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The Magus

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Prologue

The dreamer knew with utmost certainty that she was in Hell. It did not look like anything in particular, but instead was full of darkness and shadows. Outlines of objects appeared and disappeared with rapidity. There was no form: everything was insubstantial. But there was one thing that convinced the dreamer that this was Hell specifically, and not some other nameless dimension. It was the overpowering feeling of Dread. It was the kind of apprehension that one feels in the midst of a nightmare. Yet the dreamer somehow knew that in this place the dread was eternal. Even if it were possible to leave this place, the dreamer would still be here waiting until one returned. It conveyed a sense of isolation, loneliness, or being cut-off from something. But most of all it conveyed a sense of utter hopelessness. "Lasciate ogni speranza, voi chi entrata," said the poet: Abandon all hope ye who enter here. Yet what the dreamer experienced was nothing like that described by Dante. His *Inferno* was more of a satire on everything that was wrong with fourteenth century Italy, than it was a theological work. Hell, for him, was therefore full of Italians. Generally these were corrupt politicians, noblemen and churchmen who would have been public figures in Dante's time. The sinners of other nations were not encountered except rarely. Presumably foreigners were allowed to sleep-in from weeping and gnashing their teeth the day that Dante paid his visit. This Hell, however, was entirely different. The dreamer imagined that there were people here. She even thought she occasionally saw glimpses of figures or movement. She thought she could hear sounds of anguish - but there was no particular identifiable sound. Presently, though, the scene changed into something definite: a scene which looked like something out of a hellfire-and-brimstone preacher's sermon. It was a large cavern, in the middle of which there was a circular illuminated area. Outside of this, the rest of the cavern was in shadow. This time however the dreamer could definitely detect the presence of individuals: countless numbers cowering wretchedly in the darkness. And yes, the sound of moaning and wailing was quite distinct now. The vision had lost its insubstantial nature, and now seemed to be playing out like some kind of movie. The dreamer was not feeling quite so frightened now. She was still aware of the Dread which permeated the place, but she was able to feel quite detached from it. She was crouching in the darkness, observing what was going on. This suited her as it struck her as being a good place to hide. The dreamer looked into the illuminated circle and saw a throne. Upon the throne was the figure of a man dressed in a long black robe with a cowl that covered his head. Apart from the hands and feet, the dreamer could not see anything else of who might be concealed within the black material. "That's odd," the dreamer thought, "that's not what Satan normally looks like." Had she been possessed of the power of lucid dreaming, this realisation would have triggered a new degree of clarity and control for her. As it was, the thought passed out of her mind, leaving her in the peculiar state of ignorance that commonly affects otherwise intelligent people when dreaming. Suddenly, the figure on the throne stirred to life, rising from his seated posture. The dreamer's attention was fixed upon him to see what he would do. In a loud voice, the figure began chanting something. The dreamer did not recognise the language, but the effect was tremendous. It was as if the very words became objects of power - fluid, transparent, yet becoming visible in the way that

distorted and refracted the light which passed through them. At first amorphous and random, regularity soon appeared in their behaviours. They were pulsing with a definite periodicity. Each new word of this unholy chant created a new something in the air. At first irregular, as they came into proximity with the shapes that had already been created they started to vibrate and pulse in sympathy with them.

The dreamer, crouched in the shadows amongst a crowd of wretched shades, had the impression that these distortions of light were warping the fabric of that place, attracting some kind of energy from an unknown dimension. A second later, the dreamer, with a shock, discerned what the conglomeration was becoming: somehow it was a living being.

Shapeless - translucent - visible yet invisible - but very much alive. The diabolical chanting of the hooded figure itself was giving birth to some Creature which defied all known laws of nature.

The figure's chanting now ceased. He thrust his arms forward and upward. The Creature started moving: it changed shape into something like a tentacle, and stretched upward in the direction indicated by the hooded figure. One end stayed anchored in front of the figure, the other extended upwards and into the darkness.

Nothing seemed to happen for a moment: but then the dreamer realised that she could hear a faint sound gradually growing louder. It was a man screaming in terror.

The screams increased presently until the other end of the tentacle re-appeared, arcing back on itself. It grasped the body of a naked man who was thrashing about and moaning in anguish. The dreamer could not see his face properly: she guessed he might be middle-aged with pale skin, although in her dreaming state these details did not occur to her as being important. The tentacle held the naked man so that he floated in mid-air, in front of the hooded figure.

The figure now turned his hands round so the palms faced each other. He began a new chant - its words as unintelligible to the dreamer as those of the previous one. A point of light appeared in the air between the figure's hands. It grew in size and volume, so that the dreamer could see that it was a flame. It increased in size further still, so that at length it was a large ball of flame, floating in the air. Suddenly the figure stepped forward and thrust his hands at the man dangling in mid-air. The ball of flame became a stream and shot straight at him, engulfing him.

The man cried out in agony. At this the wailing of the lost souls cowering in the darkness increased in volume and urgency - so much so that the dreamer was startled. There was no respite for the man trapped in the fiery stream. The flame continued in intensity. The dreamer could see the victim's flesh being charred right off his bones -

The dreamer had the sudden conviction that she should escape. She felt sure that she was witnessing something that she ought not to, and that she herself could be in danger.

She crept backwards, keeping her gaze on the hooded figure. However he seemed intent on incinerating the man in front of him. She straightened up, turned round, and abandoning any pretence of dignity, ran in terror.

The wailing figures in the shadows were transfixed by what was going on in the illuminated circle. With each moment new notes of despair entered their moans, like a discordant symphony. The dreamer pushed some of them out of the way, and tried to make her way forward. However she came almost immediately to another group who obstructed her. She seemed to be surrounded by a sea of hellish denizens, pressing in on her.

A hand grabbed her arm. "This way," a voice said. The hand pulled her free of the crowd of shades. She found herself running with a figure whose appearance she could not make out. They ran clear of the shades, but soon found themselves in front of a solid wall, with no discernible escape route.

"Back yourself against the wall," said the voice. It was a male voice which she did not recognise, though she sensed it was not that of the hooded figure. She turned round to face him her back pressed

against the wall. Even now looking directly at him she could not make out his features: he appeared only as a silhouette.

"You must leave. It is not yet safe for you here."

"I can't!" cried the dreamer. "I don't know how!"

"This is all a dream and you are dreaming," said the Silhouette. "You are at home asleep in your bed. The wall you are pressed up against is in reality your own mattress..."

The dreamer felt the wall behind her - but instead of solid stone, it was indeed soft and springy like a mattress. The Silhouette, the cavern, the shades - all the images she saw started to dissolve in blackness. The sound of the wails and screams faded away...

She was at home in her own bed. At first she was still gripped by the terror that had engulfed her on her trip to Hell. At length though, she willed herself to open her eyes. It was indeed her own bedroom: the first rays of the morning sun were beginning to creep through cracks in the curtains, picking out the features that she knew so well. It would soon be time for her to get up and go to work.

Her mind went over the images she had just seen - yet already they were fading from her memory. Something to do with Hell, she thought. Something that didn't feel very pleasant at any rate.

How strange it was that dreams can seem so vivid at the time, yet seem to fade from memory so quickly! At least that was what the erstwhile-dreamer now thought, for she knew of no other reality. And a good thing too, she mused to herself, because I don't want to be bothered by all this whilst I am awake.

