

Flight of the Shaman

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“But when I looked into the mirror I cried out and my heart was shaken:
For I did not see myself, I saw the sneer and grimace of a devil.”

The Child with the Mirror

‘Thus Spoke Zarathustra’

Friedrich Nietzsche

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CHAPTER 1

Copperfield Street Crusaders

"Upstairs in the bottom of the wardrobe...get the best tablecloth Davey..." his mother called breathlessly as she staggered down the lobby with armfuls of plates, "Davey!" she screeched after him.

"Yes Mum?" he halted.

"Make sure it's not the cloth with a hole in it," she whispered.

"Did you say, *make sure it's not the one with a..*" he called loudly but his mother interrupted with a scream of panic, "DAVEEEE!" They both laughed as she busied her way into the street. She shouted after him, "and get a move on or you'll be late. Your uniform's hanging on the banister!" "That lad'll be the death of me," she muttered emerging into the hustle and bustle.

"Lovely day for it Mrs Mac," called old Nick from his bedroom window as he finished tying a band of streamers in place, it was one of many that stretched across the street.

"Aye Nick," sighed the woman.

"What do you think of this then eh?" he asked pointing to the streamers.

In black charcoaled letters, one letter to each small flag, his spidery hand had written *COPPERFIELD STREET CRUSADERS 1914*.

"We'll give them boys a send off to remember," said Nick.

"Aye, that we will Nick, that we will," she answered but feeling a lump rising in her throat she turned away from him and scanned the women and children thronging the street, "Coo-eee, coo-eee, Mrs Fegan," she called over the commotion.

An incredibly fat woman wearing an incredibly grease-stained apron waddled up the street towards her, her stubby heels slipped and skidded over the worn cobbles causing her to sway perilously, children seeing the danger leapt from her path or hissed warnings of, "*Fatty Fegan!*"

"Oooh, best crockery Mrs McCann," she panted stabbing furiously with three fierce hat-pins at the tiny hat perched on top of her head as though it were some living-breathing animal whose life she was trying to extinguish, "we'll make sure the men get to use them plates they won't be eating off them where they're going."

The tears welled up into Liz's eyes.

Seeing the reaction to her words Mrs Fegan quickly added, "Me and me big mouth, come on girl don't you upset yourself now, weren't these from your grandmother?" Her thick hands took hold of the delicate plates and rested them precariously on her meaty forearms, "Lived down in Matthew Street didn't they?" She began spacing the plates on the trestle tables that stretched the length of the street, "we'll put these in pride of place," but sensing that her attempts at distraction were wasted she quickly put the pile down, "Come on then girl, let it all go," she held out her brawny arms welcoming the younger woman into them.

The tears from Liz's eyes soaked the thick strap of her apron.

Thick, ugly, tea-stained teeth were revealed as Mrs Fegan mouthed soundless words to another old woman over Liz's shoulder, "*Fourth one today Mrs Murtagh.*" The other old woman nodded knowingly, it would have been a close run-contest between the two for ugliness, Mrs Murtagh had a large blob-shaped nose "the Murtagh nose" which competed with an almost equally large wart hanging alongside it, the two fleshy lumps often caused a darting eye-ball effect upon whoever she spoke to as they tried to view the appendages simultaneously. Mrs Fegan's hand waved her to assist in consoling the latest victim, "There, there, come on now," she said patting Liz on the back, "six months they say and it'll all be over, he'll be back before you know it."

Her words produced a torrent of tears.

When Davey finally appeared with the table cloth Mrs Murtagh was ready for him. "Now there's what I like to see, a man in uniform," she nodded her head towards his mother and whispered, "*she'll be alright, it's been a long time building.* Here! Give me that lovey, you run along now."

"Are you sure she'll be alright Mrs Murtagh," said Davey looking concernedly towards his mother but was reassured by various facial contortions from Mrs Fegan, "Anything you want from Uncle Paddy?" he asked Mrs Murtagh.

"You can tell that good for nothing from me that if I don't see him marching down this street with the rest of 'em then don't bother coming back home. Your dad's going to need looking after and my Paddy's the man for the job."

"I'll tell him," called Davey running off.

"Remember, tell him, don't bother coming back!" growled Mrs Murtagh emphasising the point by rolling up the sleeves of her house-coat.

"He'd sooner face the Germans than her," laughed Davey to himself.

Down Pecksniff Street and Dombey Street he ran, the flags were out, tables were laid, everyone was waiting for the parade. Feeling proud in his uniform; freshly pressed trousers, stiff black epaulettes jacket and peak hat, polished brass bugle strung across his back, he managed to attract even more attention to himself by scraping the metal studs of his boots over the cobbles. The noise, combined with the sparks as steel struck flint, caused every head to turn and look at him. At Tony Toohey's house a group of girls were gathered across the street, his sister Aimie was one of them, he planted both feet firmly on the floor and skidded along, clattering like an express train, sending showers of sparks flying.

"Whoaa!" he shouted as his feet slipped from under him. He landed heavily on his backside and went bouncing along, even as he bounced the screams and laughter of the girls hit him.

"Good thing *he's* not going off to defend us!"

"Think's he's riding a horse he does!"

"Church Lads Brigade? More like the charge of the Light Brigade!"

The girls ragged him unmercifully. Even the women forgot their troubles as they laughed until it hurt.

Davey got to his feet. The intended blast on his bugle which was now even more dented than his pride, came out as a shrill shriek.

"Stop him, he's killing me!" howled one of the girls who, like the rest of her friends, was doubled-over in fits of laughter.

Davey knocked timidly on the open door.

"Send him over on *their* side," jeered Aimie Toohey, "we'll win the war in a week!"

"Hurry up Toots!" Davey called into the hallway.

"What's the score then?" asked Toots sticking his head out the doorway, "what's everyone laughing at?"

"No idea. You ready?" Davey asked hurriedly.

"Be right with yer," he answered jamming on his peaked hat with the its distinctive "CLB" cap-badge. They were just about to set off but he remembered something. "Hang on a mo' I've forgot me bugle," he darted back in. Davey stood suffering further abuse until he re-emerged.

"Left, left; left, 'ight, left," said Davey quietly. They marched off smartly clacking their heels in step but it wasn't enough to silence the girls.

"Look at his ears!" one of them screamed.

"They're bright red!" screamed another.

"They talking about us?"

Avoiding the question Davey answered, "We're meeting up behind the cathedral," but he could feel the stares burning into his already burning ears. The girls were still screeching as they turned into Nickleby Street

"Our Aimie was with 'em, I'll give her a good hiding when I get home," promised Toots realising his friend's embarrassment. Davey was torn between wanting her to protect her and the desire for retribution. He was about to come down on the side of forgive and forget when another lad hailed them from across the street.

"Hey up there!"

"Buzzer! How's it going?"

Buzzer struggled to emerge through the narrow doorway to his house, he succeeded by walking backwards carrying his snare drum in his hands, with a wide grin he threw the strap of the drum over his shoulder, took up his sticks and battered out the first few beats of the Brigade song. They marched on together singing the words,

"Old King Cole was a merry old soul
And a Merry Old Soul was he
There's none so fair as can compare
With the lads of the CLB!"

Several more verses which grew steadily cruder were to follow before they reached the cathedral.

"They're all here," said Davey pointing downhill towards the crowd gathered under the massive building's dark shadow, "I'm going to find me Dad!" off he ran away from his friends.

It was a bright sunny day but a cool sea-breeze lifted off the River Mersey and sent a chill through the air, factories and dockyards sent their filthy smoke up to join the breeze darkening the sandstone walls of the cathedral from red to black. Some of the men raised their collars against the damp, many had just finished their shifts, they still wore their work clothes; heavy jackets and boots, trousers with patches on the knees and turnups at the bottoms stitched on to replace frayed edges.

Davey searched amongst them but although he asked several times, "Have you seen me Dad?" no-one was able to help. The men milled around, a disorganised body about three hundred strong waiting for someone to

organise them. That someone was ex-Colour Sergeant Cayden. Twenty years of bellowing orders hadn't done anything to weaken his voice.

"LISTEN UP!" he roared above the hubbub. Powered by his barrel-chest his voice stilled everyone into silence, "I want you men fallen in, street by street, file by file. You're in the army now so the sooner you start acting like soldiers the better it'll be for all of us."

"But *you're* not in the army *now* Colours!" quipped a voice from the crowd.

"And it's a good thing for you I'm not!" retorted the sergeant.

Groups started to gather together, "Arundel Avenue Raiders!" "Myrtle Street Marauders!" "Copperfield Street Crusaders," "Dombey *and Sons*!" each man joined his own street under the banner of its adopted name.

"Dad!" called Davey seeing his father heading towards his street's banner. Several other men with sons his age looked in his direction but it was a small man with curly hair, thinning on the top, and wearing trousers that always seemed too big for him, who turned back.

"Alright lad," he said, "by gosh you're looking smart." He waved towards a friend in the crowd, "quite a turn-out eh? We all signed up together. Few more years and you could have joined us. Ironed them trousers yourself?" Davey nodded. "Smart. Is your mum alright?" Hugh knew that she would be taking it hard.

"Fine Dad," said Davey. The past two weeks of her arguing and pleading with Hugh not to volunteer had been the only time in his life that he had heard his mother cry.

The heavy thump of the big bass drum signalled the Church Lads Brigade to form up.

"That's for the band, I'd better go."

"See you at the party," called his father.

Davey ran straight into the outstretched arms of a thick-set man. The man's hands gripped him round his arms and hoisted him into the air. "Hey lad, what's the hurry!" he boomed.

"Uncle Paddy! Are *you* going to be in the parade?"

"Nobody's going to be dropping white feathers through *our* door," he boomed planting Davey back on his feet, "it's not us workers that want to fight but nobody's goin' to call Paddy Murtagh a coward," he thumped himself on the chest.

"Your mam'll be pleased, she said she wants you to look after me Dad."

"Silly old woman, she's no idea. Look at them, like lambs to the slaughter, they think it's all a game, but yer Uncle Paddy'll be there for him," he looked thoughtful.

The bass drum thumped out more urgently.

"I'd better go, see you at the party!" called Davey.

"Aye, let's celebrate," said Paddy quietly to himself.

The Church Lads Brigade was placed at the head of the parade with the men behind, street by street, with banners fluttering. On the cathedral steps stood Colour Sergeant Cayden, alongside him clad in his robes and vestments the dean of the cathedral stood ready to give the men his blessing.

"PARADE 'SHUN!" yelled the sergeant. The Brigade and some of the men with military training snapped smartly to attention, others stood looking bewildered.

The sergeant yelled, "You men have taken the king's shilling, tomorrow you will put on uniform and begin basic training, you will have the power of the king and the might of the British Empire behind you. You will defeat the Hun and return as heroes. I only wish I was going with you. Now let's hear three cheers, AND I MEAN CHEERS for yourselves!"

The shout of several hundred men roared into the air, the noise hit the cathedral and echoed into the distance, all the surrounding neighbourhoods heard it, the streets which waited for the parade and the street parties went quiet as women and children stood and listened to the roar which carried across the rooftops.

The dean's blessing, accompanied with a sprinkling of holy water, was short and simple; "Onward Christian soldiers marching off to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before." It was followed by the first drum rolls of the same hymn as the sergeant roared,

"PAA... RADE WILL ADVANCE BY THE LEFT...FORWARD... MARCH!"

The bass drum beat out the time as the whole mass of men stepped forwards,

"LEFT, LEFT, LEFT, 'IGHT, LEFT," roared Cayden.

Buglers joined in and blasted out, "*Like a royal banner, on against the foe,*" the men in the column added their voices to each chorus "*Onward Christian soldiers marching off to war....*"

They paraded through the Holy Land; John Street, then Matthew Street, James Street and Simon Street, everywhere women and children and older men, not fit for war, stood cheering them on.

Colour Sergeant Cayden marched smartly alongside occasionally hissing out of the side of his mouth, "YOU! What do you think yer are? a camel!" Out of co-ordination the man would strive to stop himself swinging his left arm forwards with his left leg and get back in step. Showing the compassionate side of his nature the sergeant would demonstrate the small skip necessary to break the ungainly gait.

Davey was proud enough to burst, the Brigade played like it had never played before, Brian Kelly was tossing the mace, he threw it higher than ever and for the first time didn't drop it once.

The band's instruments gleamed in the sun and dazzled the onlookers eyes, it was a parade to remember! Davey and Toots exchanged winks as behind them The Crusaders followed, the tiny figure of Hugh smiled as he looked ahead at his son.

In Copperfield Street the excitement grew as they heard the parade approaching.

"They've just left the Holy Land, they're moving into Dickens Land!" came old Nick's shouted commentary from his bedroom, he couldn't get down the stairs because of his arthritis. As "Pilgrim's Progress" floated through the air they could clearly hear the percussion instruments, xylophones and tambourines and knew it was getting closer.

"They're in Nickleby Street!" cried one, "No its Pecksniff Street!" argued another.

"He who would valiant be 'gainst all disaster," sang the men.

"Let him in constancy follow the master," blasted the bugles in competition with the men for that and the next line.

All the instruments joined together for, *"His first avowed intent, to be a pilgrim!"*

Horses reared and whinnied as the parade passed.

"Doesn't he look smart." "You just fancy him," said the girls in Dombey Street as Davey passed blowing for all he was worth. Then the bugles went quiet as the drums took up the interval between songs, the big bass with "Church Lads Brigade" painted in bright blue letters upon both its faces, boomed out on its own, marking time with the thousands of steel studs which struck the stones. Some of the men carried broom-sticks as imaginary rifles, those who knew drill moved the sticks through, "Slope arms, order arms, present arms."

The snares joined in with their rat-a-tat-tat, they sent a pony and trap hurtling off as the high-spirited animal took fright. As the mace-bearer directed the column into Copperfield Street bugles sounded the first few bars of a song they all knew well.

"LET'S HEAR IT LADS!" roared Colour Sergeant Cayden.

"It's a long way to Tipperary,"

Davey waved to his mum as the Brigade passed by, she was smiling and waving with all the other women of the street.

It's a long way from home"

"It's a long way to Tipperary," At this point Hugh came alongside his wife, their eyes met and flooded with tears as she heard his voice yelling above everyone else to her and to her alone,

"To the sweetest girl I know..."

Goodbye Piccadilly

Hello Leicester Square

It's a long long way to Tipperary but my heart lies there".

Like many other wives Liz buried her face into her pinny and sobbed. The older women took bunches of the younger women into their arms and tried to console them.

The band and men passed by until its sound faded. The atmosphere in the street wasn't what it had been but Mrs Fegan took charge. "Ladies, Ladies, Ladies!" she screeched until everyone turned towards her, "the men'll back soon, let's make sure we have a good party, get rid of the tears and be happy for them, they won't want to remember us like this." The women pulled themselves together, dried their eyes, went into their two-up, two-downs and began ferrying food to the tables.

