

· O N E ·

BLOOD DRIPPED FROM THE neck of the severed head and fell in a drizzle of red raindrops, clotting into a ruby pool upon the black and white tiles. The face wore a grimace of surprise, as if the man had died in the middle of a scream. His teeth, each clearly divided from its neighbour by a black line, were bared in a horrible, silent scream.

I couldn't take my eyes off the thing.

The woman who proudly held the gaping head at arm's length by its curly blue-black hair was wearing a scarlet dress—almost, but not quite, the colour of the dead man's blood.

To one side, a servant with downcast eyes held the platter upon which she had carried the head into the room. Seated on a wooden throne, a matron in a saffron dress leaned forward in square-jawed pleasure, her hands clenched into fists on the arms of her chair as she took a

good look at the grisly trophy. Her name was Herodias, and she was the wife of the king.

The younger woman, the one clutching the head, was—at least, according to the historian Flavius Josephus—named Salome. She was the stepdaughter of the king, whose name was Herod, and Herodias was her mother.

The detached head, of course, belonged to John the Baptist.

I remembered hearing the whole sordid story not more than a month ago when Father read aloud the Second Lesson from the back of the great carved wooden eagle which served as the lectern at St. Tancred's.

On that winter morning I had gazed up, transfixed, just as I was gazing now, at the stained-glass window in which this fascinating scene was depicted.

Later, during his sermon, the vicar had explained that in Old Testament times, our blood was thought to contain our lives.

Of course!

Blood!

Why hadn't I thought of it before?

"Feely," I said, tugging at her sleeve, "I have to go home."

My sister ignored me. She peered closely at the music book as, in the dusky shadows of the fading light, her fingers flew like white birds over the keys of the organ.

Mendelssohn's *Wie gross ist des Allmächt'gen Güte*.

"How great are the works of the Almighty," she told me it meant.

Easter was now less than a week away and Feely was trying to whip the piece into shape for her official debut

as organist of St. Tancred's. The flighty Mr. Collicutt, who had held the post only since last summer, had vanished suddenly from our village without explanation and Feely had been asked to step into his shoes.

St. Tancred's went through organists like a python goes through white mice. Years ago, there had been Mr. Taggart, then Mr. Denning. It was now Mr. Collicutt's kick at the cat.

"Feely," I said. "It's important. There's something I have to do."

Feely jabbed one of the ivory coupling buttons with her thumb and the organ gave out a roar. I loved this part of the piece: the point where it leaps in an instant from sounding like a quiet sea at sunset to the snarl of a jungle animal.

When it comes to organ music, loud is good—at least to my way of thinking.

I tucked my knees up under my chin and huddled back into the corner of the choir stall. It was obvious that Feely was going to slog her way through to the end come hell or high water, and I would simply have to wait it out.

I looked at my surroundings but there wasn't much to see. In the feeble glow of the single bulb above the music rack, Feely and I might as well have been castaways on a tiny raft of light in a sea of darkness.

By twisting my neck and tilting my head back like a hanged man, I could just make out the head of Saint Tancred, which was carved in English oak at the end of a hammer beam in the roof of the nave. In the weird evening light, he had the look of a man with his nose pressed

flat against a window, peering in from the cold to a cosy room with a cheery fire burning on the hearth.

I gave him a respectful bob of my head, even though I knew he couldn't see me since his bones were mouldering away in the crypt below. But better safe than sorry.

Above my head, on the far side of the chancel, John the Baptist and his murderers had now faded out almost completely. Twilight came quickly in these cloudy days of March and, viewed from inside the church, the windows of St. Tancred's could change from a rich tapestry of glorious colours to a muddy blackness in less time than it would take you to rattle off one of the longer psalms.

To tell the truth, I'd have rather been at home in my chemical laboratory than sitting here in the near-darkness of a draughty old church, but Father had insisted.

Even though Feely was six years older than me, Father refused to let her go alone to the church for her almost nightly rehearsals and choir practices.

"A lot of strangers likely to be about these days," he said, referring to the team of archaeologists who would soon be arriving in Bishop's Lacey to dig up the bones of our patron saint.

How I was to defend Feely against the attacks of these savage scholars, Father had not bothered to mention, but I knew there was more to it than that.