Just to make sure, she had the idea of pinching herself. But then she decided against it, as she had her carefully manicured nails which she did not want to damage. Instead, she gently pressed one of her nails into the palm of her hand: it felt exactly as she thought it would feel. Yes, she was awake alright. She lay still and brooded, waiting for her alarm to go off.

"... and bowing His head, He gave up the spirit."

The sound of several hundred people kneeling down came from the television set. There was the silence throughout the house, as the congregation at the Good Friday service which was being televised, paused in prayer, joining with other Christians in similar services throughout the country and indeed the whole world. It was the tradition since time immemorial, to kneel in silence for a moment, during the reading from the Gospel of the death of Jesus Christ.

It was at this precise moment that the front door crashed down, and half a dozen baton-wielding policemen charged in. They rushed through the house according to a drill rehearsed many times since learning at Hendon: they were rushing to ascertain the whereabouts of exactly who might be in the premises, and to prevent a serious crime which they believed might be in progress.

"Sarge - ground floor room, front of house - white IC1 male, appears to be unconscious."

"Get the paramedics in here. Smith, Evans take the first floor."

"Kitchen clear. Ground floor room, rear of house, clear."

"Sarge - upstairs bathroom clear."

"Sarge - upstairs bedroom clear."

"Check if there's loft-space!"

Two paramedics, in their green uniforms, entered the front door: the Police Sergeant, who had been directing the operation from the front hall way, motioned them to the room for which one of his constables had reported the occupant - the same room in which the television was situated.

"Loft space clear. The whole first floor is clear, Sarge."

The Sergeant moved towards the back of the house, briefly peaking in the living room where the paramedics and the first constable were. There was also a young man slumped in an armchair, over which the paramedics were bending: their faces registered concern. The Sergeant did not pause but moved into the kitchen, past a second constable, and went to the back-door. He noted that it was bolted shut. Taking care not to disturb any possible fingerprints, he took a small rod from out of his pocket and manipulated the bolt so it was pulled back. He then opened the door and went out into the back-yard. It was plain concrete, except for weeds which were growing up through cracks. Nowhere to hide.

Another constable was climbing into the yard from over the back wall. He dropped down, and walked towards the Sergeant.

"Report?" said the Sergeant.

"Men stationed in the alley-way and the next road, but we haven't seen anyone or anything moving," said the Constable.

The Sergeant spoke into his radio. "Peters, Williamson. Start checking the neighbouring houses." He turned to the Constable. "Get the area taped off."

"Right Sarge." The constable turned to go. "Anything in the house?" He asked.

"One unconscious male, that's it."

The constable frowned. "I thought this was supposed to be a murder scene!"

"We'll let the SOCOs figure out what happened here," replied the Sergeant, meaning the Scene-Of-Crime-Officers. He dismissed the constable, and walked back into the house. Passing back through the kitchen, he now made his way to the living room where the house's only occupant had been

discovered.

~~As he walked in, the look on the Paramedic's face gave away the bad news even before he spoke.~~
"Dead, I'm afraid. Nothing we could do. I think he had already gone before we had got here."

"How long do you reckon?"

"Not long, probably within the last half-hour."

"Damn!" The Sergeant thought, if only they had got there sooner. He took a good look at the body - a young man, aged no more than 30, dressed casually in t-shirt and jeans. He was slumped in an armchair. His face was contorted in what seemed like pain. The Sergeant shuddered and looked away.

"Let us pray, dear friends, for the holy Church of God throughout the world, that God the almighty Father guide it and gather it together so that we may worship him in peace and tranquillity."

The Sergeant turned and saw that the television was on. The reading of the Passion from the Gospel of Saint John was now over, and the Service had moved onto the General Intercessions. However the Sergeant, who had not been a regular churchgoer since childhood, did not actually appreciate the details of the Good Friday service.

"Let's all get out and let the SOCOs take over." At this the Paramedics and the first constable followed the sergeant out of the living room and out of the front-door. Another uniformed officer was stationed at the gate - left behind as a rear-guard after the main body had stormed the house. Although his role had been to prevent anyone escaping out of the house behind the team that went in, he was now engaged in politely fending off a crowd of onlookers that had gathered. The Sergeant started giving orders into his radio, and awaited the arrival of the white suited Scene Of Crime Officers.

Several hours later, Detective Inspector Tobias Croft, of the Homicide Specialist Crime Directorate of the Metropolitan Police - otherwise known as the Murder Squad - was sitting in his office at the Norman Shaw (North) building with two police colleagues.

The first was his partner - Detective Sergeant Nichola Peterson.

The second was Dr Benjamin Watt, a forensic medical examiner who had just completed an autopsy on the body found by the uniformed officers earlier that afternoon.

Croft, a middle-aged man of about fifty, was staring in incomprehension at the pathologist.

"What do you mean - 'he died of natural causes?'"

"I am sorry Inspector," the pathologist said, "but whoever claimed your man in Fulham was being attacked and murdered was either lying or mistaken. There is no evidence of foul-play whatsoever."

Croft briefly exchanged glances with his assistant Peterson. She was a young-looking woman in her early thirties, with fine features. She always dressed with impeccable good-taste, and even a little glamour. She made quite a contrast with Croft, who generally came to work in an old single-breasted suit. Peterson spoke up.

"I've already got the transcript of the call from the 999 operators."

"We'll go over it in a moment," said Croft. "So, anyway, what did this guy die of if he wasn't murdered?"

The pathologist took a pair of spectacles from his pocket and put them on, and looked through a file he was holding. "Acute Intracerebral haemorrhage of the temporal lobe," he read.

"Which in English is...?"

"A stroke - and quite a bad one. Death would have been almost instantaneous." The pathologist removed his glasses and fidgeted with them distractedly.

"A stroke! I thought he was only a young guy!" Croft said. He turned to Peterson. "Who was he exactly?"

"Peter Matthew Kenner, aged 30," Peterson read from her notebook. "That was his own place we found him in."

"Thirty years old," Croft mused. He then saw the pathologist's fidgeting, and the expression on his face. "Something wrong, Doctor?"

"Well, it's difficult to say," he began, "but usually when someone suffers such a brain-injury there is an obvious contributing factor. High blood pressure, previous medical condition, penetrative head trauma, compressed skull fracture..."

"Ah, Doctor." A mild scowl crossed Croft's face. Indeed, Croft was known around the office for scowling almost all the time. The expression served to remind the pathologist to get to the point.

"Oh yes, sorry. What I mean is that there was no obvious reason from the autopsy why the victim would have a stroke. I would have to get his file from his GP to make absolutely certain, of course."

"A stroke for no reason!" Croft said. "Is there anything else you can tell us?"

"Well yes there are three things which you might find interesting," the pathologist said. "There was slight damage to his mucous membranes suggesting that he enjoyed the occasional line of Bolivian Marching Powder."

"Previous cocaine use might have weakened his vital organs..." Peterson ventured.

The pathologist shook his head. "If he had been taking that much, I would have expected to see his liver damaged a lot more than it was." He waved his hands apologetically. "It wasn't."

"So no evidence of a link between the cocaine and the death, in other words?" Croft said. "You said there were three things. What are the others?"