Before long the men returned rolling two kegs of ale before them.

"What a spread!" exclaimed Davey seeing all the tables filled to overflowing. He said the names of everything he saw as if savouring the taste, "Ginger beer, lemonade, sandwiches, apples, oranges, ham, sausages, biscuits....Dad!" His father ruffled his hand through his son's hair. "Quite a spread eh son!"

"So you've taken the shilling have yer!" exclaimed Mrs Murtagh, "Liz!" she called, "don't you be worrying about your Hughie, my Paddy's goin' to be there to look after him."

Liz forced herself to smile, Hugh joked, "Now I *have* got problems! But the first thing he can do is fetch me a pint! Paddy, give them a hand over there!"

A group of men were struggling with one of the barrels trying to lift it on top of a low wall. Paddy walked across, "Mind yer backs there lads, I'll be dealing with this boyo," he grabbed the barrel in a bear-hug. "Heeep!" he exclaimed as he straightened his legs and lifted the barrel onto the wall. "I don't know, if you want a job doing you're best doing it yerself," he took hold of the tap, "Pass us that there mallet will yer Johnno," then with an almighty belt he thumped the tap home.

"A pint for half-pint Hughie!" he quipped as he passed the glass to his friend.

"Yer great lump, cheers Paddy!" said Hugh.

The party got underway, "Some more cheese Mr Murtagh?" "Can you pass me the ham," "Any pickles?" Best behaviour disguised a free-for-all; families sat together alongside their neighbours, food and drink was passed around until every stomach groaned under the strain, even the babies burred as milk from their mothers, heavily laden with ale, was fed into them.

"Another piece of cake Hughie?" asked Liz placing a huge chunk of chocolate cake before him as if trying to fill him up so much before he went away that he'd never need feeding again.

"I'm fit to burst," said Hugh but loosened his belt buckle by several notches to allow room for more.

When every last morsel had been cleared Mrs Fegan again took control.

"Right ladies!" she screeched, "let's clear this lot away. You fellers shift yerselves!"

The men moved together and sat laughing and joking together as the women worked away, they were being treated like lords and the beer stopped them from worrying what the future held in store. Outside they sat, smoking their pipes until the sun went down and the barrels had been drained then one by one they made their way into their homes.

"Everything alright Liz," Hugh asked his wife quietly, she sat finishing off the scarf she was knitting for him, "Has Davey gone to bed?"

Liz looked across to her husband, she put down her knitting and got up, crossed the room and hugged him as though she would never let him go.

"Come on girl, don't start going all weak and soppy on me, it's going to be a rough ride and I want to know that my girl is able to cope with it."

"Oh don't go worrying about me now Hughie, I'll be alright," she paused, "it's just that I'll miss you."

"Well if what they're saying is true it shouldn't be for long and I'll be home again. Some of the lads signed up today because they didn't want to miss out, it could be that quick."

"Can we sit and read together?" she asked, "I don't want to waste a minute of to-night."

Hugh took the family Bible from the shelf over the fireplace, "Come on then girl, sit here," he made room for her next to him on the sofa and put his arm around her.

They flicked through the pages, "Let's read this one called *The True Vine*, it's such a beautiful picture," said Liz. By flickering gaslight Hugh read the passage but his voice stuttered when he reached, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends..."

Liz could not control herself, she broke her heart and Hugh knew not to stop her.

Davey heard the heavy sobs. He lay in the darkness and was scared for his father.

CHAPTER 2

"Over the top"

"There yer go Hughie, that's you all done up, it'll protect your vitals," said Paddy. With a jerk he finished strapping the short digging spade to Hugh's chest. A piercing roar followed immediately by an explosion caused them and the men around them to bury their heads into their necks, mud and soil splattered down into their trench.

"You didn't need to duck little feller!" joked Paddy as he clapped his friend on the shoulder.

"That's their first one today," said Hugh, "The Hun are keeping their heads down." The artillery bombardment that screamed over their heads to plough into the German trenches was tremendous. Behind the enemy lines

they could see a large mud-covered hill, "Hill 17!" the colonel had called it, "It will be quite easy, after our bombardment Fritz won't be interested in fighting, you'll be able to just stroll over there and seize our objective."

The force of the explosion had dislodged a rough wooden sign, it teetered above a dugout then tumbled down into the mud at the bottom of the trench. The whitewashed words COPPERFIELD STREET CRUSADERS slowly dissolved into the grime and dirt.

"They'll be okay won't they Pad, they're all such good lads," said Hugh.

"You be worrying about yerself now Hughie, they're all big enough to take care of themselves." The same bad omen had been seen by the other men, they paused in their last minute preparations, hurriedly scribbled letters to their wives and sweethearts were for the moment forgotten, restricted by battledress and greatcoats they shook hands or hugged each other.

"We'd better be getting these monkeys ready," said Paddy as he began to carefully unwrap the rags and strapping which protected his rifle from the mud. Hugh copied him, the blast and roar above their heads increased so that he had to put his mouth directly over the bigger man's ear to make himself heard.

"Soon be our turn!" he yelled.

"You stay right behind me little feller," shouted Paddy back into his ear, "I'm a lot bigger than that there shovel."

Hugh said something he had wanted to say for a long time, "Thanks for looking after me Pad."

The bigger man just grinned. "ere lad, let's be looking after those poor feet of yours." He took off his backpack and dropped its dead-weight onto the mud. "Come on," he pulled Hugh next to him, their weight forced the pack down into the sucking sludge but their feet stayed clear of its grasp.

"You'll be getting yourself in trouble Paddy," said Hugh but grateful to get his sodden feet clear of the mire.

"If those there fellers are too important not to stand in the filth then so are we." Paddy inclined his head towards the officers standing together on a rickety wooden duck-board.

"I don't know why they can't all be like Captain Sherston," said Hugh indicating a man who stood apart from his brother officers, knee-deep in the filth.

"Poetry ain't got no place here but he's a fine man I'll grant you that."

Feeling their gaze upon him the officer looked up from the small pad he was writing upon and smiled at the two friends, he took the time to scratch at the lice gnawing away under his armpit, then returned to his notes.

The hours of waiting passed slowly; the shell fire continued without cease, overhead a bi-plane droned past spotting for the artillery, the very shells the pilot sought to direct onto their targets caused vacuums around the plane sending it dipping and dropping alarmingly, "Wouldn't fancy his job eh Hughie?" said Paddy putting an arm around Hugh, he was dozing on his feet with his head resting on his friend's shoulder. There they stood throughout that long, hot summer morning, Hugh slept through most of the deep, booming bombardment, it was the shrill blast of whistles which was to bring him back to harsh reality.

"Micawber Street and Nickleby Street are to go first," Paddy informed him.

Shrieking madly above the noise and confusion, the whistles signalled the first wave of attack. "Over you go!" yelled an officer who stood high on a parapet half-way up the trench wall. He motioned them upwards with his Browning pistol, a couple of coat-hooks were missing from his hand but he still had the use of his trigger and middle finger.

To cheers from the men who stood jam-packed together in the trench bottom the first wave climbed from safety into no-man's land.

"Get the Hun! Give them one for us!"

One joker shouted, "Remember the Alamo!"

The shouts of encouragement were drowned by the bomb-blasts which battered above their heads. Two of the men were blasted back into the trench as if flattened by an unseen hand. It was well for those who waited that they could not see the carnage that was taking place.

A blasted wasteland, covered in mud-filled craters and splattered tree stumps was the killing-field. Water-cooled machine guns stuttered out their tunes of death as men ran into the enfilading fire, behind their fallen comrades they crouched, seeking protection as necklaces of death spattered through the mud trying to fasten onto their lives.

Fear sent the thoughts of the waiting men scurrying home to their loved ones.

"Come on girl, let's get you over to Mrs Murtagh," said Mrs Fegan. She looped her arms around Liz's waist and, assisted by her own bulk, lifted her off the sofa.

"Come on, dry those eyes, you'll see, everything's going to be just fine."

She half-carried the younger woman down the lobby, into the street and crossed over to Mrs Murtagh's house.

"Mrs Murtagh!" she screeched. The door was opened by Mrs Murtagh, her hair was tightly wrapped round wooden clothes pegs, she was wearing a flowery workcoat. Instantly seeing what the situation was she said, "In you come girl," against words of protest Mrs Fegan heaved her in.

The front door opened straight into the living room.

"Sit yourself down you poor girl, what are you getting yourself so upset over. Mind your back there Mrs Fegan," said Mrs Murtagh as she helped the fat woman lower her burden into an armchair.

Mrs Fegan stood cradling the younger woman to her big belly. "A *cup* of tea Mrs Murtagh," she said mouthing the words in her exaggerated sort of way and emphasising the word *cup*. Mrs Murtagh nodded in understanding.

"I'd just put the kettle on," she said disappearing into the kitchen.

"Have you heard anything from your Paddy," Mrs Fegan called over the sound of the singing kettle, "is he alright?"

"That good for nothing so-and-so," said Mrs Murtagh as she returned carrying a cup of tea, "out there enjoying himself," but the expression on her face told a different tale. "There you go Mrs Mac, get it down yer, you'll feel a lot better for it."

The two old crones watched closely as the younger woman drank the tea.

"There's a good girl, just leave that little bit in the bottom."

Liz no longer sobbed but the tears still streamed down her face, several drops landed in the dregs of the cup. Mrs Fegan gave a questioning look, Mrs Murtagh answered, "That's fine, every little helps. Right, turn your cup three times to the left like this," she showed the movement. "That's a good girl," she turned to Mrs Fegan, "get us a saucer love."

"ang on a mo'," said Mrs Fegan as she waddled rapidly into the tiny kitchen and returned carrying a saucer.

"Right, tip your cup upside down onto this," Mrs Murtagh held out the saucer. "That's fine." She passed it back to Mrs Fegan, on it was a steaming mess of tea-leaves. Mrs Fegan carried the saucer back into the kitchen whilst Mrs Murtagh peered into the drained cup. "This is what we're after, it's a bright cup! Thank God for that, he'll be fine girl, look here Mrs Fegan, see how bright this is," she said showing her.

"There yer are, I told you didn't I," said Mrs Fegan vindicated, "anything else Mrs Murtagh?"

"Let's have a closer look should we."

Liz had cheered up, she watched attentively as the old woman squinted at the thinly spread tea-leaves which clung to the inside of the cup.

"Umm, yes, umm, yes," she repeated, nodding her head, "oh it's a clear cup, it's a clear cup."

Mrs Fegan was wriggling in anticipation but knew better than to interrupt the reading. Mrs Murtagh was spending a long time with this one, she watched the look of concentration as more and more secrets were teased from the leaves.

Mrs Murtagh's blob nose was almost stuck inside the cup, her wart rubbed along the rim. The moment in which her look of concentration gave way to a look of worry was seen by Liz.

"Will he be alright," she asked quickly, suddenly afraid.

"He'll come home to you girl, he'll come home, you mark my words," said Mrs Murtagh.

"Oh thank God," she said in an anguished but relieved voice.

"Come on then Mrs Murtagh, show us what you've seen," said Mrs Fegan.

"Pass us a pin."

Mrs Fegan extracted one of the spikes which appeared to have dealt effectively with her hat

"See down there, down in the bottom, see those deep lines set into the leaves," said Mrs Murtagh tracing round the images with the pin.

"Yes I see them," said Liz. Mrs Fegan bobbed around behind them trying to get a better look.

"That's the trenches our boys are in," said Mrs Murtagh, "see up there, higher up the cup, look there he is, your little Hughie. He's higher than the trench so he's out of it. Look, can you see him?"

Liz shook her head. Mrs Fegan couldn't see him either but said that she could.

"ere look," said Mrs Murtagh, tracing round the outline.

"Yes! Now I can see him, I see him," cried Liz, "he's walking round, he's alive and well but what's he doing out of the trench? Isn't that dangerous, will he be alright Mrs Murtagh?" she begged.

"The cup shows everything girl, everything near and everything far, it'd show us...." her voice trailed off slightly as she spoke.

"Anything else Mrs Murtagh," said Mrs Fegan sensing that she needed some help.

"No everything's going to be fine..for him," she replied getting up and sounding as cheery as she could, she walked off into the kitchen, "Biscuits anyone?"

Mrs Fegan sat with the plate resting on her belly, it made a little table of its own. One after another the biscuits were polished off and swilled down with cup after cup of tea. When the last biscuit was left she politely enquired, "Anybody want that one?" the other women did not dare to deprive her, it went the same way as the rest of them. For some time they sat, each lost in their own reveries until the silence was broken by the shout of a rag-and-bone man.

"ENNY OLD RAGS, SCRAP OR IRON!" he shouted walking up the back alleyway, the sound of his cart and the worn-out hooves of his broken down horse followed on behind.

Woken from their day-dreams Mrs Fegan raised her head and looked outside, "There's your Davey, home from band-practice, come on, let's be getting you home love," she gestured Mrs Murtagh to help.

Outside the sun was sinking low, the cathedral cast its long dark shadow upon them as they crossed the street.

Davey greeted them, "Hello Mrs Murtagh, Mrs Fegan," but seeing they way they were both supporting his mother he added, "everything alright?"

"She's been a little upset lad," said Mrs Murtagh, "but she's going to be fine now, aren't you girl?"

"Yes, don't be worrying about me Davey," said Liz in a faraway voice.

Mrs Fegan put a brawny arm around her waist, "Come on, up the wooden hill." Although the younger woman protested they bundled her up the tiny stairway and forced her into bed.

"Now you lie there my love and stay there," insisted Mrs Fegan, "I'll see to Davey, you get some rest."

"Poor dear's dog-tired," said Mrs Murtagh. The way Liz's eyes closed told them that sleep would not be long in coming. They crept back down the narrow stairs but the steep bend half-way up was far more difficult to negotiate going down.

"Here lad, give us a hand," whispered Mrs Fegan to Davey. He sprang up and steadied her hands as she tottered down, her stumpy heels ripping into the oil-cloth. "Thanks lad. She'll be fine now, don't you fret," said Mrs Fegan, "call round in an hour and I'll give you a bit of dinner."

"Thanks Mrs Fegan," said Davey his mouth watering at the thought of one of Mrs Fegan's sized meals.

The two old ladies retraced their steps, the damp evening air had made the cobbles slippery so that Mrs Fegan linked her friend's arm for support. A solitary blackbird piping the dusk sent a shiver down Mrs Murtagh's back, Mrs Fegan felt the shiver through her hand. Safely back in the living room she asked, "Well what did you see Muriel? Come on I know sommat's the matter."

"It's...I'm not sure...I need a closer look, light the lamp Peggy." She took hold of the cup then sat staring into its dried remains.

