exciting?"

He gave her a pained look. How could he tell her that the sort of problem he had in mind was precisely the only problem in the world in which the grace of God would inevitably destroy any and all plans for the future? But before he could find the words to begin to tell her what was on his mind, he heard footsteps coming up the garden path, and

turned his head to see who it was.

The black butler's coat and balding head of Wibbles emerged from between the bushes. "I am sorry to intrude on you, sir, but your father's carriage has just returned. You asked me to..."

Joel nodded. "Yes, of course. Is the cab ready for Rebecca?"

"It is, sir."

Joel turned to Rebecca. "I'm sorry, Darling, it's time for you to go. Wibbles will show you out through the back gate."

They kissed and looked into each other's eyes for a long moment. Rebecca whispered, "The next time we meet, it'll be on board ship for Hesperica!" Then she put on her hat. There was a swirl of her long dress, and in a moment she was gone.

And I'll only have four days left to live, Joel thought desperately, and cursed himself for not having found the words to tell her.

~ 13 ~

"They say Lord Abimellick departed this life very peacefully", Joel said. He was standing in the doorway to his bedroom, lolling against one of the doorposts and watching while Wibbles packed his things in his travelling chest.

"If you say so, sir", was the dry response.

"I do say so. His lordship showed so much dignity and piety that the moment of his death passed without anybody even noticing."

The butler paused in his work, gave Joel a serious look and spoke in a secretive tone, "It's done by poison, sir."

"Poison?"

"His reverence would have given it to him. Or he might have brought it himself. They do, you know, sir. To avoid disappointment."

"But he had no need for poison! The angel appeared to him four weeks previously. He knew his time was up."

"No, sir; the other way around. First he decided that his time was up. That caused him to have the hallucinatory experience of meeting an angel. Haven't you noticed that all the accounts of meeting an angel occur in the early hours of the morning, while it's still dark?"

"No, I hadn't."

"They do. Take it from me, sir. While the mind is still in a dreaming state. At its most impressionable... will you be taking your second best evening dress suit, sir?"

"No, I won't be needing that one. But remember to pack my full collection of ties... Wibbles, supposing you heard that someone you knew had seen their angel, been given twenty-nine days... what would you say to that person?"

"I would advise that person to rest, maybe take a change of scenery. An ocean voyage might do the trick very well indeed, sir. The fresh sea breeze would blow the cobwebs of old-time religion out of their mind in no time at all. It would do them the world of good." Wibbles gave Joel a firm glance before returning to his work, and Joel couldn't help wondering whether his own disturbed mood over recent weeks might have led the butler to guess more than Joel would have liked.

"An ocean voyage, yes... but – dash it all! – mightn't that be a tiny bit dangerous? Supposing the ship were to sink? The premonition of death might come true after all."

"If it did, it would be pure coincidence, sir. But ships don't sink very often nowadays. I think you can be confident that the *Tritonic* will cross the Western Ocean safely. They do say the vessel is practically unsinkable."

"So do you believe there are people who saw an angel but didn't die?"

"My grandfather, sir. He saw angels on numerous occasions, particularly after a long night at the local hostelry. The combination of religion, alcoholic beverages and family guilt left him in constant anticipation of his imminent recall to his maker."

"How did he die?"

"He promised to attend a family reunion to celebrate my father's fiftieth birthday. On his way there, in his usual inebriated state, he wandered into the road, was run over by a carriage and had his ribs crushed. He died within ten minutes of the accident."

"I see. What about people who die without any angel giving them forewarning?"

"That is the universal lot of mankind, sir."

"But maybe they do see an angel, but decide not to tell anybody about it, because to them it's a private matter, not to be shared?"

"In that case, sir, how would anyone ever know?... Your cases are all ready, sir. Shall I have them loaded up and sent on to Southharbour?"

"Yes, please do so... an ocean voyage, you say?"

"Clears the cobwebs away, sir."

Joel nodded and stood aside for the boys to come in and fetch his cases out.

~ 14 ~

Joel walked up the liner's gangway in the bright sunshine of a beautiful spring Tuesday morning. His overnight stay in a modest hotel had been comfortable. His breakfast had been delicious, and the phrasing of the letter he had to write before leaving had flowed easily from his thoughts to the page. The cab ride from the hotel to the docks had proceeded smoothly, with less in the way of hold-ups and fewer ruts in the road than he had any right to expect. Yet he felt oppressed by the conflict in his mind: on the one hand, a sense of impending disaster; on the other, Wibbles's cheerful optimism and refreshing sea breezes.

A ship's officer stood before him, smiling politely. He was a young man, about the same age as Joel, with a boyish wisp of moustache on his upper lip and a welcoming manner. Joel presented his ticket. The officer tore away a stub from the ticket, returned the remainder to Joel, pointed him in the direction of his cabin and advised him that the ship would sail at twelve noon precisely.

The corridors on C-deck smelled of fresh paint. Joel found cabin C-20 and mechanically checked the bed, the small bathroom, the regulation vase of flowers on the chest of drawers, his cases piled up together in one corner, the view from the porthole. All the furniture and fittings looked brand new and ready for the voyage. Everything was as it should be, and yet not as it should be.

This was the twenty-fifth day of his warning period. The twenty-ninth day would therefore come four days hence, while the ship was in mid-ocean. Supposing the warning to be genuine: how might he die? Might he fall overboard, or slip on a wet deck and crack his head open on a sharp corner? Or might he take poison?

Nonsense! He did not possess any poison, and it was extremely unlikely that any such was to be found on the liner. Nor would he want to take poison even if he had any. And he had been careful to avoid the temptation to help himself to his father's revolver a second time.

Joel wanted to live. He wanted to start a new life with Rebecca on the far side of the Western Ocean, far away from his domineering father and old Abimellick's irritating nieces.

And far away from the nocturnal vision of an angel which still oppressed his memory with its otherworldly realism.

There was a knock at the door. It opened, and Joel gave a start.

“Everything all right, sir?”, said the white-coated steward. “Anything I can get you?”

Joel looked at him. He was a young man, probably no older than seventeen. “Is this your first trip to sea?”, he asked.

The steward laughed easily. “Not a bit of it, sir. This’ll be my twenty-fifth crossing. My first on the *Tritonic*, though I served six months on her sister ship the *Neptunic*. How about you, sir?”

“Come in, will you? And close the door behind you.”

The steward did so.

“Sit down.” Joel pointed to the small chair next to his bed. The steward took the unusual request in his stride.

Joel walked over to the porthole, looked out, looked back into the cabin and met the steward’s gaze. “What would you do”, he asked finally, “if you had seen your angel and been given twenty-nine days to get your earthly affairs in order?”

The steward nodded to himself; the movement of his head was hardly perceptible but Joel noticed it even so. “I would follow instructions, sir. Finish my voyage, say goodbye to my nearest and dearest, and on the appointed day I’d sit in a church and wait for God to do his will with me. We’re such small, ignorant creatures”, he added, “and God has to know what’s best for us.”

Joel paced the length of the cabin without looking at the steward, then met his gaze once again. “What if you were unable to finish your voyage? What if your twenty-ninth day came when you were in the middle of the ocean?”

“Beg pardon, sir, but you’re not the first.”

“What?!”

“Your day of reckoning comes on the fifth day of the crossing. Am I right, sir?”

The conflict in Joel’s mind resolved itself. Wibbles’s fresh sea breezes vanished, swallowed up in the deathly embrace of an ocean of dark, cold water.

“Who else?”, Joel whispered hoarsely.