"Now this is the interesting thing," began the pathologist. "Firstly, there is the fact that the deceased had an unusually high level of adrenaline in his blood-stream. This would suggest he was undergoing some extreme exertion, or something extremely stressful immediately before the stroke. Secondly, he fished in his folder for two photographs. "The circumstances in which the body was found."

The pathologist gave them to the detectives. They were pictures of the dead man's hands. They could see that the fingers were digging in claw-like to the arms of the chair, leaving deep nail marks.

The pathologist then passed over a third photograph. It was of the victim's face.

Peterson gasped. At first she thought it was an ugly face - grotesque, like that of a gargoyle. But then she got over her initial shock and concentrated. She could see that in reality the victim had not been particularly ugly at all: in fact he might have been quite handsome - blond hair, good features. But what struck Peterson was that his visage was disturbed to an unnatural degree. His teeth were bared in a snarl, animal-like. His nose was wrinkled up, and his eyes were wide open, staring like a mad man. For the first time, Peterson thought, that she had seen such a perfect example of someone whose face was contorted with sheer absolute terror.

"Sergeant?" prompted Croft, who had noticed that his colleague had become somewhat rapt with the photograph.

"Yes, sorry guv," she mumbled, composing herself.

The pathologist got up, and laid his folder on Croft's desk. "That is a copy of my preliminary findings - you will have my final report as soon as you can liberate the deceased's medical records from his GP. Have a nice bank-holiday weekend!" And with that the pathologist turned and left.

"See you next Tuesday!" Croft called out to the departing pathologist's back. Peterson thought this was quite witty, and smirked: but then she realised, from Croft's scowl, that he himself had not realised the humour in it, so she assumed a mask of seriousness again. She reflected that he did not particularly appreciate humour unless it was his own. Unfortunately, Peterson could not recall Croft being humorous in front of her at all.

Croft slumped back in his chair. "We were only assuming this was a murder because we had a tip-off saying that a murder was going to take place at that time, at that location. Yet this autopsy report has basically handed a complete defence to anyone we do arrest."

"We should concentrate on finding whoever made that call," said Peterson.

"What do we know about it?"

Peterson opened a file of notes she had with her, and found the relevant page: "The log says a 999 call was received at 15:29 this afternoon. A male caller identified himself as a 'Mr Oliver Marshall,' who said that he was seeing a murder taking place at that very instant at the victim's address in Fulham."

"'Seeing a murder taking place!' He used those exact words?"

"Yes - it's right here in the transcript."

"The 999 operators must have logged the number from which the call was dialled."

"Yes," Peterson began, "it was 0207 63-"

"Whoa whoa whoa!" Croft interrupted. "0208 surely?"

"Sir?"

"Fulham is in outer London, so it should be 0208. You said 0207, which is central London."

Peterson looked at the log entry again. "It clearly says here 0207. It's a public call box in Chariton Cross Road - near Leicester Square tube station in fact."

Croft was now sitting upright in his chair, his interest re-ignited by this new turn of events. "The caller said he was 'seeing a murder take place.' That would usually imply he was in the street, or in a neighbouring property. Or in the property itself. Not several miles away in the middle of the West End."

Peterson shrugged. "I'm only reading exactly what it says here," she said. She added facetiously, "Perhaps the caller had very good eyesight."

The scowl that had been plaguing Croft's countenance for most of that day once more recrossed his face, telling Peterson that her superior was still in no mood for humour. Yes he certainly did not like other people's attempts at humour!

"Well, we have something to be getting on with," said Croft. "Get the tape of the 999 call and listen to it yourself to double-check no mistake has been made. The number which the operator logged should also be in the database, so I will check that." He leaned over to his desktop PC and started tapping keys. "Right now we appear to have a hoax call, which may not have been a hoax call, leading to a murder which may not have been a murder!"

Peterson thought back to the photograph of the young man's face and shuddered. "Perhaps he died in fear," she said half to herself. Then catching Croft's uncomprehending stare, she hurried out of the office and began the search for the mysterious caller.

"The murderer tricked Kenner into letting him in, or Kenner let him in because he knew him."

"Or her."

"Or her. The murderer then killed Kenner by some means of which we are not exactly sure, and then simply let himself - or herself - out of the front-door." Peterson looked at Croft hopefully. It was now Thursday – six days after the incident in Fulham.

The day immediately following the discovery of the body, Saturday, was not one on which either of the two detectives would usually be working. But Croft had been anxious to tie-up the loose ends as soon as possible. It had thus been easy for him to convince his own superior, the Detective Chief Inspector who was nominally in charge of the case, to authorise overtime for himself, Peterson, and a number of uniformed officers, since despite the confusion of evidence it was still technically a murder investigation.

Croft had managed to get a copy of the recording of the 999 call in the form of a WAV file, which he subsequently copied to his PC's hard drive. He and Peterson spent the Saturday listening to it. The voice was that of a well-spoken man who could have originated from anywhere in the south-east of England. They listened carefully to the call several times. The 999 operator was trained to repeat the number which she received on the caller display so it could be heard clearly in the recording.

"Which service do you require?" came the voice of the 999 operator.

"Police." This was a male-voice.

"I am putting a call from 02076364242 through to the Police. One moment -"

"This is the Police. How may we help?" This was a third voice, that of a Police operator.

"My name is Oliver Marshall. I am seeing a murder taking place. There is a young man dying at 3 Kingly Road, in Fulham. You must get there quickly."

There could be no possible doubt -an 0207 number, meaning that the call must have come from central London, not Fulham where the deceased was found.

Peterson had wondered whether the CCTV cameras might have recorded something, but her partner had already thought of this, and had procured a copy of the relevant footage from the CCTV operators who were members of the police's civilian staff. Producing a DVD onto which he had evidently burnt it, they carefully inspected the digital images.

They were surprised by what they saw.

"The phone box in question is in full view of a CCTV camera," Croft explained, "which was supposedly operational at the time, so we should be able to see our man go in and come out again."

"Supposedly?" queried Peterson.

Croft stepped away from the screen so they could both get a good view. "I have already watched it once. If you are anything like me, you are not going to like what you see next."

Peterson peered at the screen. She saw two phone-boxes next to each other, both empty. A number of people passed by without going in to either of the phone boxes. Casually dressed Londoners, parties of foreign tourists - all the normal kinds of people one would expect to see milling about the West End of London. Peterson noted that there was a time-and date code superimposed on the picture: 14 APR 08 15:25 - followed by a second-counter which was being constantly updated.

"The phone-box we are interested in is the one on the right," said Croft. "This is four minutes before the 999 operator logged the call as having taken place. As you can see no-one is going near either of

the phone-boxes - that is what happens when everyone seems to have their own mobile nowadays." Croft let the DVD play for a few minutes. Peterson tried to keep track of the passers-by - though none of them had particularly memorable faces. The on-screen time counter went through the minutes 15:26 - 15:27 - 15:28 -

"Now watch what happens at 15:28 and 37 seconds," said Croft.

Peterson waited expectantly as the seconds counted up. She assumed she was going to see someone enter the phone box. However, as the counter touched 15:28:37, the strangest thing happened: the picture at first blipped, and then suddenly disintegrated into the digital equivalent of a "snow-storm" such as one sees when a Digital TV channel is somehow disrupted. Then the screen went blank.

"What happened?" exclaimed Peterson with amazement.

"That is apparently what is on the DVD. Keep watching for a few minutes."