Hugh pushed a small locket into Paddy's hand, "If anything happens give this to me missus." Above the roar of the barrage Paddy could not hear him but he knew what he meant, he looked at the tiny photograph of Liz.

"You'll be alright little man, I'll see to that, you just stay with me." He clenched his fist and pushed the locket deep into his breast-pocket.

The shells fired from far behind their own lines to race screaming and splitting above their heads suddenly ceased. The air cleared rapidly to reveal a beautiful Summer sky, little clouds scudded across a bright blue expanse but the sudden silence was as unnerving as the roar of battle.

"What's going on then eh?" shouted one of the men to the officer on the parapet.

In a toffee-nosed accent he corrected him, "Do you mean *what's going on* SIR?" but added, "Sappers have been busy. They've been tunnelling towards Fritz for months," a runner passed him a message, "FIX BAYONETS!"

"Here we go Pad," Hugh's voice was drowned by the sound of hundreds of bayonets sliding from steel scabbards and being locked into position.

The joker began a few bars of the Crusaders favourite song, the words were simple enough, "*We're here because, we're here because, we're here because we're here...*" repeated over and over to the tune of Auld Lang Syne. None of the other men joined him but some did begin to hum along, it was a beautiful sound as they

waited in the horrible silence. It was too much for one youngster, hysteria gave him the strength to force his way through the press of men.

"Mum! Mum! Help me Mum!" he screamed and dropped his rifle into the mud.

"Halt or I fire!" yelled the officer on the parapet raising his pistol.

"Hold on! Don't shoot!" shouted men from below, "someone get hold of him."

But their attempts were too slow, the officer shot the man between the shoulder-blades. "Medics!" A stretcher was passed over the heads of the assembled men and the body was taken up.

"Swines!" Paddy spat.

The men began to murmur amongst themselves.

"He's shot Walter Pritchard's lad, b-----d, Let him have it Robbo!" someone called.

"Silence in the ranks!" yelled the officer sensing the unrest.

"*or I fire!*" mimicked a man beneath him. The situation was very tense, Hugh and Paddy clenched their knuckles on their 303's.

"I'd just as soon put a bullet into that there feller as into the Hun," said Paddy. The unrest amongst the men told of the same sentiment. The tension ended when one man shouted out, "Eh up, RATS!" A rat fell down into their trench. It was followed by another and another until soon the lip of the trench was a moving line of dark, slimy bodies as the fattened rodents slithered and fell downwards. Men lashed out with their heavy boots or tried to stamp the vermin into the filth. Some of the men received nasty bites and yelled in pain. "Get 'em Rags!" they urged their pet dog. Rags didn't need to be told, it tore after the rats, with a bite and a shake of its head it killed even the biggest of the vermin.

"Something's told them there fellers something's up," said Paddy quietly. They watched the rats dive into the dugouts darting desperately deeper. "Christ! There it is!"

An explosion from a huge land-mine far beneath the earth disembowelled the German trenches. Mountains of debris were propelled far above them; a horse's head, a wheel, artillery pieces, tree stumps. The shock wave hit and buffeted ear drums until they bled, the ground under their feet shook. The sky was blackened and ripped apart, it seemed it could never recover. Hill 17 was totally obscured by the wreckage of war.

"OVER THE TOP!" screamed the officer, gesturing furiously at all the remaining men with his pistol.

Over the rickety duckboards and up the ladders they went.

"Keep the line!" yelled the officer catching up with the heavier laden men.

Not one bullet was fired towards them, "Jerry felt that one!" shouted Paddy. They ran forward together, over the bodies of their fallen comrades, ignoring the cries of the wounded and the arms raised for help; slipping, falling and tripping across the desolation until they reached a section of barbed-wire. Jagged, knifelike spikes the thickness of a man's thumb halted them.

"It's not broken! The gun's haven't done their work!" Men cried in despair as they ran backwards and forwards seeking an opening, anywhere to get through the twisted metal strands.

"If Fritz has survived this is going to be messy," Paddy told Hugh.

A whistle attracted their attention, they ran towards it.

"Through here!" ordered the officer. A gap had been found. He stood there, waving his pistol, goading the men to press forwards, to carry the attack into the German trench. "Come on you men, into the breach!" he roared at the top of his voice.

"That there feller's a bloody fool," said Paddy, so many men were being wedged into the gap that only a trickle were able to pass through. A single shot rang out, it was the high-pitched crack of a .303, the officer's body turned head over heels then dropped to lie grotesquely in the mud.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" shouted Robbo. But the men in the gap were packed too tightly, hampered by the mud and their heavy packs they could not budge.

"Get yerself behind me Hughie, I can see what's goin' to happen 'ere."

Hugh watched as the mass of men buckled and dissolved as heavy machine-gun fire tore into them, they were flung like rag dolls as the wall of lead struck. Paddy was one of the men who took a bullet. He jerked back against Hugh knocking him down, covering him with his body. The sky erupted as explosions rent the air and white-hot metal from mortar and grenade shredded itself. The attack was forgotten as men sought to preserve their lives.

Beneath the body of Paddy squirmed Hugh, wiping the mud and the gore from his eyes he moved until he was able to scream into his ear, "Paddy! Paddy! Where are you hit?" Frantically he turned his friend's head so that he

could look into his eyes, "Paddy! Are you alright?" a faint flicker of life blinked back at him. "Let's be getting you out of here." He reached round his waist and unclasped the buckles of his webbing releasing water-bottle and ammunition. Bullets were zipping everywhere as he took hold of Paddy's greatcoat collar and dragged him a short distance towards a shell-hole. The mud allowed Hugh to slide the dead-weight of Paddy along, after several jerks they slid into the hole and came to rest in its slimy bottom. The screams and yells of their comrades told of others less fortunate than themselves.

Hugh opened Paddy's battledress, his tunic and shirt were staining crimson, as he stared into the wounded man's eyes he saw that same glazed look he has seen in the eyes of men hit by sniper fire and knew his friend's time was running out. "You'll be alright you great idiot, it'll buy you yer ticket back to Blighty."

He took off his pack then carefully wriggled up the muddy slope trying not to put his hands anywhere that bore the stain of battle. When he raised his helmet slightly above the rim of the shell-hole he saw a horrific sight. There was no longer a gap in the wire, the bodies of his friends blocked it. With shattered spirit he sank back into safety.

"We're only a grenade's throw from 'em Pad but we'll be alright, most of the other lads made it," he choked as he said the words, he knew that if he survived he would never forget what he had seen. "We'll keep our heads down until it gets dark."

Paddy's eyes rolled slowly round in their sockets, he looked at him, "Don't yer be worryin' about me now, I'm not goin' anywhere."

Hugh knew better than to argue, "Let's get you comfy then, it's going to be a long wait." He took off his greatcoat, covered his friend with it, then lay down at his side. Above them the battle raged in all its fury but beyond it the sun rose in the sky and it grew hot and warm.

"Thirsty Pad? let's get you some water should we." He took his canteen from its pouch and by soaking his handkerchief was able to squeeze drops into Paddy's mouth. His fear kept him talking, he talked of trips to Blackpool, "Remember the time you missed the last charabanc and had to sleep on the promenade?" he laughed at the memory; and spoke of old Nick the grouch of Copperfield Street who would wake up in the night and shout out at the top of his voice, "Is anybody there? Can somebody tell me if I'm awake?" He felt Paddy's head, it was cold and clammy, peeling back the greatcoat he saw the bright red patch of blood had grown. Panic forced him to talk even more, "Paddy, me and my Liz have been thinking that we should buy a little place in the country and grow vegetables, keep a few chickens for eggs, maybe a cow for milk and what we don't use we could sell. Davey could have a horse of his own and he'd grow up in a lovely clean place. You could join us Pad, if you want that is, your mum would probably be glad to get rid of you!" he laughed at that point. "Tell you what Pad, we could have a place by the sea and if we had a little boat we could go out everyday and catch a few fish. The four of us wouldn't need much would we."

Paddy did not make a murmur, Hugh panicked, "Paddy, you still there?"

"Aye lad, give us...smoke," he croaked.

Hugh reached into his breast pocket and drew out his tobacco, pipe and lighter, he packed a pipe, pulled on it then held it to Paddy's mouth. Paddy could not draw on it so Hugh took some into his own mouth and blew it softly into his friend's. High above, above the shell-bursts and cordite the blue sky beckoned, Hugh thought he saw something and held a hand to his eyes to shield them from the blasts and flares which burst all around.

"Paddy, up there. Can you see it? There's something up there." He tried to show him whatever it was but Paddy was unable to focus his eyes, they just rolled round, he was close to losing consciousness. Hugh lay back staring, "I'm not seeing things Pad, something's up there, something strange." He looked at his friend, his life blood was slowly ebbing away, "Maybe it's a guardian angel," he said dreamily.

It was late afternoon when the wind changed direction. There was an urgency in Hugh's voice, "Paddy, the wind's changed, they'll be laying down gas behind it!" but when he looked into his friend's eyes he saw that unless Paddy received treatment soon it would not be long before the life left them.

First came the smoke; an acrid, thick black cloud which billowed along hovering inches above the battlefield as if not wishing to add its filth to the foulness beneath it.

"They'll be adding the gas next, we're going to have to be getting out of here!"

He dampened their handkerchiefs and tied them into position over their mouths and noses.

"Soon as the smoke covers us we'll make a run for it!"

"Give me.. rifle, I'm stayin'."

Hugh did not answer, he returned his bayonet to its scabbard and prepared the rifle so that he could use it as a walking-stick to help them from the hole.

Unable to see their targets through the smoke the German gunners concentrated their fire in bursts through short arcs. Looking back towards his lines, Hugh saw other men rising from the ground, some helped their injured comrades to their feet, others struggled under the weight of wounded men. Screams of agony and pain rent the air.

"Let's be having you then Pad," said Hugh heaving on Paddy's lapels.

Paddy tried to speak but was too weak, Hugh pulled him into a sitting position then hoisted him onto his back. With his boots caked in mud and scrabbling for grip, ramming the butt of his rifle deep into the mud, he fought his way out from the shell-hole.

"Won't be needing that," he panted as the rifle was left stuck deep into the mud. The smoke engulfed them, "The Hun'll not be missing their chance," he gasped as the fumes soaked into his lungs. He staggered on moving as rapidly as he could dreading the thought that the unseen death might catch them. But it was not long before he felt a burning sensation on the back of his throat and knew it was something terrible. Heavier than air the gas filled hollows and depressions as it rolled along billowing after the retreating men.

Other men had already suffered its effects, they passed by crying out "Jesus help me!" or screaming in agony. Hugh heard retching and gurgling as they lay down to drown in water from their own lungs. Blinded and coughing he struggled through the hell away from the bursts of fire. Soon even the rattle of death stopped. Nothing could be seen, nothing could be heard save the crying of injured men wandering without any sense of direction until they fell. Through the eerie silence he strained under the weight of his friend. His helmet was pushed down in front of his face, only his will-power kept him going forcing him to stagger forwards one step at a time. An occasional magnesium flare flashed through the murk casting garish shadows, burning gas-filled eyes, "Soon be there Pad," he sputtered as they fell downwards.

"These tea-leaves are scattered everywhere," said Mrs Murtagh, "it's like they've all exploded from the bottom of the cup to give this reading." Her shaky hand traced the pin over a small clear area near the rim, "And look at this spot, high up above them, there's not one leaf on it."

"What is it?" asked Mrs Fegan, "hold on it looks like one of those Zeppelin things."

"Yer right girl," said Mrs Murtagh, she cried, "don't tell me they're going to drop bombs on our boys!"

"They'll be alright, you take a good look now," urged Mrs Fegan.

"I thought I saw something before but it's gone....No! There it is. It's my Paddy! He's hurt!"

"Are you sure Muriel? Show me," pleaded Mrs Fegan. The shaky pin drew round the figure of a man laying down.

"But look, if it's him he's higher than little Hughie in the cup," said Mrs Fegan, "what does that mean?"

Mrs Murtagh shook her head slowly from side to side, "My poor lad." A moistness was in her eyes, she took out a grubby hanky and blew her great nose.

"Yer could do with a drink," said Mrs Fegan, she went out into the backyard where there were crates of stout, some crates were filled with empties others waited to be consumed, "get this down yer girl," she encouraged biting the top off the bottle with her thick teeth.

It was a long drop before they hit the ground, the fall knocked the air from Hugh's body, he could feel everything about him going black and had to fight not to lose consciousness. In surges he became aware that he had fallen onto duckboards, they were solid and wide, they rested on the dry base of a deep dry trench. Forcing himself to see through tear-filled eyes he croaked, "Paddy we're in Fritz's trench!"

The smoke rolled like a wave over the top of the trench then fell like a waterfall down its side it would not be long before the trench was filled but for the moment they were able to breathe. Hugh's lungs were heaving as they sought to drag life through the poison which filled his chest. Paddy lay awkwardly, the gas was already beginning to cover him.

"Let's get you up Pad," Hugh tried to speak but gurgled as if his mouth was full of water. He heaved on Paddy's big shoulders but was barely able to move him. The effort caused him to choke, he coughed and spat out thick mucus, "Come on Pad, you've got to help me. We've got to get out of here."

Paddy's head rolled round, there was a look of stillness on his face.

"It'll soon be over for you," Hugh cried cuddling him, "you'll not suffer much longer."

He sat behind Paddy with his back against the trench wall cradling his friend, shreds of darkness dropped off the black cloud above and were eagerly swallowed up by the smoke around them which gradually deepened.

"Looks like Fritz is getting a taste of his own medicine Pad." He did not know and did not care if he ever moved again when out of the gloom loomed a figure of a man, "Let's hope this feller's one of ours," he said quietly but the spike on the helmet told him otherwise.

"He's a Hun," Hugh whispered, "keep still!" but his warning was not needed.

The gas mask on the man's face gave him a frightening appearance, he moved slowly along the trench like some kind of monster, shuffling and dragging his feet, moving sideways like a crab. Hugh gradually lowered his eyelids, his hope was that the German would take them both for dead and pass them by. As he came closer Hugh could see the man's rifle pointed towards them but it was the sight of the armoured glove with a dagger welded to its knuckles which caused him to shudder. He realised why the man was walking in such a fashion, he had used that weapon before, he was positioned so as to be able to bring it slamming into force.

The dagger glinted evilly in the half-light.

Using his friend as a shield Hugh slowly withdrew his bayonet taking care that even the faintest click should not betray his movement. The German was taking no chances, he approached their bodies cautiously.

Hugh knew he had to cough, the poisons in his lungs were bubbling, they passed up to his throat and he coughed loudly spitting sputum from his mouth.