The steward lowered his voice. “Dozens of ’em, sir. Mostly third class, some second. A lot of the crew, too. Stokers, engineers. You’re the first first-class passenger that’s said anything, to my knowledge. But there are dozens more, hundreds in third class, with that haunted look on their faces, even if they won’t say anything. Don’t want to frighten their families, even though the families know the same thing. Only the little children are talking about angels. The husbands and wives are lying to one another for appearances’ sake.”

"Dash it all! But what about...?", he gestured at the steward.

"I've not seen no angel, sir."

"That means you'll escape in a lifeboat... most of the steerage will drown."

"Not enough lifeboats for everybody, sir. Not much use for them, even if there were. Not that far out in the ocean, not with storms and such. It'll take a while before another ship passes by and spots us. Maybe this new-fangled wireless telegraphy will be some help, maybe not."

"And most of the first class will survive?"

"That's the way of it, sir, at that kind of time. I'm sorry to hear you won't be among us. Maybe it means you'll sacrifice your life helping someone else into a lifeboat? Beg pardon, sir, but if Almighty God's spoken to you, that does rather limit your options."

"Rebecca...", Joel muttered.

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Nothing. Thank you, er... what's your name?"

"Saul, sir."

"Thank you, Saul. You've been extremely helpful. I think that what happens in four days time will all be for the best."

The steward stood up. "I'll let you know if I hear of anyone else in first class, sir."

"Thank you, Saul. I'd like to know that."

After the steward had closed the cabin door behind him, Joel stood there for a long while, thinking. In his mind's eye he was standing on deck in semi-darkness while a cruel wind laced with salt spray howled through the ship's rigging. The deck was slanting at a crazy angle: the ship was about to founder and it was hard to keep his footing. He was helping Rebecca into the last available place on the last lifeboat.

Joel, I won't leave you!, she would say, and protest against stepping into the lifeboat.

You go on ahead, he would reply, gently pressing her over the side of the ship into the boat. Saul would be there, standing in the overcrowded boat, his white jacket bright against a background of dull red lifebelts, and he would reach out and help her across. *There are still plenty of boats on the other side*, Joel would be saying. *I'll catch up with you in the morning, I promise! I love you!*

Then there would be one last wave of her hand as her lifeboat was cranked down the ship's side to the heaving black water, one last kiss blown into the gale, and she would be gone.

And Joel would saunter into the smoking room, hands in his pockets, easily keeping his balance despite the lurching of the ship's bow deeper and deeper towards watery oblivion. He would look around at the other gentlemen – all dressed immaculately in top hat, white bow tie and tails – gallant gentlemen who, like him, had played the hero with the help of a little white lie in order to get their loved ones away to safety. The *Tritonic's* orchestra would be there too, playing the melancholy *Dream of Autumn*, while the ship's hull made ominous groaning and creaking noises all around them. *Well, gentlemen!*, Joel would say as he clinked brandy glasses with each one of them in turn. *Now we're really going on a long journey!*

~ 15 ~

He found Rebecca on the portside boat deck, between the second and third of the four giant funnels. She was leaning on the rail and looking now up at the seagulls wheeling around the tops of the ship's masts, now down at the people milling around on the dockside forty feet below. A gentle breeze ruffled the ostrich feathers in her new hat.

He slid his arm around her waist. "We're free!", he whispered. "Free from Father, free from stultifying social conventions!"

She gave him a skeptical look. "Did you send the letter?"

"Er... I thought it would be better to send it from New Hudson."

"You mean you didn't send it?"

"Not yet, no."

"You said you'd break off the engagement before we left Albion."

"No, listen, Darling, it's much better this way. If I break it off with Esmerelda now, they'll know I've run away with you. That could have bad repercussions for your family. When we get to New Hudson, I'll write and say I've fallen in love with an American. I'll break off the engagement then. That'll confuse them."

"So that means you're still engaged to Lady Esmerelda?" She aimed a slap at the hand resting on her waist. "Unhand me, sir!", she said in a shocked voice. "Whatever will people think? – and you a gentleman engaged to be married!"

"But..."

"Don't you know what gossips they are? One wrong move, and the story will be all over the ship!"

"Come on, Darling, nobody's watching us!"

"No, they're not", she agreed in a more serious tone. "They're watching the crew. There's some delay. We should have undocked by now."

Joel turned his attention away from her and looked forward and aft. The tugs were waiting idly at both bow and stern, sitting dead in the water. Seamen were standing by the mooring lines awaiting orders to cast off, but for some reason those orders were slow in coming. Black smoke was pouring from the funnel-tops high above them, giving the air a sooty smell, but the giant engines far below their feet were obviously not turning.

"Gentlemen, please!", came the sound of a voice behind Joel. He looked around, as did a number of others waiting at the railing. It was one of the ship's officers, the young one with the wispy moustache. "All gentlemen, please come to the smoking room!", the officer called. "All the gentlemen! Captain's orders!"

Joel shrugged. "I'd better go", he said.

"Don't be long", Rebecca urged him.

He followed the other men past the third funnel and through the first-class entrance to the smoking room.

As he arrived he saw the captain, white-bearded and with cap and cuffs larded with gold braid, climb onto a chair at one end of the room. There were a few minutes of shuffling and chattering as the remaining first-class men were ushered inside. Some were already seated in armchairs smelling of fresh leather, others were standing behind them. The officer who had rounded them up gave the captain a wave and a thumbs-up sign.

"Gentlemen", said the captain. His voice carried easily over the crowd, and Joel could well believe that he had begun his long career in the age of sail, could well imagine him barking orders in a storm. "I'm sorry to say I have some bad news for you. As you know, the *Tritonic* is a new ship. Sometimes a new ship has technical problems when her machinery has not yet had time to settle down into full working order. So it is now. The chief engineer has reported to me that a surge of high-pressure steam in the engine room has caused a number of valves to break. These valves are critical to the operation of the engines, and we must therefore delay our sailing. It is expected that repairs will be completed within one week."

"Captain!", called back one of the gentlemen, "do you know anything about these rumours we've been hearing?"

"I don't know of any rumours."

“People have been seeing angels!”, another gentleman shouted. “From what I’ve heard, half the ship’s company will be taken to heaven mid-voyage!”

“That may or may not be so”, the captain replied sternly. “I don’t know of any such rumours, and I don’t run my ship on rumours. We’re not concerned with matters of religion here. We’ve got a transoceanic service to run. As I said, there are broken valves in the engine room. These make any suggestion of a mishap in the next few days completely academic. Any passengers who wish to continue their voyage with us will be welcome to re-embark next Tuesday. Any passengers who wish to cancel their booking will of course receive a full refund. That is all.”

He climbed down off the chair, and Joel exchanged blank looks with the faces nearest him.

As he went outside on deck again, Joel suddenly had to raise his hands to his ears to protect them from a great blast of noise as the exhaust valves on the funnels opened to blow off the now unwanted steam.

~ 16 ~

“You knew, didn’t you”, Rebecca said. There was an accusing tone in her voice.

She was looking at him across the table in the tea shop where they had met up after returning to their separate hotels and rebooking for another seven nights. They had left most of their baggage on board ship, taking only what they needed while they waited for repairs to the *Tritonic’s* engines to be completed.

For a moment Joel pretended that he did not understand what she meant. Then he realised that he knew exactly what she was hinting at, and that she knew he knew.

He did not need to answer. His face said it all.

“When did you see your angel?”, Rebecca asked.

Joel nodded, took a sip of tea and put the cup down. It rattled on the saucer; he did not seem to be able to hold his hand steady. “Today is my twenty-fifth day”, he whispered at last. “My time will be up...”

“Halfway through the voyage”, she finished for him. “I’ve heard what people are saying. The ship’s supposed to sink on Saturday, a thousand miles from land. Half the passengers and crew will drown. The rumours reached the company office; the company ordered the captain not to sail. God may take the people, but God said nothing about the

ship, and the company don't want to lose their newest liner."