The blank screen continued for a short while, until Peterson saw the picture improve via another "snowstorm." Eventually the picture resolved itself, so that the phone-boxes were perfectly visible as before - and completely empty. The time code on the screen was counting up from 15:30:23.

"The camera was out of action for the whole time that call was being made!" she cried.

"Exactly. The call lasted approximately 45 seconds. The camera packed up just a few seconds before the caller entered the phone-box, and mysteriously started working again almost immediately after he left the phone box."

The pair carefully went over the footage several times. There was not anyone who was obviously approaching or leaving the phone box. The members of the crowd did not seem to be paying attention to anyone out of shot of the camera. *That was especially odd*, thought Peterson, as she would have expected someone to notice the CCTV camera being tampered with - if that was what had happened. Eventually however, after the umpteenth repeated viewing, Croft was on the verge of giving it up for a bad job, when his partner pointed out something unusual. A passer-by had flinched ever so slightly before the picture broke up, as if someone had suddenly pushed past him. But there was no-one to be seen.

Croft thought this was clutching at straws, but on the basis that it was better than nothing, he arranged to have a vid-cap of the passer-by - a young man of oriental ethnicity - taken and be played on Crimewatch, which would be on television that week.

Come Thursday - the day after Crimewatch had gone out - the two detectives were faced with the fact that the broadcast had so far spectacularly failed to result in any phone-calls from the public.

The other lines of enquiry they had followed that week had fared no better. They had visited Kenner's place of work - a film and media company based in the West-End. Apparently Kenner had a senior role in it. However, the co-workers, though shocked, were not able to provide any useful information. Unless Croft and Peterson received any new evidence, they would have to put the case on the back burner and turn their attention to other incidents altogether.

Croft considered Peterson's theory about how Kenner died, but again looked unsatisfied - much as he had done from the very beginning of the case.

"That is the most reasonable explanation for how it could have happened - why there were no signs of forced entry, for example. However, we know from the door to door enquiries that no one was seen entering or leaving the premises in the hour preceding the time Uniform arrived."

"That doesn't mean it couldn't have happened, just that no one noticed it."

"True. He lived alone didn't he? What were his movements the night before?"

"After work he had gone drinking with colleagues, to mark the fact that it was the Easter weekend, and a bank holiday the following day. At closing-time he left his friends intending to go straight home. The last he was seen he was going home alone."

"Do we know if he went to a night-club?"

"No, but it's unlikely!" said Peterson. Croft looked puzzled.

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, he was hardly dressed for going clubbing. He would have needed to have gone home and changed first."

Croft was beginning to feel the effects of the gap in ages between himself and his colleague. "He would not have gone with what he was wearing?"

Peterson sighed. She was the sort of woman to whom music and fashion came as naturally as if she were speaking her mother-tongue. And yet here was her boss, some twenty years older than he, with twenty years more experience of police-work - and twenty years out of date when it came to popular culture.

"Peter Kenner would not have gone to a night-club with the suit he had been wearing," she explained patiently. "He had three suits: one which he had been wearing that week which smelled of sweat and cigarette smoke -" Peterson pulled a face at the memory of checking the contents of his wardrobe "and two which had not been worn since they were last dry-cleaned. He would not have gone clubbing in the suit he had been wearing, because I could tell from his house that he had some taste. Therefore he would have wanted to change if was going to go out."

"He could have tried to go clubbing all the same."

"Well in that case he certainly would have gone home alone, because he wouldn't have pulled wearing those clothes! Trust me I know."

Croft gave up - he had long ago realised that in terms of taste and youth culture Peterson was not to be questioned. "OK, no-one as far as we know went into the house, no-one as far as we know was already in the house - apart from Kenner himself. Only possible explanation is that he let someone in, and none of the neighbours noticed him - or her - entering or leaving."

"You think it might be a woman?"

"No, I was just trying to be politically correct," quipped Croft. Now it was Peterson's turn to scowl.

"What," said Croft, "you think it might be a man?"

Peterson realised she had instinctively thought that since women were obviously - in her opinion - superior to men, women were not likely to have committed the crime. She immediately realised that was a completely irrational train of thought, quite against her police training. She regretted letting her feelings show, and started talking quickly to excuse herself.

"I just thought that the only real suspect we have is this mysterious Oliver Marshall," she said, "as he is the only person we know who knew about Kenner's death. And he did somehow manage to escape identification - probably deliberately."

Croft was mollified by this: it was in fact quite reasonable, as far as he could tell. "Fair point. But let's consider cause of death. A massive stroke - with nothing apparent to cause it."

"Except Fear perhaps," Peterson ventured. "It can cause heart-failure, so why not a stroke? You saw what his face looked like."

Croft was sceptical. "Death by fear, indeed!" He paused. "But what could he have been frightened of?"

"He was in front of the TV, which was on, when he was discovered," Peterson said.

"What was on?"

"A church service."

"Church service ... Good Friday ... perhaps he was upset by the story of the crucifixion?"

"A Ninja!" Peterson suddenly exclaimed.

"What?" said Croft, put out by this display of randomness from his colleague.

"The pathologist said that such a stroke is usually caused by something, like a penetrative head trauma, right? But there was no mark on him? So perhaps it was someone who was skilled in the martial arts, who knew how to hit it with a single deadly blow which didn't leave a mark. Obviously

ninja!" Peterson looked happy with her new theory. She deliberately ignored Croft's look of exasperation. "And ninjas as we all know are skilled in escaping detection, and moving invisibly!" "I thought you were getting beyond the pale with the 'death by fear' idea," Croft told his partner disapprovingly. "But now you are just being silly."

"Well ... yes. But I get the feeling that we are at the stage when even silly theories are better than no theories. After all, let's face it - we don't have much evidence and we don't have any leads. We are at the point of being desperate."

Croft looked as if he wanted to argue, but decided against it. "Moving invisibly ... invisibility..." He got up and paced round his office. "There are a lot of things which are invisible about this whole incident. An unseen cause of death, an unseen killer - if indeed there was a killer at all - an unseen caller, who apparently witnessed events that he should not have been able to see..." Croft stopped, and turned to directly to Peterson. "I am going to tell the DCI that we have taken this investigation as far as possible, and we cannot do any more on it. The vidcap shown on Crimewatch was our only hope of taking this forward. However if there was going to be any response to it at all, it would normally have been almost immediately after the programme aired." Croft looked at his watch, it was about three o'clock. "You can spend the rest of the afternoon filing everything away; from now on we can concentrate on other outstanding cases. I unfortunately have to leave early this evening."

Croft went to his desk and started tidying away his papers, and switching off his computer. Peterson got up. "Yes sir," she said, and headed towards the door before adding, "Going anywhere particular sir?"

Croft looked up as if he had been caught doing something he shouldn't have. "No," he lied. "I mean yes, obviously, I mean ... it's just something I have to do," he said airily.

"You're going to your Lodge-meeting, aren't you?"

Croft felt annoyed. Despite having known Peterson for some time, he felt uneasy about talking about his involvement in Freemasonry with a woman. His wife knew that he was a Mason, although he didn't talk about it with her, although she gathered it involved a lot of drinking.

"Detective Sergeant", he began. He never normally addressed Peterson in such a way. It was the best way he could think of to erect a barrier between them. "I can't really discuss it with you. Besides, how did you know?"