"Hands hocht! Kamerad!" ordered the German, his voice sounded metallic through the mask. He thrust the dagger towards them and covered any movement with his rifle.

"Take it easy now there's a good feller." Hugh started to position his dagger ready for a sudden lunge but he could see the German knew what he was doing, there was no way that he would be quick enough to get in the first strike before a bullet hit him.

"Seems like that's it Pad, it's all up.... *kamerad*," he said quietly raising his hands.

The man moved towards them and kicked the outstretched foot of Paddy.

"Rausch!" he ordered.

"Eh! Pack it in!" said Hugh getting to his feet, "Can't you see he's had enough!"

The German swung the rifle towards him, warning him not to move. Through the seat of his pants Hugh felt the ground trembling. It was a different feeling from the vibrations made by the shells and explosives. Soon the German felt it too, they both looked along the trench, within an instant a frenzied horse charged towards them, its leather traces and gun-carriage harness flew wildly all around, its eyes were mad and crazed with fear. Hugh flung himself on top of Paddy, the German jumped the wrong way, he screamed as the animal hit him and trampled him into the ground.

Men chasing the animal followed close behind, they saw Hugh, the outline of his flat helmet gave him away. "Englander! Schnell! Achtung!" bullets tunnelled through the smoke. Hugh picked up the German's rifle and returned their fire, forcing the figures to shrink back into the murk. Quickly he dragged the gas-mask from the dead man and tried to put it on Paddy but shots zipped towards them. He ejected the spent shells from the rifle and reloaded from his own magazine praying that they were of the same calibre, his prayers were answered and he fired back. With bullets drilling through the air all around them he dragged Paddy towards the safety of a dugout. Staying as low as he could he reached the shelter but as he laboured to drag his friend to safety a bullet seared across his shoulders furrowing through the skin. The pain gave him strength, he bundled Paddy in and quickly fastened the mask to his face.

The enemy were moving up the trench, Hugh leant out and fired a couple of rounds towards them forcing them to dive into dugouts, for a time he was successful but a stick-grenade tumbled towards him out of the smoke, it landed short. He darted back into the shelter as the grenade exploded blasting earth and mud through the air.

"Stuck like rats in a trap eh Pad," but as he spoke he looked towards the back of the dugout, "There's light there Paddy!" he exclaimed. Breaking through the cracks around a narrow door faint shafts of light sliced into the gloom. "I'm going to have to leave you here Paddy boy, they'll look after you a lot better than I can, you'll have a better chance with them than with me," he gave his friend a last embrace then for greater protection pushed him out of sight under some planking which served as a bed. Paddy lay submerged in the smoke, his breath barely rattling the filter in the mask. Hugh held the rifle out into the trench and fired off a few shots. A scream of "Ich schlag!" told him that a bullet had found a target, he waded back through the gas to the door. "They'll be on you in a moment. I'll be seeing you Paddy boy, take care of yourself now!" he called.

The door was metal plated with a brass handle recessed into its face, when he turned the handle and pushed, to his surprise it opened smoothly and easily on well-greased hinges. A grenade exploded in the trench as he moved through the doorway, the blast slammed the door shut behind him.

This was no dugout like those to which he was accustomed; the walls were engineered with precision, along the roof leading down a sloping tunnel were a number of electric light bulbs, the floor was covered with dry duckboards. It was quiet and still in the tunnel but the door could not hold back the smoke and gas, it puffed in the cracks and crept around his ankles. From the trench came shouting, Hugh propped the rifle against the door and kicked the butt end hard to wedge it into place. No sooner had he done so than the handle was turned and heavy boots battered against the metal plate. Harsh voices shouted, "Bringen hammer!"

The tunnel sloped steeply downwards, an iron hand-rail set into the left-hand wall allowed him to steady himself as he descended. His lungs begged to cough and his eyes screamed with pain but he forced himself along with his bayonet extended before him. Even the dull thud of shells exploding above were lost as the tunnel deepened to such an extent that steps were needed, he could barely see through his blurry eyes but at his feet, flowing like water, the smoke and gas trickled past. A deep thumping bang told him that a sledge-hammer was being used on the door, quickly he moved on to where the tunnel opened out into a small chamber, all kinds of foodstuffs were collected there, "Cripes Jerry has it good," he said to himself. Sacks of vegetables and thousands of tins were stacked to the roof, great sausages and hams hung from vaulted beams set into the ceiling. The explosion from the land mine had loosened some of the beams, one of them hung down so low that he had to duck underneath it.

Leading from the chamber four tunnels made off in different directions, Hugh watched the gas rolling down into them, from the two tunnels on his left he could hear the noise of men hard at work echoing along the shafts, he realised that they must already be near the site of the explosion. To his right, away from the sounds of digging, he chose a tunnel that was less steep than the others and cautiously made his way down it coughing and spluttering as he walked. A short distance along the tunnel the sound of music arrested him, "*Oompah, pah, oompah, pah pah.*" It reminded him of the band playing in the park on a Sunday afternoon, the sound was eerie in the midst of battle. Although his chest was wheezing horribly the sound was so peculiar that he had to see what it was. Peeping around a half-open door he looked into a small room which was fitted out as a hospital ward; on operating table was at the far end, surgeons were working away on the body of an injured man, the reek of ether and surgical spirits filled the air. Nearer to the doorway six small beds were bunched close together, in each bed lay an injured man, some were groaning in pain, four of the men were missing limbs. The music was coming from a phonograph scratching away on a small table. One of the patients glimpsed him and he cursed himself for his curiosity but the soldier was in such a weakened condition he was unable to cry out. Hugh slowly backed away but as he did so he witnessed gas rolling into the room.

He had to warn them, "GAS! GAS!" he shouted, several pairs of eyes turned towards him.

"Englander, Englander!" a male nurse shouted, then yelled to his patients, "Nicht im Bett!"

The alarm was raised, Hugh was exhausted, he staggered back to the chamber and followed the next passageway downwards but was so drained of energy that he fell against the damp earth wall, the sight of a small scorpion hiding in a crack close to his face shocked him enough to compel him to stagger on until the passageway widened. Along one side was stacked row upon row of huge artillery shells, he could go no further, he crawled behind the shells and hid in a tiny gap against the earth wall. There he sat, straining to draw air into his injured lungs and suffering such intense pain in his eyes that he felt like tearing them free with his hands, water splashed onto them from his canteen gave some temporary relief. "Well this is a fine mess you've got yourself into Hughie lad," he said to himself.

In the passageway the search was on, "Rauschen! Schnell!" yelled German soldiers. Two of the soldiers who passed were arguing, he heard them getting angry and listened as a tussle turned into a fight, he took off his helmet and spied from behind the shells, they were tugging at something, he knew what it was when one of them yelled, "Verschenken gas maske!"

The panic in their voices was plain to hear, slowly but surely the gas was crawling downwards, it had already risen to knee height, soon it would fill everywhere. Hugh thought of using his bayonet and trying to get the mask from the men but an officer ordered them away, he sat in the rising smoke and made a decision, "If I've got to go I'll take some of these fellers with me, they'll have fireworks here like they've never seen before."

He pulled down a shell and tried to unscrew its tip but it would not budge, he tried using the bottle-opener set into the handle of his bayonet but he could not move it.

All the while soldiers without masks were rushing past, trying to get as deep down as they could to escape the creeping terror. Peeping from behind the shells he saw that they too had tied soaked handkerchiefs around their faces. Some of the men had been caught out up above, they had bandages over their eyes and coughed and spluttered as they stumbled downwards with one hand on the shoulder of the man in front.

The land mine had dislodged earth in the trench wall behind him and revealed old wooden timbers, using his bayonet he began hacking out the timbers and heaped them together. Deeper he dug, by ramming the bayonet in with both hands he forced chunks and splinters of timber free. The gas rose rapidly, with what little strength he had left Hugh worked in a frenzy, by the time the gas had risen to waist height he was exhausted and could only push the timbers together against a shell with his boot.

"Well here goes nothing," he croaked as he took out his lighter. He held his breath and ducked into the smoke but his damaged lungs could not hold air, he came back up gasping and feeling so sickly that he thought he was going to pass out. He realised that the only way he could get a fire going would be to set light to a piece of wood first. Taking his bayonet he made another stab into the timbers but this time the bayonet and his arm disappeared deep into the hole he had made. The bayonet hit a chunk of stone then broke through into water. Beads of sweat broke from his brow as the water began to rush out, he knew it would give his hiding place away. Desperately he removed his helmet and pressed it hard against the hole but the water sprayed out completely drenching him, behind it he could feel the pressure building up. He held on for as long as he could but suddenly he was pushed to one side and a powerful jet rammed into the shells behind him.. They rocked backwards and forwards then clattered to the floor like skittles. Freed from any restraint the water blasted across the corridor and powered into the earth wall, cutting out mounds of soil and earth.

"Schnell!" came the shouts from below, an officer ordered a squad of soldiers to investigate but they were bowled over by the shells which clanged downhill on a slope of mud.

Hugh watched as the water widened the hole. The flow increased until what must have been thousands of gallons gushed down the corridor. Shouts of "Hilfe!" and "WASSER!" came from men trapped below, their shouts became screams as the water rose to ceiling height then they stopped. Soon afterwards it ceased to flow. Looking down the tunnel Hugh could see the water levelling off, some men were scrambling round in the muddy mess, they were the lucky ones. Occasional escapes of air bubbled to the surface as the liquid filled the gaps and crevices down below. Realising that he had but moments before rescuers discovered him Hugh poked his head into the opening made by the water. It was pitch black inside the hole but when he struck his lighter he was stunned. The flickering light revealed the inside of some sort of shaft, an old mining shaft he thought but the lack of light above told him that escape that way was out of the question. He looked downwards and saw just beneath him a pile of bleached white bones. Startled he almost dropped the flame.

From behind him came more shouts, "GAS! Achtung!" the rescuers backed away when they found that the water which had flowed down had backed a huge volume of gas upwards filling the tunnel. Hugh was about to try to save himself when he saw a helmet amongst the bones. It looked similar to the German's helmets but was slightly larger and without the spike, something about it attracted him. He squirmed his body into the hole and reached down, his fingers just managed to grasp the helmet and he dragged it free from the mud which clung to it. A skeleton arm broke free, the fingers of the hand were wedged into two holes in the back of the helmet. Hugh forced himself back out of the hole but the whole tunnel had filled with black smoke, he could not even see the helmet in his hands. As the gas again entered his body he began coughing and could not stop, he coughed until he felt his lungs were going to separate from his chest. He held the helmet with both of his hands, then as if wrestling with his pain he began moving it closer and closer to his face. The skeleton arm was still attached when he placed the helmet upon his head. The moment he did so a feeling of calmness came over him.

It was an indescribable calmness, everything around him seemed to slow down; the gas no longer cut into his lungs, he could breathe freely, his body felt no pain, his eyes no longer hurt, "What's happening?" he called out as vitality flowed through his veins, he clenched his fists together with his new found strength. He knew something strange was happening but his thoughts were for his friend. "Paddy!" he shouted and immediately began making his way upwards. As Hugh walked he realised something else, he could see clearly through the murk, men were scrabbling round in agony, tearing at themselves in their pain. Those with masks were shouting in panic and fear as they tried to find the bodies of their comrades whose horrible screams filled the foul air.

Hugh returned to the underground chamber, in one corner he saw three German officers wearing gas masks, they were hiding from their own men. Two of the officers carried tools from the site of the explosion, "Maybe they're too busy looking after their own skins to worry about me," he hoped but he would have to pass very close to them.

He crept past but the smoke was thinner, as he placed a foot on the first stair a heavy blow across the back of his head knocked him to the floor, smashing the skeleton arm. If he had not been wearing the helmet it would have caved in his skull. As he landed he rolled to one side, a pick-axe handle smashed into the floor where his head would have been. He kicked up hard with his feet and caught his attacker in the stomach. The man was sent flying through the air and did not stop until he smashed into a pile of tins. The other two officers backed off when they saw what had happened, "Schweinhund!" shouted one of the men.

Hugh ran up the stairs, incredibly he felt he had only just started to run but then was at the top, a soldier blinded by gas begged, "Hilfe," as he passed reaching out a hand for help. He dodged around him and carried on until he reached the doorway, the door, smashed off its hinges, was a mangled mess of metal. Quickly he ducked through.

Back in the chamber the two officers picked up their injured comrade who was groaning in pain. "Kommen!" said the more heavily built of the two. He used the pick-axe to smash a padlock from a steel locker which was packed with freshly greased rifles, taking one each, they ran up the stairs. They had only reached the fifth step when the German halted. "Mein Gott!" he shrieked.

Within the smoke before him was a snake-like pair of eyes, the evil contained in the eyes froze him to the spot. "Was ist da?" questioned the man behind him.

The smoke around the eyes began to pull itself into shape, rapidly a fiercesome face was formed, the blackened skin and jagged teeth only highlighted the horror of the eyes. The rest of the body began to appear.

"Teufel hexe!" screamed the German then launched himself backwards slamming into the man behind, they both tumbled back down the stairs.

Hugh entered the dugout cautiously, it was completely filled with gas but was empty of men. "Paddy!" he called, he reached under the bed and there was his friend where he had left him, at first not even the slightest sound came from the mask but as he pulled and tugged the body out from beneath the bench he was rewarded with a faint rattle as air passed through the mask's filter.

"Let's be getting yer out of here lad." Hugh lifted Paddy easily to his shoulders, his strength surprised him as he moved out into the trench, he could hardly feel the load he carried. The trench was no longer a safe haven beneath a poisonous cloud, it was now part of the cloud. Within that cloud Hugh could see men dead and dying or, for those lucky enough to wear masks, crouching down into dugouts waiting for the wind to blow the gas clear. Hidden to them he passed them through the murk until he found a ladder without anybody near it, without any effort he climbed up carrying Paddy. The casualties he witnessed in no-man's land were countless, wherever he looked the smoke seemed to clear revealing visions too unspeakable to mention.

Grimly he walked back to his own lines a rifle shot away; past the bodies of the Crusaders, past the bodies of men mown down like ripe corn; through the devastation and destruction he walked, a survivor of a massacre.

CHAPTER 3

"Enny old Rags"

Davey and the older lads stood together watching as the younger boys formed two great lines.

Arms linked across each others backs they marched backwards and forwards across the playground chanting, "ALL IN TO PLAY WAR! ALL IN TO PLAY WAR!" picking up stragglers onto their ends of their lines. Over and over they chanted at the top of their voices, nobody could resist, soon even the older boys who tried to stand aloof joined up.

"ALL IN TO PLAY WAR! ALL IN TO PLAY WAR!" Davey had tried to withstand the call but it was too urgent, one of the lines was becoming slightly longer than the other. He joined the shorter.

As if by unseen command the lines separated, positions were taken up behind low-brick walls, the toilet block and the corrugated metal walls of the school became command-posts and forts.