"I'm very sorry", was all Joel could think of to say. "I know I should have told you, Darling, but..."

"I know. Because you love me, and all that." She smiled at him. "I knew the truth before we even arrived in Southharbour. Wibbles told me you'd been behaving strangely the last few weeks, especially when there was any mention of his lordship's death. That confirmed my suspicions."

"If you never want to speak to me again..."

She reached forward and covered his hand with her own. Joel tried to look at her face, but his eyes were filled with penitent tears and he did not see her clearly.

"We've got three more days together", she said. "Three days to live out all our dreams for the future. And all of Southharbour to do it in. But only if you write that letter first!"

Joel nodded and began to laugh through his tears. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the letter he had written that morning to his father, breaking off his engagement with Lady Esmerelda.

"That's better", Rebecca said after having cast an eye over its contents. "Our dreams begin with a visit to the post office!"

~ 17 ~

They spent Wednesday simply walking around Southharbour, viewing the city and the docks together. Joel explained features of civic architecture while Rebecca pretended to be interested.

The day after, they took a cruise on a coastal steamer and visited an offshore island. On arrival, Joel insisted that they go to inspect a restored galleon from the age of the first voyages to Hesperica, even though that left no time for them to take a tour of the famous beauty spot that Rebecca had long dreamed of seeing.

On Friday they toured the forest outside the city. Rebecca wanted to include a visit to a local wildlife sanctuary but Joel was more interested in a medieval castle, so they went to the castle. They both agreed that Rebecca would have all the time in the world for beauty spots and wildlife after he was gone.

Evening by evening, they lingered later and later before separating to go to their hotel rooms. It was only on their very last evening together that they plucked up the courage to

defy both social convention and house rules and slip past the receptionist together to spend the night in the same room and the same bed, and only then that Joel learned that heaven on earth was real.

On Saturday morning they managed to slip out of the hotel together without attracting awkward questions, and went to have breakfast in the tea shop. Joel's elation from the night before was ebbing, and all Rebecca's caresses and cheerfulness were unable to break his sense of impending doom.

"I don't want to leave this. I don't want to leave *you!*", he explained.

"I don't, either", she tried to comfort him. "But just think of the wonder of it. We're going to heaven, Joel! By the grace of God! You today, me... some other time. Won't that be even better than our time here together?"

Joel shook his head. "The shipping company did what they could, but God won't be moved. Now he'll hunt us down like dogs!"

"Joel, you mustn't say that! It's disrespectful. How can we know why God does what he does? How can we understand divine wisdom?"

"Do you think everybody will die at the exact times they were supposed to when the ship went down? Or will God pick us off at random during the day?"

"I don't know... Surely God must have known in advance that the company would cancel the sailing?... Let's go for a walk, Joel. Let's walk around the town and watch the people for one last time, and think of what they'll be doing after we've gone!"

Lost in gloomy thoughts as he was, Joel allowed her to take his hand and lead him out into the street. By unspoken agreement they ambled casually in the direction of the docks.

By mid-day they were back at the *Tritonic*. The giant ship looked deserted and the gangways had been removed to prevent access.

"There's nobody on board", Joel decided, gazing up at the massive wall of riveted black steel. "Not even to make repairs. I reckon the company won't allow anybody on board until they're sure the danger period's over."

"Maybe in future nobody will be allowed to travel unless they've signed a solemn oath that God won't be coming for them during the journey!", Rebecca laughed.

"That would be a triumph of business sense over religious piety. Times are changing."

They turned away from the great ship and wandered further along the pier.

There was a great deal of activity around some of the other ships, and plenty to see. Goods were being loaded and unloaded by cranes, wagons were being driven to and fro,

passengers for one of the smaller liners were presenting their tickets to the purser's men before being ushered on board. Here and there Joel and Rebecca found that they had to make their way through quite a crowd of people.

They came across a group of men manhandling crates into a net that was attached by line to a crane jib. One of the men paused to wipe his brow, noticed the young couple walking by and made a gesture in their direction and a no doubt disrespectful comment to his partner.

The other man, distracted by the jibe, laughed and accidentally dropped his end of the box. It fell to the ground with a sudden *bang!*

At that moment an empty goods wagon pulled by two horses was passing close by. Frightened by the noise, the horses bolted. The wagon jerked forwards and hit a sailor who had been walking a little too close.

As Joel and Rebecca watched in horror, the sailor fell to the ground with a cry. Before the driver could get his horses under control, one of the heavy iron-rimmed wheels had rolled over the man's head with a sickening crunch.

The sailor's cap rolled across the cobblestones and came to rest at Joel's feet. On the front of the cap he saw a familiar company badge and below it the inscription: *R.M.S. TRITONIC.*

"It's beginning", he said. He took Rebecca's arm and hurried her away.

~ 18 ~

They spent the afternoon in a state of restless agitation. Neither felt like eating lunch, neither wanted to return to their hotel room or seek out amusement in the city centre. Although they did not for the time being witness any more deaths, they did at one time hear screaming in the distance. Neither felt any inclination to investigate more closely.

When Joel suggested that Rebecca should say her final farewell and leave him to face his last moments alone, she pulled him close to her and vowed to stay with him all the way till the end.

"If you like we could find a church and pray", she suggested.

After all that he had seen and heard of meekness and submission to God's will from Lord Abimellick and others, Joel thought this was a pretty spineless suggestion, almost on a par with deliberately ending the waiting by taking poison. But he could see that Rebecca

was highly agitated on his account. So he agreed that a church would be their best option, more to calm her nerves than for his own sake. A little way outside the docks they discovered a suitable house of worship. There were a scattering of people inside, including some church wardens who were rearranging the hymnbooks and replacing burned-out candles, but nobody paid Joel and Rebecca any attention.

They walked down one side of the church and sat down in a pew near the front. They had not waited long before Rebecca nudged Joel and pointed across to the other side.

Joel recognised the captain of the *Tritonic* immediately, sitting in a pew just as they were. He was in uniform, his cap resting on the shelf in front of him, and his lips were moving soundlessly, though his eyes were closed.

"Of course the captain must go down with his ship", Joel whispered.

They sat like that for the rest of the afternoon. Joel watched the wardens for a while. He observed the careful manner in which they inserted a sheet of paper, no doubt containing the order of service, into each hymnbook at a particular page, and then neatly placed the Book of Common Prayer on the hymnbook and the two together on the tops of the pews at regular distances. A woman with a shawl over her head came in with a box of fresh candles and the wardens turned their attention to the wooden chandeliers. The daylight slowly faded. The church wardens finished their tasks and disappeared. Occasional voices were heard, and once there were distant shouts from the street. When all was quiet Joel heard a faint scrabbling sound and saw a mouse appear from beneath the altar, sniff at the air, dash across the floor and disappear into the vestry. Then all was still again.

"I'm bored", Joel whispered at last.

"Look!", Rebecca nudged him. "Something's happening to the captain."

Joel followed her gaze and noticed that the captain was breathing heavily as if in pain. Suddenly the old sea dog stood up and started shaking and coughing. As he collapsed heavily onto the flagstone floor, a priest and another man hurried to his side.

"I'll call for a doctor", the man offered.

The priest laid a restraining hand on his arm and shook his head. "His time has come", he said. "God's will be done."

They both bowed their heads in silent prayer, accompanied by noises of choking, retching and uncontrollable farting from the captain. After a while his feeble struggle for life came to an end. The priest crossed himself.

"I've had enough", Joel muttered.

Rebecca nodded. They stood up, went outside and by unspoken agreement walked slowly back in the direction of the docks.