"Once every three months on a Thursday you always come to work wearing a black suit which you never wear at any other time. You also manage to find some excuse to leave early that day as well. Also, I have seen you carry a spare tie - black - with you." Croft's hand involuntarily went to his right jacket pocket, in which he carried a black tie. Peterson continued. "At first I thought you were regularly going to an alarming number of funerals. But then I read in a newspaper that it is the custom of Freemasons in England to wear a black suit and black tie to Lodge meetings. As a memorial to those who died in World War One, isn't that right?"

Croft felt somewhat ashamed at being caught out by Peterson in this way. "There is a time and place for detective work, and this is not it. Now if you will excuse me -" he put the last of the papers on his desk into a drawer, and locked it. Peterson left Croft's office and went to her own desk to get on with the work that Croft had left her.

A few minutes later, she heard footsteps behind her. She looked up: Croft was walking out of the office - pointedly he did not say goodbye to her as he passed her desk.

Peterson felt guilty. Freemasonry was a part of Croft's private life. It was obvious - using the wonderful gift of hindsight - that she had crossed the boundary between acceptable familiarity and just plain prying. Moreover, she ruminated, she had upset her and Peterson's professional relationship with something that was unwise to do if she was to continue working with him.

And yet, as she finished off the last of her work that afternoon and tidied her desk, like most people

she was not comfortable with guilt, and therefore started mentally rehearsing a number of counter arguments. Propositions which justified her behaviour, and sought to pin the blame for her bad conscience on Croft himself.

She and Croft were not just two professionals (her line of thought went), they had worked together for some time. During that time, she thought, they had had arguments, apologised to each other, but more of all built up some sort of familiarity, which, if not exactly friendship per se, was at least supposed to be a lot warmer than the relationship of two strangers. In fact, now that she searched her memory, she could recall a number of occasions in the past where they had swapped banter and a few details of their lives outside work, for the purposes of making small-talk. Surely this was just another such occasion! Surely Croft had been wrong to react in the way he did! Surely he would come to his senses and recognise that?

With the clock eventually ticking around to 5.30pm, she grabbed her coat and headed out of the door. She made her way through the building and out to the car park, where her MG convertible awaited her. She got in, started it up, and drove out of the car park. She turned into the main road, and almost immediately came to a queue of slow-moving traffic. Having been long accustomed to the evening rush hour, her hand went automatically to turn on the radio - which was already tuned to Kiss FM. She was not actually listening to it, she just habitually turned it on so it could play in the background of her awareness.

At times when she was alone with her thoughts, her mind often turned to her future, and in particular her career. She had been a Detective Sergeant for some time now, and not unnaturally she was concerned about when she herself might be promoted to Detective Inspector. Just recently however her concerns had become more anxious, when she heard some news about one of her contemporaries from police-training college. It transpired that he had received his promotion already. She had up to that point thought that her career had been making steady progress: but when she heard the news she became worried that she was coming to a halt and stalling.

Her mind went back to Croft, and his Masonic lodge, and new paranoid ideas started arising. Whilst she knew that most of the wilder accusations against Freemasonry had no basis in truth to them, she could not help feeling there was something elitist about this male-only preserve. For one thing, she had suspected that Croft's lodge was one especially for Policemen. She shuddered: was it really true about Masons corruptly looking out for one another? Perhaps her contemporary was a Mason? Perhaps he wasn't better than her at all, but had got his promotion with the good offices of this all-boys club, leaving her beneath a glass ceiling. Or was she just being paranoid - making up excuses for her own failure?

She eventually pulled up outside her flat. At least, due to the residents' parking scheme that was not a problem. Having got out, secured the steering wheel with a brake-lock, and locked the car, she entered her apartment building and climbed the stairs to her flat on the second floor. She was in fact quite lucky in that she owned a nice car, and was renting a nice flat in a nice part of town. She had tried buying a flat with the aid of a mortgage, but she had discovered that for some reason it was in fact cheaper to rent than to buy in that particular area.

She got in her front door, and picked up some post that was waiting for her. Her flat was tastefully decorated in the modern style, with brand-new furniture everywhere. She was quite proud of her stylish flat, and her nice car. But no matter how beautiful the ornaments with which she surrounded herself, there was always something making her feel uneasy about her life...

She saw a red-light flashing from the corner of her eye: it was her answering machine. She pressed play, and busied herself taking off her coat and shoes, and looking around for a wineglass.

"You have - 1 - message - sent - today - at - one - thirty - seven - pm."

"Hi Nichola, it's James -"

Peterson, now with a wineglass and opening a bottle of red which she had started the previous day, became alert. James was the man she was currently going out with. She had had to cancel two dates with him the previous weekend, due to work.

"Listen ... ah ... Nichola..." The voice on the answering machine was uneasy. She had a sudden prescience that he was going to deliver bad news.

"Look, I'm really sorry, but ... well when you cancelled at the weekend I realised that with your work you're probably going to be too busy for me, and let's face it my work isn't too sociable either ... so, ah ... Nichola ... I don't think we are going to work out together, so I think we should knock it on the head. What do you say? I'm sorry to have to tell you like this, and not to your face... but ... I'll see you around, Ok Bye."

"End of message. To listen to your-"

Peterson angrily switched off the answering machine. She was devastated. James had been a reasonable bloke, or so she thought. She had been really hoping things would work out between them. In fact, she had been desperately hoping that things would work out this time, because the unfortunate fact was that despite the car, flat, the steady job, and everything else going for her, she had a very long and very poor track record when it came to boyfriends. "Not to your face..." - that summed it up for her about her latest man.

She necked the glass of wine that she was holding, went back to the kitchen to pour herself another one, and then brought the whole bottle as well as the glass with her back to her elegant beige sofa. She resisted the temptation to slam the bottle on to her coffee table, as at the last moment she remembered it had a glass top which she did not want to crack. It had been a nuisance to replace it the last time this had happened. She climbed onto the sofa, curled up her legs into something resembling the foetal position, and brooded over the second of the glasses of wine she knew she was going to have this evening.

Nichola felt sick - not nauseous, but an unpleasant feeling down the front of her body. It was the feeling that she had come to associate with rejection. The fact that James' break-up message had been delivered in such a cowardly way was bad enough - the fact that it had come after her day at work had ended on a sour note was particularly galling. She reached for her glass and gulped down some wine. She was doing it automatically: she was not appreciating the wine; in fact she was barely thinking at all. Eventually, though, some sense of pride stirred in her unconscious mind. *I've got to snap out of this*, she thought, *otherwise he will have won*.

Who "he" was didn't exactly matter right now - it was a convenient pronoun which applied to everyone in her life whom she believed was a problem. It referred, in fact, to the whole of the male population of the Earth, as far as she was concerned. It was the cowardly James, who had used her and dumped her by answer-machine. It was Croft, who put up so many emotional barriers between them in the professional relationship. It was her contemporary from Hendon, who even now was racing up the career ladder faster than she was. It was Pete Kenner -

She stopped herself, and drank some more wine. She was by now quite drunk, not that she was keeping count. It was unreasonable, she realised, to resent the deceased man for his own death: but something about the look on his face, which she had seen in the pathologist's photograph, had disturbed her. On the one hand, she could imagine him being a man just like every other, guilty by association for the pain she felt right now. But on the other, the idea that he had suffered so before his death stirred her compassion. What could he have gone through in those last few moments?