"OVER THE TOP!" roared a group of twenty littl'uns as they hurled themselves forwards braying like sheep. More machine-gun noises hit their charge, "Aargh!" some yelled throwing their arms up in the air and toppled to the floor to lie slain on the battlefield whilst their comrades continued the attack.

The bigger lads took command of the defenders, "Hand-grenades!" ordered Davey. Thirty boys obeyed him, in unison they reached for their belts; raised the grenades to their mouths, teeth extracted the pins, then as one, the grenades were hurled. More attackers fell screaming to the floor shouting the sound of the same explosion that brought their untimely death. Shouts of "Yer dead!" came from the defenders as some attackers argued the extent of their wounds.

The CLANG-A-CLANG of the bell froze everyone. Like a terrier shaking a rat Mr Quirk battered it back and forth in his hand.

"YOU BOY!" he roared at one of the slain who was slow in his recovery, "Stand still!"

Nothing escaped his eye, even a girl in the playground next-door was roared at, "Stop dancing about Glenda Tappington!"

"I want...toilet...Sir," squeaked a little voice.

The girl's shrew-faced teacher screamed, "SILENCE!" and looked over the iron railings towards Mr Quirk, "I do apologise," she added. Her husband replied with a smug smile.

Davey thought he could use the distraction. His father would be resting on the Harrison's wall before he began his walk home. He turned and gave a quick wave. Hugh sat, his chest heaving, forehead sweating, he smiled weakly.

"You boy. OUT HERE!" roared Mr Quirk.

Davey moved from amongst the statues and made his way to the school master.

"Sorry Sir, it's my..."

"SILENCE!" roared the teacher into his face. The sound hit him like a blow. The smell of the man's breath was of moth-balls and kippers.

Mr Quirk's eyes swivelled to the side, took in Hugh sitting on the wall, then swivelled back.

"What do you think this is McCann!" he yelled, "I'm fed up with your insolence!"

The playground had been quiet before but now an expectant hush fell over it. Everyone knew what was coming.

"My cane Fergusson!" ordered Mr Quirk. A skinny, tousle-haired lad who had a permanent smirk on his face trotted into the building. Hugh used his walking-stick to help him stand up. By the time he reached his feet the boy had returned.

"Hand!" ordered Mr Quirk. Davey held out his hand, the cane was brought down with the full weight of the man's shoulder behind it.

"Hey leave it out!" called Hugh but his voice no longer had the power to carry.

"Other!" ordered Mr Quirk. Davey knew he must hold the hand perfectly still but as the heavy cane was whipping its way downwards he could not help it but moved his hand slightly, the cane caught him a glancing blow which was more painful than the previous swipe.

"Again!" snapped Mr Quirk without hesitation. Davey looked away as the second blow slammed home.

Hugh grimaced as each blow landed but Mr Quirk seemed to pay no more attention to the matter, "LINE UP" he roared. All the children walked quickly into lines, as each teacher appeared from the main doorway their class of children filed quietly into the building.

"Single file! SINGLE FILE!" Mr Quirk roared loudly so that his shout rang in the ears of Hugh.

A sly nod returned by his wife was followed by another smug grin as his eyes swivelled to watch Hugh's slow progress homewards.

"War hero," he sniggered as he took out a silver cigarette case from his pocket, lit up, then stood watching, chest stuck out, puffing smoke over his victory.

"I've told you that walking up to that school is too much for you Hughie," said his wife, "look at you, all out of breath," Hugh slumped in his armchair, his chest wheezed painfully as it dragged in air, "write to the War Board again, if we could afford the medicine you'd be recovering, not suffering like this."

"Times are hard girl," said Hugh, "there's men far worse off than me, look at poor old Paddy over the road," changing the subject he said, "Look Liz, I reckon that Quirk fellow is giving our Davey a hard time, you know the sort."

"Huh, know the sort, he got given four white feathers, he's nothing but a big bully."

"Well anyway I was thinking, what if we let the lad have a few days off?"

"And I don't suppose you'd mind having him round the house would you?" she laughed.

"It'll do him good, besides he's going to be out working before he knows it."

"Promise me that you won't try to go for another of those long walks like that one last weekend and I'll let him."

Hugh smiled, he wore spectacles, little metal rimmed glasses with thick lenses which magnified his gas-damaged eyes, Liz bathed in the love which flowed from them.

The chant already echoed through the school as Mr Quirk entered. With a loud, "Huh!" he pulled out a silver pocket watch from his waistcoat pocket then twitched his head as if to say, "*They are too early.*" As he hurried through each classroom on the way to his own the class halted and stood up, not until he had passed through into the next room did they carry on from where they had left off.

"Your dad's still got his gun hasn't 'e?" asked Toots. Davey listened, he sat with his throbbing hands under his armpits, fighting back the tears.

"*We'll* get that creep," said Toots nodding towards Fergusson.

Fergusson was waiting at the door, when he heard the chant stop in the adjoining classroom he knew his master was near; he swung open the door, the class jumped to their feet, in stormed Mr Quirk, face red with fury.

"We're behind," he snarled abruptly. With a wave of his cane as though conducting an orchestra, they were off.

"One's five is five
Two fives are ten
Three fives are fifteen
Four fives are twenty"

Forty boys chanted together but Tony Toohey had no idea of his tables, he just said anything that came into his head that fitted the tune. Davey had nearly laughed uncontrollably listening to him in times past but today the pain in his hands warned him otherwise.

The windows to the room were set high into the walls so that nothing should cause any distraction, outside the late summer sun rose in the sky until its rays shone through the windows, the dust separated the light as it shafted downwards, slowly it crept across the bare boards below and brightened the dismal room. Mr Quirk's face twisted into a grimace at this potential nuisance, the echo of his thin soled leather shoes competed against the scratch of pen nibs, with a long pole he hooked a heavy blind and pulled it down, blocking out the brightness. He could not block out the heat, summer was ending but the sun radiated against the corrugated metal walls, turning the rooms into ovens.

Costas Contaratus was a Greek dumpling, the sweat rolled down his face in rivers.

"Sir, Mr Quirk Sir," he interrupted the teacher from reading a novel.

"What *boy*," snarled Mr Quirk.

"Please Sir, may I remove my jumper," begged Contaratus, the heat was obviously getting too much for him, his eyes swam in their sockets.

"*Why?*" asked Mr Quirk, twitching his head slightly as was his mannerism whenever he felt attention was upon himself. He sat in his jacket, trousers, waistcoat, shirt and tie, not even a bead of sweat broke from his smooth white skin.

"'E's 'ot Sir," answered Fergusson.

Mr Quirk looked at him.

"Shut up," he spoke in a quiet voice but there was an air of menace to his words.

Fergusson's head shrank back into his shoulders, rebuked by his master. After a moments thought Mr Quirk nodded towards him. "Take him outside," he ordered, then returned to his reading. Fergusson copied Mr Quirk's self-important look and shot to help the boy who was slowly turning a shade of green.

Contaratus was half-carried through four classrooms, in each class he sank a little lower but the worse his plight the more titters he raised.

"Costa Curtains," whispered several voices, "Pull yourself together."

When they finally staggered into the fresh air, he gasped like a fish out of water.

Towards the day's end Mr Quirk took out his pocket watch and placed it on his desk, the feeling that freedom was once again drawing near spread like an invisible wave over the class, even Fergusson began staring anxiously at the back of the watch, polished by the hand of the man he sought to serve.

"CLANG-A-CLANG-A-CLANG!" the bell signalled the end of the day.

Indians, cowboys, soldiers, sailors, nurses and princesses burst from out of the school-gates, screaming, whooping and shooting.

"Dad!" called Davey, running across the street to his father.

Hugh sat on the Harrison's wall, he roughed the boy's hair in his hand.

"Hello lad, I'll bet you were baking like beans in there today, eh?" the sweat on his son's head was his answer.

"Everything alright lad?"

"He picks on all the kids, it was nothing," Davey looked away.

"I haven't told your mum what happened but I've sorted something out for you...if you want that is."

Davey turned towards him, curious.

"If you like you can have a few days off, it won't hurt, your mum's agreed to it..."

"Thanks Dad that's terrific!" exclaimed Davey.

"Come on then give us a hand." With one arm resting on his son's shoulders the other using his stick they made their way home. Their resting places were well known to them, every few hundred yards Hugh would take a brief halt. "Why are you walking like that lad, I'm not too heavy for you am I," he asked, noticing that Davey was dragging his left foot.

Davey looked embarrassed, "It's the sole on me boot Dad, it's a bit thin."

"You leave that to me, I'll get your granddad to get us something to fix that with."

Down the neat rows of terraced houses they walked, past the cold dark sandstone walls of the reservoir, past Steble Street baths and over the canal bridge until they reached Copperfield Street.

"Wow Dad! That looks great!"

All round the front door Hugh had painted the bricks with bright red-lead paint.

"It makes our house the smartest in the street," said Davey as they entered.

"And it nearly finished him off, those fumes on his chest," scolded his mother.

Davey kissed her on the cheek.

"Oh stop fussing Liz," said Hugh, "you'll have me dead and buried."

"I'll give you dead and buried," she said, "and if you two think you're getting up to mischief together over the next few days then you've got another thing coming to you."

Davey smiled, "Thanks Mum," he said.

"I'm going to have a little lie down now girl," said Hugh.

Davey and his mother looked at each other as they heard him slowly making his way up the stairs, he would not be down until morning. They sat together listening to the wireless, upstairs they could hear the same cough, all night long it would go on a harsh racking sound which hurt to listen to.

"Doctor says it should improve given time.- and money," said his mother crossly, not looking up from her knitting.

Autumn was setting in, the weather contrasted with the heat of the previous day. A cold drizzle pattered against the window panes, forcing its way through unputted gaps to slowly drip down the frame. A mist drifted across the river forcing ships and liners to sound their fog-horns like great beasts laying claim to their own territory. The clink of bottles told the time as the milk-cart wound its way along the streets.

"Breakfast Davey!" called his mother. From upstairs came faint snores.

"Ah, let the lad sleep in Liz," said Hugh coughing. The smoke belching out of a thousand chimneys to mix with the mist filthying the air put an even harder edge to his cough. Liz patted him gently on the back.

"You're spoiling him Hughie," she said forcing herself to laugh, each of his racking coughs cut into her like a knife.

Davey lay wrapped in his eiderdown but the smell of fried eggs was irresistible, for a moment he lay half asleep, half awake until the rumblings of his stomach dragged him from his bed, "I'm up Mum," he called, pulling on his dungarees and grining with the knowledge that he did not have to attend school.

The sound of his father's cough grated up the stairs, it seemed to be answered with a booming echo from across the street. Davey drew back the curtains and looked towards where the booming sound was coming from then pulled on his boots and ran down the stairs.

"Morning Mum, morning Dad, just popping over to Uncle Paddy's."

"Watch nobody sees you Davey," called his mother after him, "and be quick, it's going cold."

Smoke from a blazing fire rose above the Murtagh's thick and heavy like steam from a train, Mrs Murtagh tended her son like a nurse-maid, she ushered Davey up the stairs screeching after him,

"It's a visitor! Need anything Paddy."

"Here she goes again, all day long, *need anything Paddy*," he copied, giving another great booming cough. On the bed at his side lay a walking stick, he tapped on the floor with it,

"*Once for No, two for Yes, and three times if you want me*," he mimicked.

The accuracy of the imitation caused Davey to laugh. Paddy coughed in reply, he lay in bed, it had been specially raised so that he could lie at the window looking out at the street; heavy net curtains dulled out any bright light which may hurt his weakened eyes, below them a horse and cart carrying scrap metal made its soaking way along.

"No school today then young 'un?" he asked.

"Naw, I'm going to be leaving soon. Me and me dad are going to play chess instead."

"You'll learn a damn sight more doing that than stuck in that damn schoolroom." Every few words were punctuated with a frightening wheeze, "do us a favour and open that window, it's like a furnace in here." Davey could hear the fluids building up in his chest adding a rattle to the wheeze, he knew that soon Mrs Murtagh would ask him to leave saying, "*He needs a good clear out.*"

He slid the sash open, drizzle drifted in.

"That's better lad," said Paddy, "needed a bit of fresh air." But the air which entered dropped small flecks of soot onto the bedcovers. "Chess is like a battle see Davey, you've got to get all your men into the right place at the right time, find out your opponents weakness, then when everything's ready you strike. Sometimes it pays to throw away one of your pieces, make a sacrifice, a sacrifice will rip the heart out of a man. Look I'll show yer 'ow it's done."

"And keep that window shut up there," called Mrs Murtagh, "the doctor said to keep you warm and I'm not paying to heat the street."

"There she goes again," said Paddy angrily.

Davey could see his anger was not directed against his mother.

Another cough from downstairs was instantly recognised, "It's me Dad," said Davey.

Mrs Murtagh greeted him, "Morning Mr Mac, come in, you're all wet, you shouldn't be out in that. Go on up, they're both up there, 'ere love give us yer coat."

Slow footsteps sounded up the stairs.

"Come on little feller," wheezed Paddy, "yer like an old man, what's wrong with yer!"

Hugh panted into the room, grinning at Paddy he said, "I'll give you old man, you great lunk," he turned to Davey, "better get your breakfast lad, your mum says its getting cold, we don't want to upset her do we!" he smiled, a twinkle was in his eye.

"Alright Dad, see you later Uncle Pad."

"'e'are son, couple of coppers for yer," said Paddy taking some coins from the top drawer of the dressing table and passing them to him.

"Ta!" said Davey.

The two men listened to his energy as he bounced down the stairs.

"How's you then little feller?" asked Paddy.

"Much the same, much the same," answered Hugh quietly.

"Your lad didn't look too happy yesterday Hughie, what was up?"

"God, you don't miss a thing from here do you Pad," joked Hugh, "he had a bit of a problem with his teacher."

"Oh, who's that then? Do I know him?"

"Big bloke, always wears a suit and tie, he's got a moustache and a bit of a beard, he gave our Davey a caning yesterday, I tell you Pad if I was half the man I was I'd have been straight over there and set into him."

"Swine!" said Paddy, leaning over and spitting into the bucket by the side of his bed, his face was bright red when he came back up, "I know that feller, I remember him, keeps twitching his 'ead, now let me think..yeah... Queerk, that's him isn't it?"

"That's the one," said Hugh coughing, Paddy nodded towards his bucket, Hugh cleared his throat,

"Liz said he gave so many excuses to dodge the call-up that he got given four white feathers."

"Swine! To think we was over there fighting for the like's of him, I tell you what Hughie a hiding's too good for 'im," his temper had boiled over, "if you take my advice you'll get your .303 and put a bullet in him, so help me I would....If I ever get out of here...You get me your rifle and so help me God, I **will** get out of here!"