As they wandered aimlessly along, Joel asked, "If the captain already knew his time was up, why did the company wait till the last minute before cancelling the sailing?"

Rebecca smiled. After a moment she replied, "Not everybody wants to tell the world. Some people prefer to keep it private."

Joel nodded. "Oh, I see. He must have been planning to take poison as soon as his day came, so as to save the ship. Or maybe jump overboard, or blow his brains out with a revolver. It was only when the stewards were welcoming people on board, and the crew were taking their places, that everybody suddenly began to realise..."

They walked on. After a while Joel noticed that the dull evening light was being added to by an unnatural reddish glow. He suddenly heard shouts in the distance, and then the clanging of bells.

They walked faster. Turning the last corner together they saw the cause of the commotion: one of the large warehouses on the pierside was on fire. As they watched, flames were leaping out of the ground-floor windows and a great pall of black smoke was collecting over the doomed building.

Joel looked closer and was horrified to see faces at one of the upper-floor windows.

"It's full of emigrants!", he heard a voice say behind him, and turned to see a woman addressing a man in fireman's uniform. A few yards behind him the fire engine was stopped, its crew unrolling hoses and attaching them to a water hydrant. "The ship was damaged and all the steerage passengers had to be put up in temporary lodgings while it was being repaired! The fire started on the ground floor, and there are hundreds of people trapped above!"

As if drawn by an invisible force, Joel and Rebecca went closer to the burning building. They walked holding hands and with a mesmerised expression on their faces.

"This is God's will", Rebecca said. "There's nothing anybody can do."

"Maybe not all of them are destined to die tonight?"

"You're right! How can we know who's destined to die and who to live? Maybe it's God's will that some of them can be saved? The ones who would have made it to the lifeboats? Oh, look – there are some people trying to get out! The firemen haven't seen them yet! There's a pile of boxes in the way! Come on, Joel – we've got to help them!"

Rebecca gave Joel's hand a tug. When he proved unwilling to go closer to the fire, she

let go and darted forward by herself.

“Wait, it’s dangerous!”, he shouted after her, and suddenly realised that she must know she would not die tonight. She could therefore take risks which would be fatal to him. Or could one subvert God’s plan for one’s life by taking irresponsible risks, or even by deliberately committing suicide?

He saw her pulling at a pile of wooden boxes that were blocking a ground-floor doorway. They were too heavy for her; she would need help. He glimpsed the hands of people trapped inside hammering helplessly against a window in the door that would not open. If Rebecca was not able to free the door quickly, they would be roasted. He ran towards her.

A great gout of flame leaped out of the side of the building just above the door, and a section of wall began to collapse. A wave of heat struck him and it quickly became hard to breathe. He dimly saw a heavy beam detach itself from the burning wall. It smashed into the boxes, and Joel watched in horror as Rebecca fell to the ground under a pile of debris.

He reached her only moments later. She appeared to be unconscious. Shouting incoherently, dimly aware of the heat and the smoke, Joel pulled at her body, but it would not budge.

Somehow there were other people around him. He glimpsed firemen’s uniforms. They were pushing, pulling, taking charge. He reeled back and found himself being dragged away by one of the men. Moments later he was out of the danger zone, and Rebecca was lying on the hard cobblestones in front of him.

He shouted her name and bent down over her. Her hair was dishevelled, and there was a hideous red gash on her forehead.

Her eyes fluttered open.

“Rebecca, you’re alive!”

“Joel, I’m sorry... I should have told you... I thought you’d be taken first...”

Her expression froze, her eyes glazed over and her head lolled lifelessly to the side.

“What have you done?”, Joel shouted at her. “It wasn’t meant to be like this. You were supposed to go to Hesperica...”

A woman in nurse’s uniform appeared, knelt down beside him and inspected the body. She turned to Joel. “Do you know the name of the deceased?”, she asked.

“Rebecca Moon.”

The nurse pulled out a luggage label and a pencil, wrote the name on the label and

tied it to Rebecca's clothing. She got up and left without giving Joel another look, and he saw her go only a short distance before stopping at another inert human form lying prostrate on the ground.

~ 19 ~

Joel did not remember what he did after that. Long hours he wandered the pier, seeing neither the ships, nor the people who were still working into the night, nor the smouldering ruin of the warehouse when he went near it, nor the rows of bodies neatly laid out for the coroner to inspect in the morning, nor the firemen winding up their hoses, smoking and joking with one another.

Nothing made sense any more. He had been destined to die, and yet his love had been taken instead! Or had she received a visit from an angel as well? Was that the meaning of her last words? *She thought I'd be taken first... so she must always have known she would die today as well, but she thought she could keep it from me so as not to poison my last moments on earth?*

Certainly it was well known that many people concealed the fact that they had been visited, whether from a desire to keep such a personal matter private, or from the desperate belief that the angel would turn out to have been a mere hallucination or a bad dream, and that God was not about to rip them out of their familiar life. This was especially the case where the patient was young and healthy. If he had found it impossible to confess to Rebecca that their relationship must be broken forever in mid-ocean – for who could say what their relationship in heaven might be, or even if they would meet again there at all? – why should she not have found it equally impossible to admit exactly the same thing to him?

The difference being that Rebecca was a far better actor than he had been. He had worn his shock at his angel's visitation on his face for all to see for the past four weeks, while she had kept the truth to herself out of a combination of pious belief that all God did was for the best, and womanly concern not to trouble other people with her own problems.

A recollection flashed into Joel's mind of the way she had dashed forward to help the trapped emigrants. *Of course! She wanted to end the waiting for both of us; she thought we could die together helping them to escape! She thought that when she ran forward, I would be sure to follow. In that instant she forgot that I thought she had a charmed life and I didn't! And so I hesitated, I let her down, I let her die and held back for fear... she meant for that falling beam to hit both of us at the*

same instant and take us both to heaven together!

Joel's eyes filled with tears and he walked carelessly, bumping into people and objects, inviting with his erratic steps every passing wagon to roll him over and break his neck, to give him the same *coup de grâce* that had been dealt out to that sailor from the *Tritonic* earlier that day. The pier was erratically lit: jaundiced patches of electric light alternated with puddles of darkness. But the people were thinner on the ground and kept to the well-lit areas, while the wagons were few and far between at that late hour. All he earned was the occasional curse.

A clock began to chime, and the realisation that it was so late sent a shudder down Joel's spine. He stood still and focused his attention on the strokes of the bell, but a loud rattle of machinery from a nearby building made him lose count. Surely there had been twelve chimes? Or were there only eleven? Twelve o'clock would mean that he had lived out the full twenty-four hours of his twenty-ninth day – the day which divine law and custom decreed that nobody on earth could survive.

But if he lived? What if God neglected his promise to end Joel's life this Saturday? What if the Creator's divine appetite had been sated when he took Rebecca in his place? Or what if Wibbles was right and all religion was nothing but dreams and superstitions? A life without Rebecca was unthinkable. There could be only one answer. But he could not face Wibbles again. Surely Southharbour must possess some dive, some low tavern, some disreputable chemist's shop whose owner would be willing to sell Joel a small glass phial containing some viscous, sickly sweet liquid which would finish in a couple of heartbeats the work that God himself had given up on?

And yet, and yet... What would Wibbles have said? He would surely have advised Joel to continue with the voyage. Get on that ship, face the current of bracing sea air pouring past, take deep breaths and thank – not God, but some vague notion of Fortune – that he was still alive. In Joel's imagination the butler's advice took on wings. Take brisk walks along the promenade deck! Sober up in the salt spray as the bow cut into the waves! Eat bacon and eggs for breakfast and beef and pudding for dinner! Get into conversations with complete strangers! Have violent disagreements with your social betters! Ogle the ladies! Enjoy a scandalous dalliance with a young countess or a millionaire's daughter! Get drunk and have to be carried to your cabin by the stewards while the other passengers watched and tut-tutted! You're alive – so get out there and play your innings as if you were certain of a century!