She sighed. If not all men were blameworthy, she thought, to whom then should she devote her energy? Obviously not the cowardly James. And obviously her relationship with Croft could never hope to be anything more than professional. Her ideal man, she thought, must first and foremost be attentive to her alone. He must hang on her every word. And obviously be good-looking. But what so

of complexion - fair or dark? Why not both! Why not have a selection of men to pick and choose from - ~~As she began to entertain these far more enjoyable thoughts, she involuntarily fidgeted, causing her hand to brush against her bosom.~~ She suddenly realised that her nipples, underneath her blouse and bra, had become sensitive. She stroked one, this time deliberately. *Mmm, a selection of men...* There was no mistaking it. Her nipple had become erect. A plan was forming... She put down her wineglass so that she now had both hands free. She wondered momentarily about closing the curtains in case anyone could see in, but she thought to herself: *Fuck it! I am going to risk it.* She got up, unbuttoned her blouse, and her trousers, and took them both off. She unhooked her bra - very lace, almost see-through - and took it off, and discarded her panties - wispy and almost thong-like. She picked up the pile of clothes and stowed it behind the sofa where it would be out of her line of sight. She was now completely naked. *Now, she thought, where was I?*

She lay down on the sofa, and made herself comfortable.

A selection of men...

She gently tweaked at her nipples, so that now they were both erect. Her hands felt cooling on her breasts - the sensation sent a tingle throughout her entire body.

Not just one or two, but a whole roomful of them...

She continued playing with her breasts, alternating between massaging the nipples themselves and stroking the aureoles. She could feel a frisson of excitement as the blood rushed to her genitals, and her vagina began to moisten.

All adoring me...

With one hand still playing with one of her breasts, she reached down her body with the other, stroking her stomach.

All worshipping me. All worshipping my body.

Her hand stroked over her pubic mound - waxed completely smooth ("just in case," she had thought) and fingered inside her labia. Her clitoris was now engorging with blood, but it was not yet moist enough for her liking. She took back her hand and licked her fingers: then she re-applied them, spreading the moisture round. It felt much better.

All these men. Lusting after me. Watching me get myself off.

She was directly stimulating her clitoris, now quite erect and sensitive. With her other hand she continued to stroke her nipples, first one then the other, adding extra excitement to the situation.

All of them applauding me! Her fingering action now became more vigorous.

I am the star! I am more powerful than them!

She could feel her climax was quite near now. She was aware that lube was seeping out of her vagina and probably going all over her nice sofa: but at this stage she didn't care. She could smell the furniture clearly - made her think of primal unrestrained lust.

They need me! I don't need them!

The muscles in her stomach were tensing up - it was almost here -

I am strong! Independent! I AM FREE...

She orgasmed massively - not just in her clitoris, so it seemed, but throughout her whole womb, and indeed her whole lower abdomen. The strength of it surprised and thrilled her. She let out a loud gasp. She withdrew her hand and ran her fingers under her nose, smiling. *Men, she thought, who need me? them?* She glanced down admiringly at her breasts and nipples, taut and pointing. *I make myself happy.*

They can't ever take that away from me.

She realised she had banished the sick feeling that had afflicted her earlier. She reached for her wineglass, refilled it, and settled back on the sofa, luxuriating in her nakedness. This was going to be the start of a good evening after all...

"Brethren, nothing now remains, but, according to ancient custom, to lock up our Secrets in a sacred repository, uniting in the act Fidelity, Fidelity, Fidelity."

Brother Croft joined with the other masons in tapping his left chest to coincide with each use of the word "Fidelity." Then according to a well-rehearsed practice, the senior officers lined up two abreast along the southern side of the lodge: the Director of Ceremonies and his Assistant; the Junior and Senior Deacons; the two Wardens; and finally the Worshipful Master on his own. They processed out, stopping at the south-western corner to make a sharp right turn, and proceeding to the door of the Temple which was in the north-west corner of the hall. The Director of Ceremonies and his Assistant stopped short of the door to form an Arch with their wands; as did the two Deacons who took up position besides them. Under this double-arch the two Wardens and the Master exited the hall. The four-wand bearers kept their places as now the ordinary members of the Lodge now left the Temple, not going straight to the door, but going around the hall clockwise by right-angles, effectively following the path taken by the Senior officers. Croft himself left in this fashion, passing under the two arches, and joined the other Brethren in the vestibule who were waiting in silence. Finally, the four wand-bearers left the Temple, followed by the Inner Guard who shut the door. At this the Brethren visibly relaxed: they started chatting and began taking off their regalia.

Croft's mind, however, was elsewhere. Despite his initial annoyance at Peterson earlier that afternoon this had quickly turned to guilt and introspection once he had got on the Tube, so that by the time he had got out at Holborn tube station, he was thoroughly ashamed of his actions. He had overreacted to Peterson's prying by a very long measure indeed. The modern Craft was actually a far less secretive organisation than it had been thirty years ago, when he had first joined. In fact there was a positive move amongst Freemasons to be freer with information about their organisation - so long as this did not amount to revealing the traditional modes of recognition, or the details of what went on at individual meetings. (The modes of recognition - the so called "funny handshakes" - had in any case been described in print for a long-time. They and the text of the rituals had even found their way on to the internet, like a lot of other things).

Croft packed up his lambskin apron, his white gloves and his Royal Arch jewel into his case, and followed other members out of the vestibule. They made their way through the large corridors of Freemason's Hall, and, going down the grand staircase, exited onto Great Queen Street. Here they crossed the road and headed to a nearby restaurant that Masonic lodges often reserved for their so-called "Festive Board" - a traditional meal they had together after the lodge was closed.

Croft was in an unusually contemplative mood that evening, not saying much. Normally he would have been more outgoing with the other members of his Lodge, but the incident with Peterson had set him thinking. There was a growing number of Masons - including some of Croft's contemporaries - who supported the more progressive changes that were occurring in Masonry: although he was pretty sure that none of them would ever dream of doing anything such as overthrowing the traditions of the Craft completely. He reflected that had he been one of these progressive types, he might have taken the opportunity to chat briefly with Peterson about his involvement in the Craft when she had tried to pry, and be more open with her. Unfortunately, when he had first joined Freemasonry he had fallen in with a crowd from "the old school", who looked upon the Craft as an excuse for a men-only get-together, a chance to have a night off away from their wives.

And "old" was the right word! In the particular lodge to which he belonged, he estimated that the average age was about seventy. Croft himself, at only fifty, was actually one of the youngest people in the Lodge.

After the final Toast, "to poor and distressed brethren," Croft took the opportunity to get up and move to the bar area. He was standing there, ordering himself a drink, when a voice accosted him.

"Brother Croft! How goes it?" It was Brother Alfred Macguffin, a member of his lodge a few years older than himself, who also happened to be a Detective Chief Inspector at another Police station across London. "I haven't had a chance to chat to you all evening. Here let me get this round." Macguffin ordered a pint of lager for himself, and paid for both his and Croft's drinks when they arrived. "You don't seem your usual happy self, Toby. Anything wrong?"

"Thanks, Alf," said Croft accepting his drink. "I have a lot of things on my mind at the moment."

"A difficult case?"

"A man died last Friday."

"Ah yes, terrible shame," said Alf, pausing to take a sip. "But look on the bright side, at least He rose from the dead on Sunday morning."