In the recent past there had been a number of murders in Bishop's Lacey: fascinating murders in which I had rendered my assistance to Inspector Hewitt of the Hinley Constabulary.

In my mind, I ticked off the victims on my fingers:

Horace Bonepenny, Rupert Porson, Brookie Harewood, Phyllis Wyvern. . . .

One more corpse and I'd have a full hand.

Each of them had come to a sticky end in our village, and I knew that Father was uneasy.

"It isn't right, Ophelia," he said, "for a girl who's—for a girl your age to be rattling about alone in an old church at night."

"There's nobody there but the dead." Feely had laughed, perhaps a little too gaily. "And they don't bother me. Not nearly so much as the living."

Behind Father's back, my other sister, Daffy, had licked her wrist and wetted down her hair on both sides of an imaginary part in the middle of her head, like a cat washing its face. She was poking fun at Ned Cropper, the pot-boy at the Thirteen Drakes, who had the most awful crush on Feely and sometimes followed her about like a bad smell.

Feely had scratched her ear to indicate she had understood Daffy's miming. It was one of those silent signals that fly among sisters like semaphore messages from ship to ship, indecipherable to anyone who doesn't know the code. Even if Father *had* seen the gesture, he would not have understood its meaning. Father's codebook was in a far different language from ours.

"Still," Father had said, "if you're coming or going after dark, you are to take Flavia with you. It won't hurt her to learn a few hymns."

Learn a few hymns indeed! Just a couple of months ago when I was confined to bed during the Christmas holi-

days, Mrs. Mullet, in giggling whispers and hushed pledges of secrecy, had taught me a couple of new ones. I never tired of bellowing:

*“Hark the herald angels sing,
Beecham’s Pills are just the thing.
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
Two for a man and one for a child!”*

Either that or:

*“We Three Kings of Leicester Square,
Selling ladies’ underwear,
So fantastic, no elastic,
Only tuppence a pair.”*

—until Feely flung a copy of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* at my head. One thing I have learned about organists is that they have absolutely no sense of humour.

“Feely,” I said, “I’m freezing.”

I shivered and buttoned up my cardigan. It was bitterly cold in the church at night. The choir had left an hour ago, and without their warm bodies round me, shoulder to shoulder like singing sardines, it seemed even colder still.

But Feely was submerged in Mendelssohn. I might as well have been talking to the moon.

Suddenly the organ gave out a fluttering gasp, as if it had choked on something, and the music gargled to a stop.

“Oh, fiddle,” Feely said. It was as close to swearing as

she ever came—at least in church. My sister was a pious fraud.

She stood up on the pedals and waddled her way off the organ bench, making a harsh mooing of bass notes.

“Now what?” she said, rolling up her eyes as if an answer were expected from Above. “This stupid thing has been misbehaving for weeks. It must be the damp weather.”

“I think it died,” I told her. “You probably broke it.”

“Hand me the torch,” she said after a long moment. “We’ll have a look.”

We?

Whenever Feely was frightened out of her wits, “*I*” became “*we*” as quick as a flash. Since the organ at St. Tancred’s was listed by the Royal College of Organists as a historic instrument, any damage to the dear old thing would probably be considered an act of national vandalism.

I knew that Feely was already dreading having to break the bad news to the vicar.

“Lead on, O Guilty One,” I said. “How do we get at the guts?”

“This way,” Feely answered, quickly sliding open a concealed panel in the carved woodwork beside the organ console. I hadn’t even time to see how the trick was done.

Switching on the torch, she ducked through the narrow opening and vanished into the darkness. I took a deep breath and followed.

We were in a musty Aladdin’s cave, hemmed in on all sides by stalagmites. In the sweep of the torch’s beam, organ pipes towered above us: pipes of wood, pipes of

metal, pipes of all sizes. Some were as small as pencils, some like drain spouts and others as large as telephone posts. Not so much a cave, I decided, as a forest of giant flutes.

“What are those?” I asked, pointing to a row of tall, conical pipes which reminded me of pygmy blowguns.

“The Gemshorn stop,” Feely said. “They’re supposed to sound like an ancient flute made from a ram’s horn.”

“And these?”

“The Rohrflöte.”

“Because it roars?”