And here he was wandering the darkened streets in despair? What sort of a way to behave was that?!

There and then Joel came to a decision: he would defy God and live! He would honour Rebecca's love and her heroic death by living on as best he could. Why should he resign himself to follow her into an unknown heaven, into the undiscovered country, into the final embrace of religion? He was wanted in Hesperica. Maybe the lie he had been planning would come true: that he would meet an American lady and fall in love with her and marry her. Life was here to be lived! Right here and now he would return to his hotel room as if nothing had happened and go to bed. There would be just two more days to wait, and on Tuesday he would go back on board the *Tritonic* and sail to Hesperica as planned.

He turned away from the docks and into the main street leading towards his lodgings, hoping still to find a cab at this late hour, but prepared to walk all the way if necessary.

The street was quiet. There was just one gentleman coming towards him on his side of the street, but the closer he approached, the more Joel slowed his pace.

At first he thought it was an apparition. He had been thinking about Wibbles, and here on the street in front of him, the face under his bowler hat illuminated in the pale yellow light of a street lantern, was the very person he had imagined giving him such good advice.

It was no apparition. Wibbles recognised Joel at the same instant.

"Master Joel...", the butler began in an urgent tone.

Joel did not wait, but turned and bolted.

As he ran back in the direction of the docks, he silently cursed his own stupidity. Of course Father would have received his letter breaking off the engagement on Thursday at the latest, and it would be a wonder if he had not heard by Friday the news that the *Tritonic* had been delayed. He would immediately have known that his prodigal son was stranded in Southharbour, just waiting to be dragged back to the Steinbrook mansion in disgrace and called to account for his insolence.

The question was, how many men had he sent with Wibbles to hunt him down?

If only Rebecca had not been so particular about observing social propriety!

He slackened his pace, winded. Wibbles was no longer in sight, and there were no signs that he was being followed. He continued to walk briskly along the pierside, dodging late-night workmen and wondering where he could find another lodging that would put him up for three nights, no questions asked.

In the distance he heard chimes again, and another chill ran down his spine.

After two, he knew for certain that he had misheard the clock an hour before. That must have been eleven o'clock. Now, on the twelfth ring of the bell, this time it really would be twelve o'clock midnight. If he could only live until that twelfth chime, he would finally be released from the spell of the angel. He would have earned his forgiveness from God and his freedom to begin his life again!

How difficult could it be to stay alive for another ten seconds?

There the chimes went... six... seven... eight... nine... ten...

He heard a loud *crack!* followed by an urgent shout of warning, and looked up.

Without paying much attention to his surroundings, he had come to another patch of lamplight where the dockers were working late into the night. A small cargo ship was being loaded. Crates were being hoisted into the hold with cranes. One of those cranes had taken more strain than it could bear. A rusty steel cable had split. Suddenly released from a tension of twenty tons per square inch, the loose end of the broken cable whipped out from the side of the ship and across the pier.

On the eleventh stroke of the bell, at precisely one second before midnight on his twenty-ninth day, the jagged end of the split cable flashed across Joel and neatly severed his head from his shoulders.

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He felt that he was falling into a fathomless void. Splinters of light sparkled and swirled around him, creating an impression of great speed, but whether they were stars, or sparks, or the random spasms of his own dying brain, Joel could not tell.

He did not know how long the fall lasted. Of one fact he was conscious: that he had only counted eleven chimes of the clock when he had half-glimpsed, half-felt a flicker of movement that had snatched his breath away, and a twelfth chime just as the pierside, the dockers, the lamplight and the cargo ship had all seemed to rush away from him down a long, dark, narrow funnel.

The fall came to an end, but he felt no sensation of landing. Rather the sense of uncontrolled vertical movement seemed to fade away of its own accord while his new surroundings were fading in.

He saw limestone columns, a floor of coloured tiles, a shaft of rainbow light falling slantwise from a stained-glass window. He was back in the Church of Saint Abadonna.

He heard the slam of a door behind him and whirled around. A heavy oak door with black iron studs stood shut, and next to it...

The angel smiled. "We meet again, Joel Steinbrook. Welcome to your Day of Judgement!" The voice was the same deep, authoritative tone that Joel remembered from their previous meeting, twenty-nine days ago.

"Let me go back, please! I've got a life to live... I'm a graduate of Auxford!"

"As we speak, your head is rolling across the cobblestones of the pier like a football into the mouth of a goal. Your body is still pumping fountains of blood out of your open neck. Even Auxford would have no more use for such carrion than to transfix it to a bench with sharp needles in a room smelling of ether and apply the dissecting scalpel in the name of science. But that does not concern you any more. You, Joel Steinbrook, now have a new examination to face. I wonder how you will fare this time?"

Joel gazed at him in dismay as he realised what the angel meant. Faces paraded through his memory, leaving the sour taste of guilt in their wake: the Reverend Rehoboam, Tenzin Rimposhay, Madame Guiragossian, Wibbles... Joel swallowed nervously. "I tried to defy God. I tried to go on living."

"Didn't you listen to Reverend Rehoboam's sermons? The Lord knoweth when you sit down and when you rise up, he discerneth your thoughts from afar even before a word is on your tongue. He hath written your name in a book – but will it be the book of life, or the book of the lake of eternal fire? This way, please!" The angel indicated that he should step out into the long nave of the cathedral.

"Will God be angry with me?"

"He will if you keep him waiting!"

"But according to you he already knows that."

"He does. But you don't. Yet." The angel put his hand on Joel's shoulder and gave him a none too gentle shove forward.

When Joel stepped out of the relatively secluded alcove he had been standing in, he saw for the first time the true extent of his surroundings.

The nave in his vicinity was of supernatural dimensions. Along its length a vast number of side chapels were admitting newly deceased people, each one ushered into the throng by the angel who had just closed the door on their earthly life. A constant stream of people were shuffling slowly up the nave in one direction, their voices and footfalls audible over the ever-pervasive organ music. Somewhere, a baby was crying. From time to time Joel

heard a burst of shouting or a scream as some new arrival to the afterworld realised the finality of their situation and protested against it. The rebel was quickly brought to order by the angels, a number of whom were standing guard along the sides of the procession.

The aisle between the pews was wide enough for a dozen people to walk abreast. But the pews themselves were not empty, for Joel saw that church wardens were at work between them, carefully inserting a sheet of paper into each hymnbook at a particular page, and then neatly placing the Book of Common Prayer on the hymnbook and the two together on the tops of the pews at regular distances.

Suddenly a young man in an officer's uniform walking close to Joel's own position tried to make a run for it, against the flow of the crowd. What he thought he might gain was not clear: the nave in the direction from which people were coming continued for so great a distance that its end, if there was one, was too far away to distinguish. But the officer's intention was quickly frustrated when a pair of angels supervising the procession spotted his dash for freedom, darted out into the crowd with drawn swords and crossed them in front of him to block his way. A third angel seized him roughly by the scruff of the neck and dragged him, sobbing and pleading, back in the prescribed direction, towards the east end of the nave – the altar end.

As they passed by, the man's wild eyes briefly met Joel's. The youthful face with its scrawny moustache looked familiar, and Joel realised with a shudder that it was the officer of the *Tritonic* who had welcomed him on board four days ago, had taken his ticket and pointed him the way to his cabin. He must have arrived in the afterlife about the same time as Joel, or even a little later. Perhaps he had been supposed to survive for a while in the water after the ship had gone down before eventually succumbing to the cold early on the morning after the disaster.