"What?"

"Anyway, surely the case has already been solved? The Romans did it! Although the Scribes and High Priests could be charged as accessories."

"I'm not talking-" Croft started but then realised Alf had been dead-panning, gulling him into falling for his ruse. Alf broke into a smile when he saw his joke had worked.

"Heh heh! Now Toby," said Alf, "seeing as you work in the Homicide SCD up at the Yard, and you and your colleagues are used to investigating murders, I presume that this is no ordinary death you're talking about."

"You are right," said Croft. "It's a young man who died suspiciously in Fulham."

"Last Friday, you say... you're not referring to that case that was shown on Crimewatch last night, is there any chance?"

"Well done, Sherlock!" said Croft, wanting to get into a game of out-deducing Macguffin.

"So," continued Alf, "Why is this suspicious death causing you so much trouble?"

"Because we have absolutely no concrete evidence one way or another!"

Croft then went on to describe to Alf the difficulties which he and Peterson had been experiencing with the investigation. "So you see," he concluded, "We have very little to go on, and every time we do think we are getting somewhere we encounter a brand-new obstacle."

"Damned tricky I admit," said Alf, scratching his bottom lip in thought. "Had you not mentioned the business with the CCTV cameras, I would have suggested that the phone call could have been faked."

"Is that possible?" said Croft.

"Oh yes, or at least I believe so. There is a word for this sort of thing - 'Phreaking,' with a P-H. It's the equivalent of hacking, but done to the phone network instead of a computer network. It started off in the seventies with teenagers attempting to cheat phone companies in the United States out of free phone calls, though I believe it has evolved since then. As indeed has the technology! Mind, you would have to talk to an IT specialist to get the full details - I'm not an expert myself."

Croft's interest was stirred: this was a new idea. "Phreaking..." he mused out loud. But after a moment he frowned. "But that doesn't fit in with the CCTV cameras." "No," said Alf, "That's what I meant."

"Logically," continued Croft, thinking out loud, "if the phone call had been 'phreaked,' the person who did so would have wanted to 'hack' the CCTV cameras. However, the computers controlling the CCTV cameras are all on a secure network - there is no physical connection to the outside through which they can be hacked."

"And, of course, the CCTV cameras are all operated by Police civilian staff. And there are strict

security rules in force to ensure that there is no opportunity for the staff to do such a thing."

"So the only way for the cameras to have been 'hacked' is if one of our civilian staff - who are all vetted before being employed - accessed the server in the office itself."

"Which is unlikely in the extreme, unless you suspect a conspiracy within our civilian staff, or a massive cock-up in our HR department. Or both!"

Croft paused to take a sip of his pint. "Actually I think there is a simpler reason to discount the likelihood of the phone-call being 'phreaked,'" he said.

"Eh? What's that?"

"Well, the logical purpose behind faking the phone call would be Misdirection - like what stage magicians use. They misdirect the attention of their audience - deceive them into looking in one place when the business of the trick is happening somewhere else."

"Yes, so-"

"So if a Phreaker were going to misdirect our attention, surely the logical place to have a fake call coming from, for a death in Fulham, would not have been an obvious hoax location like London West end, but in Fulham itself. For example, they would make it look as if one of the neighbours had called the police when they hadn't."

"It could be a double-bluff," said Alf unconvincingly, avoiding Croft's eye.

Croft grinned.

"I give up. You have a real puzzler on your hands, Toby," Alf conceded. "Anyway all this talk about magicians has made me think: perhaps you would be better off talking to a psychic."

Croft laughed. "I may have given the impression I was desperate, but not that desperate! Even your suggestion of hacking and Phreaking, whilst unlikely, would be more sensible. In fact I have a mind to go and call an IT specialist tomorrow morning like you said. He might be able to provide some new leads after all." Croft took another sip of lager. "Anyway, what do you know about psychics?"

"I knew one once," said Alf, "She helped us solve several cases. Mostly murder cases, but also a few kidnappings. She was a Medium you see, she received messages from the murder victims - and they all turned out to be genuine. Lead us to the murderer everytime, or uncover some piece of vital evidence."

"Come on!" said Croft, incredulous. "No court would accept the evidence of a Medium! Why, remember a case a few years back when the members of a jury tried to rig up an Ouija board in the jury room - tried to contact the victim. When the Judge found out, he threw a fit, and ordered a retrial."

"Yes I heard about that one too," said Alf. "Shame. They should have set the Ouija board up in the witness box and make the spirit take the Oath, and be cross-examined. That at least would have satisfied the laws of Evidence."

Croft and Macguffin both laughed at the absurdity of the notion. Alf continued.

"But you're missing my point. We never used the evidence of this Medium - we used the evidence that she helped us uncover. In other words all of her leads were corroborated by actual admissible evidence."

"I find it hard to believe any police force in this country would consider using psychics at all."

"That is what the sceptics would like to believe. The reality is though, that in a recent survey of police authorities in this country, when asked whether they had ever used psychics, instead of giving a categorical 'no,' the vast majority said that they had no record of ever having done so."

"They responded with the bare minimum they were obliged to reveal under the Freedom of Information Act, in other words."

"True ... but when you consider that information normally supplied by psychics and mediums can never be used as evidence anyway..."

Croft was amazed: "There would be no record of them being used in a police investigation in the first place!"

Alf tapped the side of his nose meaningfully. He continued his story.

"Anyway, this Medium ... she wasn't just a Medium, she had some other power, the name of which I forget ... it involves receiving impressions from physical objects..." Alf furrowed his brow.

"Psychometry! That's it."

"You mean she had the power to take those personality tests that HR sets new candidates?" asked Croft facetiously.

"Dear boy, Psychometry is completely different from Psychometric Tests! They are both conjectural but one is less superstitious than the other."

Croft smiled: he noted that Alf had cleverly avoided saying which one he thought was superstitious.

Alf struggled on to finish his anecdote, despite this constant ribbing from the junior man.

"There was a kidnapping case once: we had caught the kidnapper, but he wasn't saying where the victim was. So we conducted a search of the area, and we gave this woman a piece of clothing belonging to the victim. She did her thing for a few moments, then cried out: 'I know where that girl is! Follow me!' And she dragged a group of us along with her. We were giving her lift in our car following her directions into a forested area when she said: 'Stop here!' So we got out and started searching, and within two minutes we had found the victim in a storm-outlet tube that led into a brook just a few yards from the car. The girl was very wet, cold and miserable, but very much alive. Thank you to this old lady." Alf paused to quench his thirst again.

"So what happened to this Medium?"

"The last time I saw her, was when we threw a dinner in her honour, as our way of saying 'thank you,' said Alf. "This was the funny thing, actually. Every case she ever helped us with, she steadfastly refused to accept any kind of reward or payment for her services. She didn't in fact accept any payment for working as a medium at all. She earned her living doing something else. She said that her powers had been given her by God, and she was just doing His Will. In any case, her involvement with us had always been in an unofficial capacity, for the reasons I mentioned earlier. Hence, it was not possible for us to give her any kind of official recognition, even if she had wanted it. The dinner in her honour was the best we could do for her - and she was more than happy with it."

Alf drained his pint. "As it happens, there are some Brothers who are into all this sort of thing. The lodge night was tonight also. Right now they are probably up the road: I was intending to pop in and say hello to them briefly. You can come along if you like."