On her way upstairs with two cups of tea Mrs Murtagh decided she had better retreat. She hurried back into the kitchen and put a scarf on to hide the pegs in her hair, "Just popping round to Glendennings," she called up the stairs.

"Oh God, not more fish," groaned Paddy, "I'm goin' to grow gills if I stay here much longer."

Holding a gabardine mackintosh over her head to shield herself against the rain Mrs Murtagh hurried across the street.

"Mrs Mac, Mrs Mac!" she called breathlessly at the open door.

Davey and his mother rushed to her, "What's the matter, is it Hugh?" asked Liz in alarm.

"No, No he's alright, nothing to worry about." She turned to Davey, "You go on in lad while I have a word with your mother, it's just women's talk."

As soon as Davey had disappeared she lowered her voice to a whisper. "It's my Paddy, stuck up there all day everyday, it's driving him mad, mad I tell yer. I've just heard him saying that if your Hughie gets him his rifle he'll shoot somebody!"

"Hughie wouldn't do that," said Liz.

"We know that but my Paddy... you know what he's like. He's getting himself so worked up over there, just hide the rifle from him there's a dear, just in case." She rushed back across the street muttering to herself.

"What's going on Mum?" Davey asked as she burst past him and ran up the stairs. When she did not answer he followed her up. She stood holding the rifle in one hand and a helmet in the other.

"We've got to get these out the house Davey," she said.

"But Mum, this is Dad's rifle, he took this helmet off a German in the war."

"They'll only remind him of it," she said looking round and thinking. The cry from the alleyway gave her the answer.

"ENNY OLD RAGS! SCRAP OR IRON!"

"Give these to the rag and bone man, you keep the money, go on, there's a good lad."

Davey saw there was no argument about it, he carried them out into the back yard and opened the alleyway door. A few houses away a black, brown and white pie-bald horse which wore heavy leather blinkers stood patiently in the rain, harnessed behind it was a low flat-bedded cart carrying old rags and lumps of metal dripping with water, a man who was so filthy he looked as though he'd just come up from a coal-mine shouted his gravelly cry, "ENNY OLD RAGS! SCRAP OR IRON!"

Davey could never understand a word of it he walked down the sodden alleyway and felt a puddle seep into the worn sole of his boot, soaking his sock. "How much for these please Mister?"

"'alf a crown for the gun, a tanner for the 'at."

"I'll keep the hat," said Davey, "Ta!" he took the coin offered to him by a blackened hand.

Slowly he opened the alleyway door to check for his mother's whereabouts, between the outhouse, which housed the toilet, and the back wall was a narrow gap, he checked was not watching then pushed the helmet into the gap as far as he could reach.

"How much did he give you Davey?" asked Liz in a hushed voice.

"Half a crown Mum, here you have it."

"Shush, there's a good lad, you keep it, don't say nothing to your dad, he's waiting."

"Make your choice then Davey boy!" said Hugh hiding a pawn in each hand. Davey chose white.

"Cup of tea anybody?" asked Liz but already the concentration was so intense she did not receive any reply. She drifted back into the kitchen from where issued the sound of her singing in a beautifully soft, high-pitched voice.

The game progressed in silence until Hugh spoke, "You've been listening to your Uncle Paddy, I'd recognise this style of play anywhere, *"a sacrifice will rip the heart out of a man,"* I bet that's what he told you, didn't he?" Hugh laughed as he asked the question, Davey's face confirmed his suspicions. "Anyway lad, it's not going to help you, watch out!" Hugh positioned his knight close to Davey's territory, it's commanding position pinned down several pieces.

"Check," said Davey, throwing away a bishop against the pawn wall protecting the black king.

"More like suicide," said Hugh, "unless its another of Paddy's *sacrifice* moves!"

More and more men attacked the gap forced by the loss of the bishop. Soon Hugh was able to see what lay in store for him, "I'll give you that one lad, set them up again, I won't be a minute."

Davey heard him coughing and spluttering to the outhouse and his mother's voice, "Will you come back in before you catch your death of cold."

"Davey's been getting a bit of help from the great lummoX over the road," laughed Hugh when he returned, "I tell you what girl, that Paddy's got some brain on him. Hospital chess-champion he was. I can just see him now,

sitting there concentrating, chewing away at the corner of his lip." Liz wrung the dish-cloth in her hands when she saw the tortured look of recollection appear upon Hugh's face.

All day long father and son pitted their wits against each other, dinner was but an unwarranted interruption to the contest, Hugh loved a game of chess now that most other activities were closed to him and gradually his style of play told upon the less experienced player. The early darkness that Autumn brought with it set in and still the games went on. On his return from one of many visits to the outhouse Hugh pointed out through the window, "Red sky at night lad, should be a nice day tomorrow."

Davey looked out, over the grey slate roofs the sky was streaked with bands of crimson, the wind had dropped and a calmness was in the air, "Maybe a bit *too* calm though," suggested Hugh.

CHAPTER 4

New Soles for Old Boots

It was not the sound of his mother's voice calling him to breakfast which woke Davey the following day but the sound of light hammering accompanied with a foul smell. He sounded reveille upon his bugle and made his way down stairs.

Hugh laughed, "Eh lad, don't do that when you're mother's around, she'll give yer a thick ear. Old Nick's probably noted it down in his book already."

"Where is she?" Davey asked and answered his own question with another, "down the washhouse?"

"Aye lad," Hugh was working away on a pair of boots, "try that for size," he pretended to throw one of them at Davey but passed it to him.

"That's brilliant Dad," said Davey as he examined the thick sole.

"Sit yerself down and watch, you might need to know how to do this yourself one day."

Davey sat alongside his father, on the table Hugh had set up a cobbler's last, its three queer shaped metal feet held the other boot ready for work.

"Ugh, what *is* that smell?" Davey grimaced.

Hugh pointed at the stove upon which simmered away an evil brew, "Cow gum, it's made from animal bones, your mum couldn't stand the pong, that's why she's gone down the wash-house...I can't smell a thing," he wheezed, "look at this your granddad got us," he held up a thick piece of rubber, "Straight off the wheels of the 39 bus he said, if he ever gets caught they'll throw away the key! Here's what you do."

He drew around the sole onto the rubber with a piece of chalk, then took a sharp knife and sliced the rubber away in strips until he had formed the desired shape.

"You've got to make sure you get the treads going the right way," said Hugh showing him. Davey nodded, clearly impressed.

"Then all you do is...pass us that glue, careful now it's 'ot."

Davey passed the red-hot paste.

"You spread this lot on like so," he said using an old knife to spread the gum, "then knock in a few of these," he placed the rubber onto the boot then hammered tacks into it, "Now, do us a favour, go in the livin' room, I've got a poker in the fire, should be 'ot enough by now."

Davey returned with the poker.

"Right, you take this heel-bore," Hugh took a lump of thick wax and pushed it into place where the uppers met the sole, "this'll seal them, pass us the poker." He applied the hot iron to the wax, working it into place. There y'are, ship-shape and Bristol fashion! try 'em on."

They went outside into the backyard, it was a beautifully crisp day, the sun shone through an unclouded sky.

"I feel a foot taller," Davey joked, "thanks Dad. I can't wait to try them out."

"Well get your breakfast down yer then off you go."

"I thought we were going to..."

Hugh interrupted, "You get out in God's good air lad, come on I'll do you a fry up."

As he chased sizzling sausages with a fork Hugh said, "Best if you go down on the old railway line, no-one'll see you down there," he placed the heaped plate on the table, "Come on, get it down, yer mum'll be back soon and she might have other ideas."

Davey ate with urgency; he shovelled sausages, fried bread and dripping, black pudding and onions into his mouth as fast as he could and swilled each mouthful down with a swig of milk.

"Best if you go out the back way lad," said Hugh quickly, "I'll keep a weather-eye out here."

Davey was about to close the back door behind himself when something reminded him of the helmet, he reached behind the outhouse and pulled it out. With it tucked under his arm he walked down the alleyway, checked the coast was clear, then crossed over Dombey street. A very narrow alleyway led onto the recreation ground, its pot-holed terrain was strewn with bricks from numerous brick-fights, every conceivable form of refuse including old prams, motorcycles, and furniture littered the area. On the far side of the recreation ground was the cutting, by squatting down and sliding down a muddy slope on the soles of his boots Davey reached the old railway lines, they stretched parallel into the distance until they appeared to join together.

Realising he was free and the rest of the world was working, he put on the helmet, gave a shout of "Donner und blitzen!" then trotted off towards the point where the lines met.

The sun warmed the wooden sleepers and released strong smells of pine and creosote, Davey breathed the delightful odours deeply, a butterfly fluttered upwards released by the warming sun, everything was made so much nicer knowing that he should be stuck in the old tin can. He felt so filled with energy that he decided to run, he couldn't understand how it was that he was able to run so quickly without even tiring. Normally because running on the stones between the sleepers was such hard going he would run on the sleepers themselves, two sleepers twice, then one step of a single sleeper but today he was leaping three sleepers with each bound. He put it down to his new boots and the elation of missing school. The rhythm carried him quickly past the recreation ground to where houses crowded above threatening to topple onto the lines below.

"HALT or I'll shoot!" shouted a voice. He looked up, from the back-yard of one of the houses a tough with a thick shock of red-hair was pointing an air-pistol at him.

"Sixpence to pass!" shouted the tough.

Davey turned out his pockets, "I haven't got a penny."

"Give us yer 'elmet then," growled the tough taking careful aim.

"Go on yer ginger-nut!" shouted Davey, turning and running away.

The tough swung the pistol after him and fired, the barrel shot out sending the soft lead slug speeding towards its target, all Davey felt was a faint tap as it hit the helmet.

"Me an' me mates'll 'ave yer!" yelled the ginger-headed thug jumping down from the wall and shouting at a mangy dog which occupied a rickety kennel.

Davey sped on, he snapped a sapling and used it either as a rifle or to batter nettles and thistles from his path. The houses thinned out and gave way to rough bushes and spindly trees which clung weakly to the steep-sides of the cutting, ahead loomed the dark entrance to a tunnel. He'd been there before with his father but Hugh's chest had given in on him and they had had to turn back. He slowed as he reached its mouth, above the rails the tunnel mouth was black with the smoke from countless trains which once upon a time had clattered through its length. At the far end he could see the tiny outlet of light which beckoned like a beacon but inside the tunnel it was cold, damp and dark.

Lime-laden water dripped down forming stalactites, it was so quiet he could hear them dropping "plink, plink, plink" to the ground below spreading their rocky outgrowths over the stones. Normally it took some time as he stumbled towards the tunnel exit before his eyes adjusted to the weak light but today, to his surprise, he found that he could see perfectly in the darkness. Underfoot the stones scrunched and echoed, he saw a rat scurrying for cover and heard the pitter-patter of its feet. A shiver of fear trembled down his spine but he plucked a hand-grenade from his belt, dodged into a workman's safety hole, pulled the pin and threw it. He followed the explosion with a few shots and shouts of "Otto von Bismarck!" which cleared the place of any more lurking enemies.

As he emerged into the daylight the sight of the great beeches and elms were worth the few minutes in the tunnel, they overhung the line in great masses; squirrels chased and played in the branches gathering their stores of nuts for winter, birds chattered and trilled to each other in the leafy canopy. The railway line no longer lay in a cutting but sliced through a thick wood, trees encroached so close to it that if it were ever to be used again they would need felling before any carriage could pass; rabbits darted across the rails, heard or saw the intruder and ran for cover into deep undergrowth flashing white scuds to warn of the danger.

No houses had been built this far out from the city, the woods rampaged; sycamore spinners had sprouted amongst the stones and forced upwards as saplings, tentacles of dog-rose had ensnarled the metal rails fastening them in ever tightening grips, whole sections of line had been displaced by the roots of mighty trees.

A mile further on and the line crossed a small stream, a sandstone bridge spanned above, supporting the weight of the line with a beautiful arch. The spiky green coats of sweet horse-chestnuts littered the ground, by carefully running the sole of his boot over them the spikes were forced to release their contents. Peeling back the woody covering with his thumbnail, Davey munched chestnut after chestnut. The taste was slightly bitter at first but after some chewing a wonderful sweet, milky taste was liberated. After the first one he was unable to stop but kept on rolling, opening and eating. Soon he had cleared most of them but looking down over the walls which straddled the bridge he saw that the ground was thick with the juicy nuts, without hesitation he slid down the steep bank to where the stream gurgled and babbled. The arch towered above, into the keystone was carved the date "1865". He yelled "Oi!" and the sound echoed and bounced back under the arch as if shouted by a hundred invisible voices.

The sound was answered by a fierce bark.

He barely had time to rush into thick rhododendron bushes before the owners of the animal appeared. "Came from up 'ere Jake," said a scruffy, mean-faced youth.

"Naw, it were from over there," answered a thick-necked, ginger-haired thug, "I reckon it's that kid in the 'elmet." He held his dog on a thick string, it was a mangy looking brute.

A third youth who wore round steel-rimmed spectacles held a dead rabbit by the back legs, it looked like a recent victim of the dog.

"I reckon the dog's got it wrong," he said.

"Look Yatesy, yer four-eyed git, you trying to say my dog's stupid or sommat? Why's 'e pulling us up 'ere if there's nowt 'ere?" said the thug angrily.

Yatesy replied, "P'raps it were a fox."

"Then what's it doing wearing boots," said Jake.

"They look like tyre tracks," said the scruffy youth.

"I don't see any wagons 'ere now, do you Fleabag," said Jake, "you two are a right pair of idiots."

The dog had scented Davey, it barked furiously, "Stay 'ere, e's got wind of sommat, e'll find out soon enough."

Jake removed the noose from around its neck.

The animal growled its way towards the bush which concealed Davey suddenly as it began to nose its way in it turned tail and ran off with its tail between its legs, yelping in terror.

"What's up with that stupid mutt?" shouted its master.

"Maybe it's the White Lady," replied Fleabag.

"You and your white flippin' lady," said Jake. "Come on," he put two fingers in his mouth and blasted out an ear-piercing whistle, "LURCH!" he shouted, "let's get 'im back."

Davey made his way deeper and deeper into the rhododendrons, the vegetation crawled above and around him like a great octopus, the flowers had died off and many leaves were turning brown in preparation for the coming winter, in some places it was impassable and he had to double back upon himself before finding another way forwards. A rustling in the undergrowth frightened him and sent him hurrying into a thin path which was completely surrounded with foliage. Thorns and brambles barred the length of the path, carefully he took hold of them between thumb and forefinger and prised them out of the way. At the end of the path the sun shone down like a curtain of light. When Davey emerged through the curtain his eyes swept across a large grassy field, it was dotted great horse-chestnut trees which were already losing some of their leaves, but it was the sight of the rambling old mansion house which protruded into the field from the surrounding woods which brought a gasp of astonishment from his open mouth.