Joel was given no option but to join the congregation, shuffling forward under the watchful eyes of the angelic guards. He began to take in the situation at the east end of the nave towards which he was headed. The roof of the church, already several times higher than its prototype – or perhaps its copy? – in the Church of Saint Abadonna in Chrome, rose in stages towards the east until it, together with the increasingly luminous stained-glass windows on either side, merged into a kaleidoscopic sky. The floor, too, rose step by step to form a vast, shallow staircase leading towards a distant throne in place of an altar. Joel tried to focus his eyes on the being sitting on that throne, but the strength of the light coming from that region made his eyes water, and he could not distinguish whether or not it

possessed human form.

Some members of the public evidently found that prospect intimidating, for they began attempting to back out of the procession into the side pews. But the angels were quickly on hand to push and prod them back into the onward flow. As they did so, one of them cried out in a loud voice, "Forward, you sinful dogs! The Most High, the Almighty Eternal Father judges his people, and his wisdom and justice are never short of perfection. Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of lords and the King of kings. Those who have bathed in the blood of the Lamb are welcomed into heaven with open arms. But those who have rejected him will be rejected in their turn!"

"What sort of justice is it to kill all these young people in the prime of their lives?", Joel shouted at the nearest angel. "What about that young ship's officer there? Someone's run over by a wagon; others are burned or suffocated or battered to death with falling debris. Dash it all! – there are women and children and even babes in arms. Do you call that wisdom?"

The angel matched his pace with Joel's. "Would you question your Creator?"

"Yes, I would, actually. How can God be allowed to go around killing people whenever he likes? It's ludicrous!"

"Allowed? By whom?" The angel allowed itself an ironic smile. "Who would have the power to teach God what to do, when God is the highest authority that ever existed, that exists now, or that can ever exist in the future?"

Joel glanced at the church wardens working among the pews. Something about them troubled him, though he could not have said what it was. He faced the angel again. "If the highest authority is a murderous tyrant, I may not be able to do anything about it. But I don't have to submit and bow down and worship it either!"

"So you claim to be a greater authority than the One who created you?"

Again Joel paused with a thoughtful look on his face. A memory of an old man with twinkling eyes came to him. He asked, "Why should I believe he created me? Who then created God?"

"Why should you not believe?", the angel replied.

"Because...", Joel smiled, "because all sentient beings are one. Because all share in the universal faculties of reason and perception, compassion and suffering."

The angel laughed coldly. "I think you've been listening to a certain Tenzin Rimposhay from the east. Yes, we know all about him. His turn will come to stand before the judgement

seat of his maker, just like yours.” The angel gestured towards their destination, and Joel looked more carefully in that direction.

Shepherded by the ever-present angels, the flood of deceased humanity approaching the throne narrowed until those reaching the throne itself were in single file. Each person stood for just a moment at the throne itself before continuing their journey. But from that point on the stream split into two, some passing to the left of the throne, a larger number to the right. On the left – thus the right hand of the being on the throne – their way continued upwards and towards another source of bright illumination that was golden-white in colour, into which they seemed to be absorbed, though one could not make it out clearly. On the other side, the left hand from the point of view of the throne, the stream of pilgrims was lost to sight after taking a downward turn into a red luminescence. The black silhouettes of the people going that way were outlined for a moment against the subterranean glow before being lost to sight.

“Is Rebecca here?”, he asked suddenly.

“All who have died must pass through the house of the Lord”, the angel replied.

“I want to see her.”

“The Lord will separate father from son, brother from sister, husband from wife. One will be left behind and one will be taken.”

Joel glanced at the angel and guessed that the expression on its face was one of indifference rather than prohibition. He began to hurry forward, overtaking other people, searching for Rebecca’s face in the crowd. As he had guessed, so long as he continued moving forward, the angel made no move to stop him. After a while he began to call her name.

“Rebecca!”, he called desperately, unable to see her anywhere. “Rebecca!”

He knew he was getting close when the clothes and faces around him recalled to mind the third-class passengers who had died in the warehouse fire. Then one of the people ahead of him glanced back and Joel recognised his lover. But Rebecca immediately looked away, lowered her head and tried to hurry away from him.

Joel dashed forward in pursuit and finally caught hold of her hand. The look in her eyes when she turned her head was one which he had never seen before. Was that shame he saw, or fear?

Joel smiled weakly. “Rebecca, you’re safe!”

“No I’m not. I’m dead... and so are you!”

“Yes, I know, but apart from that...”

He studied her face. There was a faint scar over her forehead, as if the gash that had killed her had healed over the course of a few years, but otherwise no sign of how she had died. As they walked on, carried forward by the flow of the crowd, Joel raised his hand and brushed her hair tenderly with his fingertips.

She turned her face away. “Joel, I...”

“Don’t worry, Darling. We’re together again. That’s all that matters.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! Some people want to keep their death a private matter – that’s what you said, isn’t it?”

Rebecca allowed herself a shy glance at Joel. “When you confessed, I know I should have told you too. But I was too proud...”

“I know.” Joel squeezed her hand. “Because you love me, and all that.”

Rebecca smiled for a moment, then frowned. “What happened to you? There’s a scar all around your...”

She put her hand to Joel’s neck. Joel did the same and felt a band of rough skin. He took Rebecca’s hand and gave it a brief kiss.

“A little accident on the pierside. It was very quick... Please don’t worry about anything. I’ve forgiven you now, and you’ve forgiven me. And we’re here together in the afterlife and everything’s going to be wonderful. Isn’t it? Maybe they even have Hesperica in heaven?”

Again that apologetic, even fearful look in Rebecca’s eyes.

“What’s the matter, Darling?”

She pressed close to Joel and whispered, “I don’t believe any more.”

“What, in God? But he’s there, right in front of us!”

They glanced forward, but it was like looking directly into a searchlight and they had to lower their eyes again.

“I didn’t believe even when I was alive. Not sincerely. It was just habit. Then when the angel came... afterwards I told myself it wasn’t really true, because I valued my life too much. I thought that God would somehow forget, or wasn’t serious, or would let both of us off when he saw how much we loved each other.”

Joel frowned. “I was rather hoping your belief would be enough to see both of us through.”

"It was the fire that brought it home to me, Joel. Look at these poor people! What kind of monster burns babies?"

"I know. We just have to believe that it's all for the best."

"Do *you* believe that it's for the best?"

"I thought you could believe it for me!"

"Not any longer. I don't believe in the grace of God any more, Joel. I've tried, I've tried – but I just can't!"

"Then we're both in a spot of trouble..."

They looked from side to side at the crowd of people shuffling forward around them, the shepherding angels, the church wardens working harder than ever among the pews.

At that moment a woman in a headscarf, who was apparently working the crowd, approached them and held out her box of candles.

"Buy a candle for Saint Abadonna?", she asked. "One shilling to light a candle, and all your sins will be forgiven?"

"Of course we will", Rebecca replied. "Joel, we're being given a second chance! Do you have a shilling? You must have a shilling!"

"Yes, of course...", he muttered, and started searching his pockets. One after another, he found they were empty.

"Better hurry up", said the woman with the candles. "I can't wait forever." She turned to somebody else.

"Yes, we'll buy one", Rebecca assured her, and tugged at her sleeve. "Will one be enough for both of us, or do we need two? We're together, you see... We'll find your shilling very soon. – Joel, please hurry!"

"If you ain't got no shilling, it's too late", the woman replied severely.

"Please don't go! Joel, you must have a shilling somewhere, please!"

"I haven't got a...", Joel began, and then suddenly realised. "Why should I need a blasted shilling? It doesn't make sense...! You're not real", he decided. "None of this is real."