"No thanks," said Croft, "I was going to head off home after this."

"You going back on the Tube?" asked Alf. "They will be in 'The Happy Templar' - it's on your way, you know. Come on, drink up."

Croft drained his pint and picked up his briefcase. Alf had fetched his own briefcase, and together they left the restaurant. They walked up Great Queen Street towards Kingsway. Croft was feeling somewhat reluctant about meeting people into "all this sort of thing." He wondered what he was letting himself in for.

"What are these Brothers like?" said Croft.

"Well, they are a rare lot who seem to think that the Masonic rituals are supposed to mean something. I mean in terms of mysticism and so forth. But you know what? Because they put that extra something into the ritual, they manage to make it interesting."

"Ah!" cried Croft to whom things were suddenly becoming clearer. "They are Rosicrucians, you mean." Croft was referring to a Society for Christian masons which liked to study mystical subjects.

"Well..." Alf gave the impression that this was an over-simplification. "Yes. Here we are."

They had reached "The Happy Templar" pub, and turned to go inside. It was full of men in black suits

and black ties. Croft was not overly surprised by this, as the pub was only a short distance from Freemasons Hall, and was thus a popular destination for thirsty Masons. Alf saw some people that he knew in one corner, and took Croft with him to meet them. These, Croft discovered, were the Masons to whom Alf had been referring. Out of politeness, Croft bought a round of drinks.

As Croft chatted to them, he realised that he had been right in his guess that most of them were Rosicrucians. This put Croft at a disadvantage somewhat because he was not particularly interested in mysticism, so he found some of the concepts that they happened to mention hard to relate to. Croft had met Masons from other lodges countless times before, so he knew that it was unusual for most Masons to discuss esoteric topics at all.

Croft was content to let Alf, who seemed to know a little about what he was saying, do most of the talking. He became somewhat distracted - and happened to notice a rather gregarious fellow sitting a short distance away, engaged in what appeared to be a heated argument with another Mason.

"I see you've noticed Brother Paisley!" smiled one of Alf's acquaintances. Croft turned back. "He always gets this way after he has had a few. He is quite active in an organisation that studies the Qabalah. Absolute expert on the subject, but has an unusual method of teaching it, as you can probably hear."

The man called Paisley's voice rose in volume: Croft noticed that he had a strong Irish accent. Paisley was expounding on a subject which Croft did not understand, though it had something to do with religion. Croft noticed with amusement that Paisley's "victim" - an unusually young Mason in his mid-thirties, was cunningly trying to avoid arguing with him by the simple tactic of agreeing with everything Paisley said. This however seemed to only infuriate Paisley into arguing even more.

"The Qabalah?" said Croft. "What, that stuff that Madonna practices?"

"No, the real Qabalah!" said the Mason. "That stuff you hear about is really just a cult invented in the late sixties or early seventies, with the sole purpose of fleecing gullible celebrities out of their money. No, the real Qabalah dates back hundreds or thousands of years, and they don't charge any money for anything."

"Except subs to cover room hire, and so forth," said a second Mason.

"Well yes," conceded the first.

"Shall we go over?" said Alf. "I had wanted to say hello to Paisley tonight as well."

They shifted over to where Paisley was haranguing his victim. Croft noticed that his accent was so pronounced, he managed to make an "oo" sound like a long "E."

"What de ye conceive of God?" asked Paisley. "What de ye actually conceive of Him?"

Paisley's companion appeared relaxed, and trying not to take this seriously.

"God is infinite," he said simply.

"That's not an answer!"

"God is infinite, I am finite, it is inevitable that I would not be able to conceive of His totality."

"But listen to this: God is infinite, right?"

"Yes."

"Ye conceive of Him, or at least a part of Him?"

"Yes, you are right."

"Don't keep saying I am right! Ye're not grasping what I have to say!"

"What is it you have to say?"

"God is infinite. Ye conceive of a finite part of Him. How does He move from the Infinite to the Finite?"

"You tell me."

"Ne, ye tell me! I'm asking ye to tell me how ye think He moves from the Infinite to the Finite! I mean how does He move from the Unmanifest to the Manifest?"

"The answer is not as simple as 'He manifested'?"

"Listen-" Paisley shifted in his chair, the better to explain the point to his companion. "God being Infinite Light withdraws himself from a finite portion of the infinite to create a void, and then injects a single point into the void to create the First Manifest. The whole process is known in Hebrew as *Tzimtzum*."

Paisley's companion seemed unconvinced. "Does the technicality of it really matter?"

"From God's point of view, he is Infinite - Ain Soph. But from our point of view, there are ten different ways of looking at Him, none of them an exact representation of the whole. We are like ten blind-men trying to make sense of a bloody great elephant."

"I still don't..."

"As long as ye look at a mere portion, ye can never see the whole picture. Yet there must be a way of raising your mind so that ye move above the ordinary conception of the Qabalah, to a contemplation of what it actually represents. Hence the technicality does matter, because contemplating that is what is going to cause ye to raise your mind."

As long as you look at a mere portion. How true, thought Croft. It had been the only part of the conversation which had made any sense.

Paisley's companion took a sip of lager. "I have a confession to make. I have actually read the Sepher Ha-Bahir several years ago, so I know full well what you are trying to say. I was merely stringing you along for the sake of a good argument."

At this, Paisley started swearing loudly and cuffing his companion round the head in a joking manner. This caused some mirth amongst the other Masons who were present. Croft himself had barely understood a single word of what Paisley had been saying, although it amused him to see Paisley make a mock display of losing his temper like that.

It was at that moment that Paisley noticed Croft - who was a stranger among the Masons standing around him. "And what are ye smiling at?" he demanded.

Alf stepped in. "This is Brother Toby from my Lodge."

"Aye aye! We're being raided by the Police tonight boys! Have ye nothing better to do than harass law-abiding citizens?"

Croft decided to try giving as good as he got. "If I meet a law-abiding citizen tonight, I will tell you so." The others laughed.

"Alfred, what the hell are ye doing bringing the fuzz with ye?" Paisley turned to Alf.

"Relax, Brother," said Croft, "I am not here to investigate either you or your fellow Catholics."

Paisley was suddenly surprised. "I'm a lapsed Catholic I will have ye know. Not so lapsed that I don't believe in Jesus. Nor lapsed enough not to be a Loyalist target. But lapsed enough not to be an IRA sympathiser," he said. "Besides, how did ye know I was a Catholic?"

"Simple," said Croft. "By your accent you are from Belfast. You are also obviously drunk. Therefore you are a Catholic. Had you been a Protestant, you would more likely to have sworn off the evening drink."

"Bejeesus!" exclaimed Paisley. "I did not realise that there were policemen who could actually deduce things! I thought it was just in fiction, like in Sherlock Holmes novels!"

"I'm training him up," Alf assured him.

"Listen," said Paisley to Croft, "What did you say your name was again?"

"Brother Tobias Croft," Croft told him.

At this, a sudden change came over Paisley's face. His idea of trying to start an argument with Croft visibly evaporated. "Well it was nice meeting you, Brother Croft," he said, his voice suddenly changing from his previous haranguing tone to something resembling politeness. "Listen," he said to those around, "I've just realised I have to get up early tomorrow, so I have to dash. Be seeing ye again."

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