The sandstone walls stood strong and proud, autumn shades of ivy clung to them covering the windows and snarling up wrought iron columns to balconies and onto the roof. Slates were badly wanting and great holes gaped beneath huge decorative chimneystacks which teetered precariously but the house was still magnificent.

A barking in the distance alerted him to the possibility of the dog trailing him, to throw it off the scent he decided to climb up off the ground and travel to a different spot. Overhead the rhododendron bushes intertwined so completely they meshed together forming natural platforms, he shinned up the gnarled and twisted trunks of the great plants and began clambering around passing from one mattress of leaves to another. Squirrels were disturbed by his passage and leapt up into the branches of trees from where they chattered angrily back at him.

The thick woody stems of the plants provided good handholds but as he grasped them they oozed sticky sap causing every loose bit of bark to stick to his hands, however he managed to cover as much distance as was possible before he neared the field and the bushes began to thin out. Through the thinning leaves he glimpsed a dull yellow colour through which ran a band of purple written on the purple bank were the words "*North West Railway*". Davey realised he was looking at part of an old railway carriage. Carefully he moved nearer and his thoughts were confirmed, it was not just part but was the whole carriage, it lay half on its side disintegrating away like a great whale thrown onto a remote beach, it was strangled with vegetation; thick rhododendrons twisted in and out of its windows, crawling creepers entangled its wheels and axles, dog-rose strangled everywhere. Clambering forwards he reached a position from where he could see most of the remains quite clearly.

Many of the windows had been shattered by the force of thick boughs and limbs but a few were unbroken, through them the sun shone illuminating the inside of the coach. The interior was totally wrecked; much of it was covered with scrawlings in various colours of paint. "CARNATIC CLICK" "DOGGO" and other names littered the walls; a few heavy seat cushions with springs protruding were arranged together to form rough seating. As he saw the words, "FLEABAG *the maggot*" the sun moved behind a cloud dimming the light so that all he saw in the window was his own reflection. A fierce bark not too far away caused him to look away from the window but when he looked back he almost fell from his perch, without taking his eyes from the scene before him he gripped tight hold of the limb to which he clung.

A man held a knife at the throat of a dark-skinned native. Davey watched spellbound as the man yelled at the native, "Where does your village lie?"

The native had a look of terror on his face, his eyes looked wildly around as if hoping that some way of escape might suddenly appear to him, behind him the thick rough hand of another man gripped him by the hair, forcing his head backwards to reveal his throat.

"Where have you come from?" yelled the knifeman, his words were translated to the native by a third man. Each of the questioners wore a heavy leather jerkin, chain mail sleeves extended beneath, swords hung from leather waistbands.

"Let him feel the point of the knife Vargas!" urged the man who held the captive, he twisted his hand causing a cry of pain. Vargas did more than he was told, slowly the native crumpled to the ground.

"No!" screamed Davey, "*what are you doing!*" but his cries were not heard by the men.

"The point! not the blade Vargas!" shouted the translator. He turned to one side and ordered, "Bring another prisoner for questioning!"

Two men wearing helmets and carrying long poles on top of which sat vicious axe-heads marched a native towards them. Vargas dragged hold of the native by the hair and the same question was asked, "Where have you come from?"

The prisoner looked down at the body at his feet and spoke rapidly, the translator had to make much use of hand-signs to understand what he was being told, satisfied he turned to a man who stood to one side.

"Commander, the village is little more than a day's march from here, near the banks of a great river."

The commander wore a fine armour breastplate covered with exquisite designs, a stiff ruffed collar covered the chain-mail revealed at his neck, "Would it be possible for you to ask this savage whether there is any gold Carlos?" he asked.

"Show him your tooth Ricardo!" ordered Carlos. The man who held the native bent over their prisoner and revealed a horrible set of teeth, the knife blade jabbed towards a gold tooth and the questioning re-commenced. In an incredulous voice with eyes wide-open Carlos stammered, "There is much gold!"

The shadow of the cloud passed along the length of the carriage, Davey stared aghast as the images before him dissolved and the empty interior of the coach was revealed.

CHAPTER 5

The White Lady

"'ere 'e is!" yelled Yatesy, "said I heard sommat didn't I!" the dog was leaping up into the air barking madly at the boy above. Jake and Fleabag came running.

"Told yer it was 'im in the 'elmet!" shouted Jake. He pointed his air-pistol up at Davey and shouted, "Get down will ya!"

"What's happening? Where am I?" asked Davey in fright and confusion.

"'e wants to know where 'e is!" laughed Fleabag, the two other youths joined in laughing. He shouted back at Davey, "We're the Carnatic Click and this is our place, get down and we won't hurt yer."

The looks on their faces told Davey otherwise, fear cleared his mind, "Tell your dog to get away and I'll get down."

"LURCH! 'ere boy!" ordered Jake, the dog ignored him and kept leaping up snatching its teeth on empty air. Jake ran in and kicked it in the side, it yelped away, "Right you, get down 'ere NOW or I'll shoot," he yelled taking careful aim.

Davey jumped down and darted immediately to the carriage, a tree stump had been cut to provide a step to climb inside, the dog was almost upon him as he jumped on the stump grabbed a bumper and hauled himself up. He stood, staring in disbelief at the empty interior, unable to believe that the images he had seen had not been real.

"Gerroust of it!" came the yell as Jake started to climb after him. Davey sprinted through the length of the carriage and leapt out at the far end, he hit the ground running and tore through bushes and vines.

"GET 'IM," yelled the youths tearing after him. Davey had a head start but he knew that he could not hope to outrun the dog. He burst through the bushes into the field beyond and sprinted away.

By the time the youths reached the field he had put a good distance between himself and his pursuers and was running so swiftly they realised he would escape.

"LURCH! Get 'im," shouted Jake. The dog loped along out of kicking distance with its bottom jaw hanging low.

"GET 'IM LURCH or I'll boot the life out of yer," yelled Jake. The dog did not need a second bidding, it tore after Davey, he turned and saw it bearing down on him and ran faster. He ran so fast that the dog did not gain any ground, as he ran he wondered at the speed he moved. Over a low stone wall he jumped, behind it lay a shallow ditch with a trickle of muddy water in it, he cleared the ditch but the dog did not make it and landed in the water. Davey looked back and grinned as he saw the dog up to its knees in mud.

"Call Big Dave and the gang!" shouted Jake, Yatesy put his fingers into his mouth and blasted out a deafening whistle. From the trees on the far side of the field half-a-dozen more youths appeared and spread out. Davey slowed his pace and started to decide who he should head for but the dog had been given its chance, it leapt from the ground, thumping its paws into his back, the weight combined with its speed bowled him over. The animal stood above him its slavering jaws dripping onto his face.

"Tie 'im up, 'e's a slippery customer," said Jake panting as he ran up, "I told yer to just get down, now you've shown us you don't want to be friendly."

"I've got no string Jake," said Jacko.

Jake slapped him lightly across the face, "I've got no string," he mimicked, "use 'is bootlaces. God gerroust me way, I'll do it meself."

He pulled the laces out of Davey's boots.

"Right put yer 'ands together like this," he put the flats of his hands together, "keep 'em like that." Jake's sickly pale skin was covered in ginger-coloured freckles which seemed to glow red with his temper, Davey could feel the hatred within the youth as he knelt and tied one of the strings around his thumbs,

The rest of the gang members came up, "'e can't arf run," said a lanky youth whose whole face was covered in spots, "'e ran faster than yer dog Jake!" the gang laughed.

"Shut it Doggo, or you'll be getting a taste of this," Jake threatened with his fist, he turned to an even heavier built thug than himself, "what should we do with 'im Big Dave?" he asked.

Big Dave had just started shaving, the stubble grew in patches, in places it was nearly as long as his cropped hair, in a deep, dopey voice he said, "We'll roast 'is toes, give me his 'elmet."

Eager to please their leader several hands pulled the helmet from Davey's head, Big Dave stuck it proudly on his own, he droned, "I look like a Hun. Don't I Jake. Don't I Doggo. You'd berrer watch out cos I'm goin' to get you... Fleabag."

Fleabag screamed in pretend fear and ran into the woods, the gang followed, jostling their prisoner along. The chase took place around them as they walked.

"Leggo Dave, yer goin' to break it!" squealed Fleabag as Big Dave twisted his arm up his back. He had him pinned to the floor in the centre of a small clearing, one half of the clearing dipped sharply downwards so that it was lower than the other half. As Davey appeared Big Dave looked up at the fresh possibilities of torment and took hold of their prisoner, "See that rope tied up there," he pointed high into the branches of a massive oak, "that's our swing that is, get up there and get it down."

Jake untied the bootlace from Davey's thumbs, "Go on, do as 'e says, gerrup there!" A kick helped him on his way. Davey began to climb, the first fork was only twice his height, he soon reached it by means of deep cuts in the trunk which formed steps. Bark had long overgrown the cuts but they still gave a good foothold, higher he climbed. The steps were cut into a branch but they had been cut so long ago that as the tree had grown they had spaced themselves too far apart to make it easy for him, as the branch swayed in the breeze he started to feel unsafe. A slip, and minus its lace, one of his boots fell off, he clung on for dear life whilst underneath him Lurch seized the fallen gift.

"Keep goin' yer nearly there," the calls came from below but Davey had frozen, several stones winged their way towards him but nothing was going to make him climb any higher.

"Gerrou me way," shouted Big Dave. He leapt onto the trunk and climbed like a gorilla, "Shift yerself," he said tugging at Davey's heels. Davey knew he had to get out of the way. He moved to one side as Big Dave shot past him then he carefully began to descend.

"Me Tarzan the ape man!" shouted Big Dave as he took hold of the rope, one end of it was tied to the branch the other was tied to a stout, short length of stick, "ere it comes!" He threw the stick clear of the branches. It arched downwards pulling the rope after it, and Big Dave. With a loud scream he toppled from the tree snapping off several small branches as he fell. He landed full force on his head.

"Jesus Christ 'e's dead!" said Fleabag.

"What 'appened?" said Big Dave sitting up.

"Jesus Christ 'e's alive!" said Fleabag.

"Take more than a fall to kill Big Dave," said Big Dave. He jumped to his feet and as if to prove his invincibility grabbed hold of the stick which dangled at the rope's end and ran hard, launching himself out over the lower half of the clearing. "Unga, bunga, king o' the junga," he chanted as he swept round in a big circle like a great ape. He returned to the platform and ran along it to increase his speed, this time as he swung out he lifted his knees up through his arms and hooked them over the stick, letting go he scratched his armpits with his hands as he hung upside down, "Unga, bunga, king o' the junga!"

In established pecking order the gang members each took their turns, sometimes to assert his position Big Dave barged in and took hold of the swing, "Fight yer for it!" he would challenge the gang member as they passed up their turn. Each youth had his own little ditty to chant which seemed to reflect their position, Fleabag, the lowest of the low waited until last then repeated, "Nice mice! Nice mice!" in a high-pitched squeaky voice.

Davey continually sought the opportunity to leg it but the gang had taken prisoners before, they weren't going to let him escape easily.

"elp us with 'im, Jake," said Big Dave. They lifted Davey up by the elbows and sat him on the stick, "Thar she blows!" shouted Big Dave. They took hold of a foot each and ran, threw and spun him out, as he swung back in his head narrowly missed the trunk of the tree, another throw and he was sent out even further.

"AMMO!" yelled Doggo picking up handfuls of acorns and cramming them into his pockets, others copied. Big Dave stood tall as toadies passed him his ammunition.

"Take aim, FIRE!" A thousand acorns flew through the air, Davey pressed his face down into his arms, beneath him, wild with excitement, Lurch leapt up and grazed his bootless foot with its teeth.

"Prepare for boarding!" called Jake who was perched in the fork of the oak tree. As Davey swung in Jake leapt for the rope and thumped himself onto Davey's shoulders. Others scrambled into the tree, "Prepare for boarding!" they called as they dived on board, soon five bodies whirled and twirled above the clearing.

Fleabag tried to emulate the others, in his shrill voice he called, "Prepare for boarding," but as he flew through the air a well-placed foot was stuck in his way. He crumpled to the ground and lay moaning and crying as the swingers split their sides at his misfortune.

When the boarding party was completed Davey was ordered to collect wood.

"We're goin' to roast yer toes," said Big Dave, "then we're goin' to eat them."

Davey collected his boot which had been well chewed by the dog, "What yer doin'?" questioned Yatesy, "Oo said purrit back on?"

"I need it so I can get wood, Yatesy," said Davey, using the thug's name to try to appease him.

Yatesy grunted.

Other gang members were foraging for sweet horse-chestnuts to roast for dinner, soon a fire was going and chestnuts were popping. Davey stood to one side watching the youths tearing the shells from the hot nuts inside. Like a pack of wild dogs all attention seemed to be on the eating and getting their share as he drifted first to the edge of the clearing, then into the wood.

"'e's getting away!" squealed Fleabag.

"I'll 'ave 'im!" droned Big Dave.

"LURCH!" ordered Jake.

Davey dodged through trees and bushes, trying his best to shake off his chasers, Big Dave ran faster than he could cope with, he lost control and went smashing into a tree, the sight of him staggering around caused the gang to break into howls of laughter even Lurch cackled like a hyena. It gave Davey valuable seconds, he reached the overgrown gardens of the mansion and paused but the sounds of pursuit sent him hurdling up onto a low wall in front of the house, the wall surrounded a perfectly flat patch of long straggly grass. As he darted between wrought iron columns and under balconies the sounds of the chase grew, he twisted round the corner of the mansion hoping that he would not be seen.

"'e's 'ere!" yelled a pursuer spotting a boot disappearing.

Round the back of the house paving stones gave way to uneven cobbles, sandstone archways led him on to derelict stables. He ran into the stables hoping to find somewhere to hide but they were bare and empty with no possibility of concealment; then out through the back of the stables to where there stood a tall sandstone wall whose railing gate offered the only entrance, Lurch's bark was gaining, he opened the gate and stepped into a walled garden.

It was calm and peaceful in the garden, even the faint breeze was stilled by the walls which were three times his height, at one end towered the mansion; dull grey lead down-spouts contrasted against the dark red stones, they led up to stone gutters where crudely carved sandstone gargoyles glowered ready to belch rainwater, above them eagles and great cats stalked in statues of stone. The garden was overgrown with weeds, great thorn bushes strangled the life from Autumn flowers, shattered glass houses hid their contents with moss-covered panes.

The sounds of pursuit had died down but Davey knew they would not give up, he made his way to the house seeking a hiding-place. Parting the rusty red ivy which draped down the walls he saw the windows were boarded up with slats of wood stamped CEYLON TEA. Then came the sound he had been dreading, "'e's over 'ere!" followed by a piercing whistle.