"Joel, please!", Rebecca urged him.

"The church, the people, the angels... they're all just our imagination, just like Wibbles said! Nothing here's real, Rebecca, we're dreaming! Why are there people putting out hymnbooks on the pews? It's just a memory – it's nonsense! Open your eyes and wake up, wake up!"

"But I am awake. We're in the afterlife, and we have to face..."

They both looked forward in the direction the crowd was moving. The throne was now less than one hundred yards away and shining more brightly than ever as they approached it.

“Don’t you see that’s ludicrous!”, Joel cried out. “First God kills a whole lot of people cruelly and unjustly. Then he thinks he can browbeat us with his infinite goodness by shining bright lights in our eyes! God isn’t real; we’re making all this up in our own minds!”

“But if God didn’t create us, then who did?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a different God. Not this one!”

“But he’s a *good* God! He’s saving us from damnation!”

“A damnation which he threatened us with in the first place! Can’t you see it’s all a big power play? He thinks he can keep us under his thumb even after we’re dead! This isn’t God – this is a sham!”

“Joel, watch out!”

Her warning alerted him to the fact that a pair of angels had entered the stream of people a short way behind them and were approaching with stern looks on their faces.

“No talking in front of the throne of the Most High!”, shouted one of the angels.

“Atheism in the house of the Lord is not permitted!”, the other snarled. “The punishment for blasphemy is death!”

One of the angels put a heavy hand on Joel’s shoulder, the other did the same to Rebecca, with the obvious intention of splitting them up. At the same time, Joel flung his arms around Rebecca’s shoulders and brought his face close to hers. “Rebecca, listen to me! Open your eyes! It’s just a dream!”

“My eyes are open!”

“Open your eyes and wake up!”

Her face had a frightened look. She met his gaze open-mouthed. The angels were pulling roughly at them from both sides.

“Hold on tight, open your eyes and wake up!”

The force on his shoulders became irresistible and Rebecca was ripped from his embrace.

“Rebecca...!”

“Joel, don’t leave me!”

He glimpsed her being swallowed up in the crowd, dragged away by the angel. The last he saw of her was her staring eyes.

The iron grip on his own shoulders did not relent, and he was forced to the side of the aisle.

“You’re just a dream”, he told the angel, and did his best to stare right through it. “This is a dream and I want to wake up *now!*”

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The struggle with the angel faded away. Joel sensed that he was in a different place. There was a moment’s giddy confusion. He tried to focus his eyes, and suddenly found himself blinking in bright sunshine.

When his eyes had adapted he saw that he was standing on a lonely beach that curved away from him around a wide bay. On his left, to landward, the sand was raised up into a field of dunes with occasional tussocks of grass. Ahead of him a row of distant cliffs extended out to sea to form one arm of the bay, and when he glanced behind him he saw that a matching set of cliffs made the other arm. On his right, the powdery yellow sand that he was standing on met a broad strip of dark brown sand that would be saturated with water. Gentle waves washed up against the beach, and the sea beyond was bright and blue and sparkled where it reflected the sun’s rays.

The air was filled with the fresh smell and the rhythmic sound of the sea. Otherwise the scene held a profound quietness. No ships were visible out to the horizon and no clouds drifted in the sky. The beach appeared to be completely deserted apart from Joel himself.

He noticed a mewing of distant birds. Looking around, he spotted a flock of large white seagulls gliding out to sea together. They held a steady course to seawards, and he did not see them turn back towards the land.

When he looked at the sea, Joel too felt a strange attraction towards it, as if he sensed dirt on his body and needed to wash it away with a refreshing swim. Yet at the same time the raw saltiness in the air, the brightness of the light and the depth of blue in the colour of the sea impressed upon him an element of danger. In any case, for the present he wanted to work out what was happening to him, and to find out whether Rebecca had made it out of the Church of Saint Abadonna. He chose a direction along the beach and began to walk.

He could not have said how long he walked. Time seemed to be on holiday. All he knew was that his body had not become tired and the sun had not noticeably changed its position when he saw that there was another person on the beach up ahead.

He approached, and – oh joy! – it was Rebecca, sitting on the beach and looking out to sea.

She turned to look at him and spoke first. “Joel, if this is a dream, how do I know you’re real?”

“You made it, Darling! We’re safe, together at last!”

“Not if you’re only a figment of my imagination.”

“It’s not a dream any more. We woke up. Remember?”

“Then where are we?”

Joel looked around at the scene, then back at her and shrugged.

“You don’t know”, Rebecca said firmly. “I don’t know either. I think we’re still dreaming – or at any rate, I am.”

Joel sat down beside her. “Then let’s make it a nice dream... Wait a minute! – This could be Hesperica!”

“So where are the people?”

Joel looked around. “Hiding behind the dunes? Maybe New Hudson’s only a mile or two away?”

“We’d be seeing ships. Or somebody would be out here enjoying the beach. Joel, doesn’t it feel to you like it’s not anywhere on earth? Doesn’t your body feel different? Doesn’t time itself feel different? Like a dream? Like it did back in that horrible church?”

“I don’t think it feels quite like that.”

Rebecca thought for a while. “You’re right. It feels nicer here, more invigorating. More real in some way. But it’s still not Hesperica!”

Joel shook his head. “No, it’s not earth at all. Hesperica will have to find some other hopeful couple who want to go out west.”

“All the way to San Californio!”

“On the transcontinental railroad!”

“Defying their parents!”

“To be with the one they love!”

“I wonder what happened to my thousand pounds that his lordship gave me?”

“I wonder how Jared will feel when he finds he’s become the heir to the company?”

“And has to marry his lordship’s nieces!”

They laughed together.

For a while they simply sat side by side and enjoyed being together. After a while

Rebecca asked, "If that was all a dream, back there in the church, does it mean that God really doesn't exist? – But he must, because he predicted our deaths."

Joel nodded slowly. "I think God is a being...", he began, thought a bit more and continued, "a being who has a lot of power, but not so much as he claims. Like an emperor or dictator who commands armies but in the end is as human as you or me."

"How can God be just a human?"

Joel shook his head. "That's not what I meant. Of course God has to be a sort of spiritual being like we imagine angels or devils, or like one of Professor Sigmoid's psychological complexes. Yes! – not an Oedipus complex, but a God complex. A purely mental personality. He wants to control people, so he preys on them... while they pray to him. Maybe he can't really predict the future, but he can still secretly manipulate events enough to make it look like he can. And he can still make us have bad dreams, even after we die."

"All those people he sends to hell will have bad dreams. But what about the ones who go to heaven? Won't they have wonderful dreams?"

"Maybe. I suppose if they're submissive enough. If they don't try to think for themselves or decide for themselves how they want to spend their lives. Or their afterlives. Do you know, I spoke to Lord Abimellick after his death." She gave him a puzzled look and he continued, "It was through a medium, Madame Guiragossian. I think it was his lordship – it sounded just like him."

"What did he say?"

"He said he was in heaven building the New Jerusalem, but it wasn't as nice as he had hoped. The angels were not very friendly, and he couldn't get his favourite tobacco."

Rebecca laughed. "That sounds just like him... surely it's better than being in hell?"

"Madame Guiragossian thought that most of the people she contacted were in a state of limbo. Still waiting to be judged."

"But we saw people being judged. Didn't we?"

"That was just our dream. Maybe other people have different dreams?"

They were both silent for a while.

"No", said Rebecca after she had given it some thought. "I want to believe that God is good. Like I did when I was alive, on earth. Think how merciful he is to let us know the day of our death."

Joel gave her a questioning look. "Are you starting to believe again?"

Rebecca shook her head. "If only we could all be like Lord Abimellick then it would go smoothly for everyone, don't you think?"