Feely rolled her eyes. “*Rohrflöte* means ‘chimney flute’ in German. The pipes are shaped like chimneys.”

And sure enough, they were. They wouldn’t have been out of place among the chimney pots of Buckshaw.

Something hissed suddenly and gurgled in the shadows and I threw my arm round Feely’s waist.

“What’s that?” I whispered.

“The wind chest,” she said, aiming the torch at the far corner.

Sure enough, in the shadows, a huge leather trunk-like thing was slowly exhaling with various bronchial wheezings and hissings.

“Super!” I said. “It’s like a giant’s accordion.”

“Stop saying ‘super,’” Feely said. “You know Father doesn’t like it.”

I ignored her and, threading my way among some of the smaller pipes, hauled myself up onto the top of the wind chest, which gave out a remarkably realistic rude noise and sank a little more.

I sneezed—once—twice—three times—in the cloud of dust I had stirred up.

“Flavia! Come down at once! You’re going to rip that old leather!”

I got to my feet and stood up to my full height of four foot ten and a quarter inches. I’m quite tall for my age, which is almost twelve.

“Yaroo!” I shouted, wagging my arms to keep my balance. “I’m the King of the Castle!”

“Flavia! Come down this instant or I’m telling Father!”

“Look, Feely,” I said. “There’s an old tombstone up here.”

“I know. It’s to add weight to the wind chest. Now get down here. And be careful.”

I brushed away the dust with my hands. “*Hezekiah Whytefleet*,” I read aloud. “1679 to 1778. Phew! Ninety-nine. I wonder who he was?”

“I’m switching off the torch now. You’ll be alone in the dark.”

“All right,” I said. “I’m coming. No need to get owly.”

As I shifted my weight from foot to foot, the wind chest rocked and subsided a little more, so that I felt as if I were standing on the deck of a swamped ship.

Something fluttered just to the right of Feely’s face and she froze.

“Probably just a bat,” I said.

Feely gave a shriek, dropped the torch, and vanished.

Bats were high on the list of things that turned my sister’s brains to suet pudding.

A further fluttering, as if the thing were confirming its presence.

Picking my way gingerly down from my perch, I retrieved the torch and dragged it along the rank of pipes like a stick on a picket fence.

A furious leathery flapping echoed in the chamber.

"It's all right, Feely," I called out. "It is a bat, and it's stuck in a pipe."

I popped out through the hatch into the chancel. Feely was standing there in an angled beam of moonlight, as white as an alabaster statue, her arms wrapped round herself.

"Maybe we can smoke it out," I said. "Got a cigarette?"

I was being facetious, of course. Feely was death on smoking.

"Maybe we can coax it out," I suggested helpfully. "What do bats eat?"

"Insects," Feely said blankly, as if she were struggling awake from a paralysing dream. "So that's no use. What are we going to do?"

"Which pipe is it in?" I asked. "Did you happen to notice?"

"The sixteen-foot diapason," she said shakily. "The D."

"I have an idea!" I said. "Why don't you play Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor? Full throttle. That ought to fix the little sod."

"You're disgusting," Feely said. "I'll tell Mr. Haskins about the bat tomorrow."

Mr. Haskins was the sexton at St. Tancred's, who was expected to deal with everything from grave-digging to brass-polishing.

"How do you suppose it got into the church? The bat, I mean."

We were walking home between the hedgerows. Scrappy clouds scudded across the moon and a raw crosswind blew and tugged at our coats.

“I don’t know and I don’t want to talk about bats,” Feely said.

Actually, I was just making conversation. I knew that bats didn’t come in through open doors. There were enough of the things hanging in the attics at Buckshaw for me to know that they generally got in through broken windows or were dragged in, injured, by cats. Since St. Tancred’s didn’t have a cat, the answer seemed obvious.

“Why are they opening his tomb?” I asked, changing the subject. Feely would know I was referring to the saint.

“Saint Tancred? Because it’s the quincentennial of his death.”

“The what?”

“Quincentennial. It means five hundred years.”

I let out a whistle. “Saint Tancred’s been dead five hundred years? That’s five times longer than old Hezekiah Whytefleet lived.”

Feely said nothing.

“That means he died in 1451,” I said, making a quick mental subtraction. “What do you suppose he’s going to look like when they dig him up?”