"Maybe we could all be like Abimellick if we'd had such a successful life that we were going to get a state funeral in Blestminster Abbey."

"I thought I was being submissive to God's will, but..."

"You've got the right word there: submissive", Joel replied. "If you're an absolute dictator, there are only two sorts of people in your country: those who obey you, and those who rebel. The rebels end up in the torture chambers. Think how hell is described in the holy book. Think how obsessive it is about dividing people up into sheep and goats."

"But how could the creator of the universe tolerate rebels?"

Joel smiled. "Why not? How much creation has a bit of rebellion in it, rebellion against the old ways of doing things? Anyway, we're both rebels. Would you rather be a sheep? I wouldn't."

Rebecca nodded slowly. "I suppose I've completely blown my chances by now."

Joel clasped her hand. "And is it really being merciful to tell us the day of our death? If you're old and suffering from some illness, then of course it is. But what if you're young, and you think you've got a great future in front of you? You don't have any idea what heaven really means, so even if you do submit you're still having to give up everything you know and everybody you love with no idea of what's going to replace them. Apart from vague promises that could mean anything."

"Apparently, what heaven really means is a dreamy beach in the middle of nowhere."

"Yes", Joel agreed, and looked around. "With nothing much to do for all eternity. Unless we want to explore. I wonder what's really behind those dunes?"

"At least we can go for a swim."

Joel frowned. "No. Maybe later." He stood up and offered her his hand. "Let's explore!"

She took it, and he pulled her to her feet.

"This way!", Joel said, and led her up the sloping beach. As they went higher their feet sank inches into the soft carpet of sand.

At the top of the incline they arrived at the dunes and found themselves looking out over a monotonous landscape. An undulating patchwork of bare mounds of sand interspersed with clumps of stiff-bladed marram grass extended to a distant horizon, unrelieved by any signs of human or animal habitation.

Joel sniffed the air. "I think New Hudson must be... in *this* direction", he announced, and set out into the wilderness. After a moment he stopped and turned around. "Come on!"

Rebecca remained standing there. "Joel, what are you thinking of? There's nothing there."

"There may be whole universes of wonders over the horizon. What else is there to do but go and find them?"

"I'm not coming with you."

"Rebecca..." He walked back to where she was waiting at the edge of the dune field. "We're in this together. We're in heaven together."

"It's the wrong way. Can't you feel it? Can't you feel the sea calling to you?"

"No, I can't, and I think it's pretty stupid if you think that!"

"Who are you calling me stupid?"

He took hold of her hand and tried to pull her towards the dunes, but she resisted. "Look, Rebecca, it might be dangerous to go near the sea. The tide might come in and trap us, or there might be crocodiles, or jellyfish, or something."

"Don't speak to me like that!" She wrenched her hand out of his grasp, turned away and started walking down the incline, back towards the beach. After a moment's hesitation, Joel followed her.

"Rebecca, don't!", he called. "It might be dangerous."

She looked back at him, smiled, and then continued walking downwards. Joel hesitated, glanced behind him at the dunes, then turned back towards Rebecca and hurried after her.

When he caught up with her she was already sitting down and removing her shoes and stockings. She looked up at him. Again that sly smile.

Joel opened his mouth to protest, but found nothing to say.

"Are you ready?", she asked him.

"Rebecca, I'm sorry I shouted at you back there..."

"Take your shoes off."

He hesitated, but then obeyed.

"Joel, just smell the smell of the sea! Don't you feel there might be something refreshing in the water?"

"Yes, maybe... I don't know."

"Let's find out!"

"If we have to... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said it like that."

"It's all forgiven, Joel... All forgiven."

They shared a long mutual gaze before they kissed. They then stood up and started to walk towards the sea together, hand clasped in hand. For a while, the sand was dry and powdery under their bare feet. Then they crossed onto the wet sand that was firm and rippled and criss-crossed with little runnels of water. The closer they approached the sea, the more slowly they walked. They stopped when they came to the edge of the water.

"There's something strange about the sea", Rebecca said. "As if it's not real water." She suddenly smiled. "Listen to it!", she urged Joel.

Now they were up close, the sea no longer sounded exactly like an ocean of water, but more like an ocean of voices, some whispering, some speaking, some shouting, some chanting, and in all possible languages, past, present and future. No longer did it look exactly like water, but more like a sea of faces in constant motion, each individual face only glimpsed for an instant before changing or being swallowed up by the others.

Rebecca took a few steps forward until the smallest ripples washed over her bare feet. She bent down, scooped up a handful of water, sniffed at it and tested it with the tip of her tongue.

"It's sweet", she said. When she looked up at Joel again her eyes were shining. "It's all right. We belong here. We're coming home."

Joel looked doubtful. "Do you think so? I don't want to escape drowning on earth only to be drowned after death."

"I don't think it'll be like that at all. I think this is what I meant by God all my life. We have to enter God and allow ourselves to be dissolved back into the ocean of spirit from which we came."

"What do you mean, from which we came?"

"Where do you think Joel Steinbrook came from? Or Rebecca Moon? Not their bodies. I mean, the tiny spark of consciousness that lived inside each of them, the thing that turned their sensations from being just rows of atoms bouncing against one another into real feelings. Real pain and pleasure."

"Is that where we came from? So why does it look like the sea from a distance?"

"Maybe it's because we're looking at something we don't understand, and our minds are making of it what they can? And because it's something like an ocean, that's the best symbol our minds can come up with, and that's what we see." She stood up and returned to

his side. "So let's go!"

"I don't want to go yet. Rebecca, I..."

"I know. But our lives are over. If we try to cling to them, it'll be wrong. It'll be like those dunes, just a dry, empty desert that goes on forever. It's time to go, Joel. We've got to go now."

"But when we've gone, I won't be Joel any more. I'll be... I don't know... somebody else!"

"And I won't be Rebecca any more. We'll be... everybody! Everybody who ever lived or ever will live! Life moves on, Joel. Even in death, life moves on. Especially in death!"

"Can't we stay here a little bit longer?"

"Joel..."

She kissed him. For a long while they looked into each other's eyes. Then Joel nodded.

She held out her hand and he took it.

They started walking into the sea.

As they took their first steps in the water they found it was not cold at all, but strangely welcoming. After a while it came up to their ankles, then their knees. They continued walking, but more slowly as the waves flowing around their legs impeded their progress.

Joel looked at Rebecca only to find that he was looking back at his own face. Yet it was Rebecca's face too. He was sharing her feelings and perceptions, and she was sharing his.

And there were other perceptions in there too, other faces, other lives, becoming clearer moment by moment, lives they had never known yet lives which they instantly recognised and greeted as family.

Joel and Rebecca pulled each other forward, and the sensation of the sandy bottom under their feet disappeared as their feet and legs dissolved into the liquid flow. But they no longer felt concerned about that, for as the water closed over their heads it was no longer water, but an ocean of faces, of memories, of feelings, of hopes, of ideas, of experiences, of people long dead and people one day to be born, of stories once told and stories yet to be told, all more vivid, real and tangible than any experience that one individual person could have by themselves on earth. They found themselves swimming through an ocean of universal mind, universal experience, universal feeling, universal consciousness. If it could be called God, it was not the traditional God of tribal superstition, war, intolerance, judgement, blood sacrifice and obsessive worship, but rather a God of understanding,

compassion, enlightenment and peace, a God for the pure and the impure, the obedient and the rebel, the saint and the sinner, the believer and the skeptic.

Thus Joel and Rebecca consummated their reunion with the everlasting spring from which consciousness eternally flows and into which it eternally returns.

Stephen Livesey Ashworth, Oxford, UK
sa@astronist.co.uk / www.astronist.co.uk