“Who knows?” Feely said. “Some saints remain forever uncorrupted. Their complexions are still as soft and peachy as a baby’s bottom, and they have a smell of flowers about them. ‘The odour of sanctity,’ it’s called.”

When she felt like it, my sister could be downright chatty.

“Supercolossal!” I said. “I hope I get a good squint at him when they drag him out of his box.”

“Forget about Saint Tancred,” Feely said. “You won’t be allowed anywhere near him.”

“It’s like eatin’ cooked ’eat,” Mrs. Mullet said. What she meant, of course, was “eating cooked heat.”

I stared doubtfully at the bowl of squash and parsnip soup as she put it on the table in front of me. Black peppercorns floated in the stuff like pellets of used birdshot.

“Looks almost good enough to eat,” I remarked pleasantly.

Sticking a finger into *The Mysteries of Udolpho* to mark her place, Daffy shot me one of her paralysing looks.

“Ungrateful little wretch,” she muttered.

“Daphne . . .” Father said.

“Well, she is,” Daffy went on. “Mrs. Mullet’s soup is nothing to joke about.”

Feely quickly clapped a napkin to her lips to stifle a smile, and I saw another of those silent messages wing its way between my sisters.

“Ophelia . . .” Father said. He had not missed it, either.

“Oh, it’s nothin’, Colonel de Luce,” Mrs. Mullet said. “Miss Flavia ’as to ’ave ’er little joke. Me an’ ’er ’as an understandin’. She means no ’arm.”

This was news to me, but I trotted out a warm smile.

“It’s all right, Mrs. M,” I told her. “They know not what they do.”

Very deliberately, Father closed the latest issue of *The London Philatelist* which he had been reading, picked it

up, and left the room. A few moments later, I heard his study door closing quietly.

“Now you’ve done it,” Feely said.

Father’s money problems had become more pressing with each passing month. There had been a time when his worries made him merely glum, but recently I had detected something which I feared was far, far worse: surrender.

Surrender in a man who had survived a prisoner-of-war camp was almost unthinkable, and I realised with a sudden twinge in my heart that the bone-dry little men of His Majesty’s Board of Inland Revenue had done to Father what the Empire of Japan had failed to do. They had caused him to give up hope.

Our mother, Harriet, to whom Buckshaw had been left by her great-uncle Tarquin de Luce, had died in a mountaineering accident in the Himalayas when I was a year old. Because she had left no will, His Majesty’s Vultures had descended upon Father at once, and had been busily pecking out his liver ever since.

It had been a long struggle. From time to time, it had looked as if circumstances might take a turn for the better, but recently, I had noticed that Father was tiring. On several occasions, he had warned us that he might have to give up Buckshaw, but somehow we had always muddled through. Now, it seemed as if he no longer cared.

How I loved the dear old place! The very thought of its wilting wallpaper and crumbling carpets was enough to give me gooseflesh.

Uncle Tar’s first-rate chemistry lab upstairs in the unheated east wing was the only part of the house that

would pass inspection, but it had long been abandoned to the dust and the cold of neglect until I had discovered the forgotten room and commandeered it for my own.

Although Uncle Tar had been dead for more than twenty years, the laboratory which his indulgent father had built for him had been so far in advance of its time that it would even now, in 1951, be considered a marvel of science. From the gleaming brass of the Leitz binocular microscope to the rank upon rank of bottled chemicals, from the forest of flasks and flagons to the gas chromatograph which he had caused to be built, based upon the work of the enviably named Mikhail Semenovitch Tswett, Uncle Tar's laboratory was now mine: a world of glass and wonder.

It was rumoured that, at the time of his death, Uncle Tar had been at work upon the first-order decomposition of nitrogen pentoxide. If those whispers were true, he was one of the pioneers of what we have recently come to call "The Bomb."

From Uncle Tar's library and his detailed notebooks, I had managed to turn myself into a cracking good chemist, although my interests were not so much given over to the splitting of atoms as to the concocting of poisons.

To me, a jolly good dose of potassium cyanide beats stupid old spinning electrons any day of the week.

The thought of my waiting laboratory was impossible to resist.

"Don't bother getting up," I said to Daffy and Feely, who stared at me as if I had sprouted a second head.

I walked from the room in utter silence.