Yatesy was on top of the garden wall.

He realised he was trapped, the bulk of Big Dave filled the gate, Yatesy hung down from the lip of the wall and dropped to the weeds below.

There was no other way out, he turned to the ivy and began climbing up its thick strands. More pursuers arrived to bellow abuse, he climbed higher, when he had reached first floor level a high-pitched shriek came from below, "Wouldn't go in there if I were you, the White Lady'll get yer."

"Shut it Fleabag, gerrup and gerrim," said Big Dave.

Fleabag shot back out of the garden squealing, "She'll get 'im, leave 'im to her!"

Big Dave was unsure of what to do next, his dull brain sought for a possibility, Jake, always ready to undermine his leadership shouted to Davey, "Get down and we'll let yer go!"

Davey didn't answer, he was in a dangerous position, the spidery roots of the ivy were unable to penetrate the sandstone which had been tempered by weathering until it had become as hard as granite, as he put his weight upon it strips of the plant tore away, it was a grateful hand which took hold of a window-ledge.

Big Dave finally came up with a tactic of his own, "Brick 'im!" he bellowed. Hands scrabbled for stones in ancient flower beds.

The window had not been as securely boarded as those on ground-level. Davey jerked at a strip of wood, it gave way, he threw it down at the gang as stones clattered against the wall around him.

"I'll flippin' teach 'im," said Big Dave, and to Jake, "come on, we'll 'ave 'im!"

Jake muttered some form of protest but Big Dave just looked at him. They were half-way up the wall when a thick piece of wood struck Big Dave on the helmet it bounced off and caught Jake high on his cheek-bone, "I'll

kill 'im," roared Jake climbing faster not caring about the danger. "You need one of these Jakey boy!" said Big Dave tapping his helmet and taking pleasure from Jake's injury. Davey disappeared in through the window. "Spread out you lot in case 'e gets out," shouted down Jake. The gang dispersed to surround the building.

Inside it was perfectly still, Davey's feet echoed on the wooden floors, little light penetrated from the boarded up windows, filmy cobwebs floated across his face, he crossed the room to where light outlined a doorway, feeling round for the handle the door gave a loud creak as it opened. Light flooded in revealing a magnificent stairway which swept down to the floor below, above the stairway although obscured by layers of dust, a massive cut glass chandelier glittered. The chandelier hung from a central point in a huge circular domed window which was set into the roof above, the light streamed in through the window illuminating the house.

Davey was stunned by the magnificence; carved cherubs supported stuccowork, wrought iron balustrades topped with ornate brass lined both the stairway and landing, heavy doorways were surrounded with carved oak architraves.

"Come 'ere you!" yelled Jake as he reached the window.

Davey slammed the door shut and ran across the square of landing, in its centre hung the chandelier, light reflected from numerous cut-glass facets as he darted around it. On the far side a wide corridor led to five heavy doors, he tried each door, two were locked but the third admitted him, he ran into a room which had an open door at its far side, the room was totally bare. Behind him he heard the commotion as Big Dave and Jake piled in through the window, quickly he shut the door behind himself and ran through the doorway opposite.

"Come on out, we know where yer are!" shouted Big Dave.

The door led along a further narrow section of corridor then stopped dead. Davey sank to the floor, trapped. When the door to the room behind him creaked open he clenched his fists and stood up, determined to make a fight of it but then came Big Dave's deep voice, "Naw, try this one first Jake!"

A different door was opened and their footsteps disappeared, like a trapped animal Davey looked wildly around, his heart missed a beat when he saw a hatch set into the ceiling. Placing his feet against one side of the corridor and his back against the other he began climbing up the walls, the hatch opened easily and smoothly, with a quick movement he took hold of the lip of the opening and then pulled himself up. He found himself inside the attic, in places roof tiles were missing admitting light which suspended thick clouds of dust in its midst and clogged against thick cobwebs. He brushed the webs aside with a sweep of his arm and began making his way forwards. Feeling the ceiling groaning under his weight he took care to place his feet on the joists which carried the heavy plasterwork of the ceilings below. A dull tinge to the floor on the far side of the attic indicated a break in a ceiling. All was still and silent as he crossed towards it hoping to find a place to re-enter the house, each careful footstep produced clouds of dust which threatened to make him sneeze.

A hole had been made in the ceiling, the way the plaster had been pushed downwards showed that it had been made from above, Davey lowered himself to the attic floor and looked down into the room below. The room was gloomy but his eyes did not need to readjust, he knew that what he saw before him was no trick of the light. She sat, but the object she sat upon was no longer in evidence; she wore a long white flowing dress, bracelets and necklets adorned her; her hair, fastened with gold clasps hung like a raven's wing, she was beautiful. Slowly the white lady turned and looked up at him.

"Long have I waited for you, help me," she begged in so pitiful a voice that Davey felt no fear but only compassion.

"What...who...are you?"

Someone was listening outside the door it burst open, "Get 'im!" yelled Big Dave, Jake ran straight towards the white lady then stopped and screamed.

"Yer yell belly!" yelled Big Dave, "'e's up there!"

Jake backed slowly away crying and whimpering, Big Dave also let out an almighty scream as he saw the white lady rise and stand up. She flowed across the floor towards him, Jake turned and fled but the eyes of the white lady were fixed upon the helmet.

"...I..don't..wannit.." said Big Dave taking it off and holding it out towards her. She floated towards him, reached out her delicate hands and took it from his shaking hams.

Big Dave screamed out of the room then tore down the stairs to where Jake was vainly trying to batter down a door, without stopping he ploughed into the door smashing it and the boarding behind it into pieces. The rest of the gang converged on the spot but their leaders never stopped running, their minions chased after them with cries of, "Did you get 'im?" and, "as 'e got away?" amid Fleabag's shrieks of, "It's the White Lady," which lent wings to their heels.

Davey listened in astonishment as the white lady spoke to him, "Please do not be afraid of me, I have waited for you, I have seen you before, the old man said you would come."

He lowered himself into the room and dropped to the floor, the white lady placed the helmet upon his head. "The helmet is the key, the Shaman is near."

"I'm David McCann," said Davey not knowing what else to say.

"Please help me, I cannot bear to be like this any longer, I only want to..." she broke down.

Davey's head was spinning with what he was hearing, none of it made any sense to him but he knew that he must do something. "I'll stay with you," he said hesitantly, then asked, "you're not something to do with that man who was stabbed are you?"

The white lady looked at him through sorrowful eyes and slowly shook her head, "There is much for you to learn before you will be able to do anything. I shall wait for you to return, I know you shall. Go now, quickly," she moved across to the boarded up window, "it grows cold and dark, beware the powers of the night." She moved back into a sitting position then glided backwards through a panelled wall, another faint "help me" reached his ears then all was still and silent.

CHAPTER 6

Valley of the Shadow

The domed window no longer poured light into the house, clouds obscured the setting sun, soon its rays would disappear, Davey ran from the house jumping down flights of steps and under balconies. As he sprinted across the field he knew that he was moving with an unnatural swiftness and afraid that he might see more strange sights he removed the helmet and carried it. He did not dare to try to retrace his path back through the bushes but trusted to luck.

When he reached a dark lane he ran along it hoping that it would take him back to the railway. After running for some minutes the lane narrowed to a rickety wooden bridge which spanned the tail of a lake, over the bridge he ran glimpsing his reflection in the dark waters. He shivered with the recollection of what had happened when he had seen his image in the railway carriage but ran on. The lake was fed by a gurgling stream, its babbling comforted him, he prayed that it was the same stream which flowed beneath the railway arch but as time passed he began to despair. He gasped with relief when he finally reached the arch, darkness had begun to set in, it had shrouded the date upon the keystone but it was definitely the bridge he had descended from. Grasping at thin roots and vines he scrambled up the slope to the railway line, a rustling amongst the fallen leaves revealed a big brown rat, it made no attempt to hurry away but blinked evilly at him as he passed.

"Get out of it!" he snapped but the rat did not move. He made a wide detour around it.

Springboarding the sleepers on the railway line two at a time he ran homewards, the trees on either side of the line obstructed the light so that when he reached the tunnel a solid black semi-circle of darkness met him. No light shone at the farther end to guide his path, he stopped, too fearful to enter.

He waited trying to pluck up the courage to brave the darkness, within the tunnel something stirred, at first he thought his ears were playing tricks but then he clearly heard stones crunching and a horrible echoey tap-tap-tap. His eyes told the same story, he imagined the pitch blackness merging into a shape then realised that the shape was not his imagination but was real and was moving towards him. With a cry of fear he turned to run but a voice hailed him.

"Davey! Davey! is that you son?"

He recognised the gravelly cough which accompanied the voice as much as the voice itself.

"Dad! It's me!" he exclaimed breathlessly as he ran to his father.

"Take it easy son," said Hugh, "what's put the willies into you then? Let's be getting you home your mother's worried to death. Hey you're all of a shiver put this on." He took off his jacket and wrapped it protectively around his son's shoulders. Davey moved into position so Hugh could lean on him. "What's that you've got there?"

"Your helmet from the war Dad."

"Been playing? Can't think why I kept it."

Davey felt that a slight tremor was in his father's voice but his own fear of the blackness which suddenly engulfed them kept him quiet.

"Yer couldn't see yer hand in front of your face in 'ere lad," said Hugh. As they made their way along he tapped his stick against the tunnel wall. Davey started at the sound, Hugh sensed his fear and kept talking.

"Yer mum's kept you back a bit of dinner, are you hungry lad? Where'd you get to then, find anything nice? Beats stewing in the old tin can."

It was not until they had left the tunnel behind them that Davey began to relax, Hugh could feel the tenseness leaving him. "I've polished up the range today, it's like a new pin, all ship-shape and Bristol fashion."

Davey laughed at the expression, his mother would mimic it whenever Hugh completed any job. "That's better lad, seems like you had the jitters back there."

They left the tunnel behind them and walked on under a starlit night sky, Davey wanted to ask his father more about the helmet but did not know where to begin and knew that it would be better to wait. He knew Hugh must have been very worried for him to walk so far.

When they turned into Copperfield Street Hugh said, "Better hide that thing Davey it'll only upset her, you know how she feels about the war."

"I'll stick it round the back Dad."

Relieved to be given the opportunity, he shot down the alleyway, specked the helmet behind the outhouse, then ran back round the front. When they walked through the door of Number 99 Liz rushed to them, seeing Davey she hugged him to herself, Hugh stood behind under the gas-light, pressing a finger to his lips to indicate to her not to say anything.

"Is he alright?" she mouthed silently.

Hugh smiled and nodded.

"I've saved you a bit of dinner Davey, I'll bet you're famished." She opened up a door on the cast-iron range and took out a plate, the plate rested on a dish half-full of water which was simmering away keeping the meal warm and moist.

"Thanks Mum," he said pecking her on the cheek, grateful to be home. "That looks brilliant Dad," said Davey examining the range and realising his hunger as the smells of food hit his nostrils.

Hugh kicked off his shoes and sank back into the comfort of his arm-chair, his chest was heaving with the effort of the walk but he fought to control any coughing which would upset his wife, she'd had enough worries for today. From the kitchen came the sound of her singing, filling the house with warmth;

Keep the home fires burning,

While your hearts are yearning... "Here she goes again lad," he laughed to Davey who was busy making short work of his dinner..

Though your man is far away, he'll come home...

"Bath night Davey!" she called from the kitchen, "School tomorrow!"

Davey groaned.

The sound of the tin bath being hauled into the kitchen from the backyard and pan after pan of boiling water being poured into it filled him with dread, not so much with the thought of the bath but the fact that it foretold his return to school.

No matter how hot the water the sides of the bath were always freezing, Davey got in taking care not to touch the bare metal with his skin then sat soaking away rubbing a cake of carbolic into his hair. His thoughts lingered upon his experiences of the day, the beautiful white lady and the horrific scene he had witnessed in the window of the carriage were so unreal that he had to keep thinking of them just to be sure they weren't simply dreams, even then he kept imagining that he would wake up. He was brought back to earth when his mother called, "And don't forget to do behind your ears!" Smiling to himself he applied the soap to the offending areas.

"Alright there Davey! Morning Mr Mac," called Tony Toohey, he joined them as they slowly made their way to Wellington Road School, "Where'd you get to, then?" he asked.

"Bit of a cold," answered Davey, his father gave Toots a slight wink.

"I think I might be getting one of those colds," said Toots, "it'll wait till Monday though, I think it might take at least a week before I get better."

Hugh said, "Right you are lad, you wouldn't want the weekend to get in the way of your recovery would yer."

Toots grinned, as they neared the school he shouted, "Eh up there's Buzzer!" and tore off into the playground.

Hugh put his hand on his son's shoulder. "Look son, if you have any problems with this Quirk feller come straight home, the man's a bully and I think he's got it in for you."

"I'll be alright Dad, don't be worrying about me," said Davey.

Hugh was not so sure, he sat on the Harrison's wall and watched as his son walked towards the school, he could see Mr Quirk standing tall and smug outside the main entrance a half-smile on his thick lips, "Don't forget, straight home lad!" he called

"Fergusson, you may fill up the ink wells," said Mr Quirk looking up from his book. Fergusson strutted round honoured to have been chosen for such an important task. Mr Quirk addressed the class, "Today you're all going to have a test, it's an important test, it's one of the last tests you will take before you leave Wellington Road and venture out as competitors into the workplace, so you will all work on paper. Fergusson give out the paper when you've finished."

Fergusson was barely able to cope with such an accolade, to have been chosen twice, his mind reeled, he finished pouring out the ink and replaced the ink bottle on top of the cabinet. In his haste he put it down too quickly, the bottle threatened to topple and rolled dangerously round on its base, Mr Quirk's eyes swivelled towards the potential disaster. Forty adolescent wills urged the bottle to fall as it rocked backwards and forwards. But it was not to be, an audible sigh went round the room as it settled back down. However Fergusson did lose favour, "Sit down fool," said Mr Quirk naming another toady to take over his appointed task. The smirk on Fergusson's face was replaced by a look of extreme sadness as he returned to his desk.

"Those not reaching the required standard in this test will be *disciplined*," said Mr Quirk as the paper was being given out, his voice lingered on the word disciplined. Everyone knew exactly what that meant.

"Put away your slates, take out your pens."

Forty desk lids were raised and closed. Like a flock of thirsty sparrows forty nibs were dipped into forty wells.

"Number one, four times four. Write out the question, write the answer. Sit still fold your arms.

Number two, five times eight. Write out the question, write the answer. Sit still fold your arms.

Number three, seven times six. Write out the question, write the answer. Sit still fold your arms.

Number four, nine times seven. Write out the question, write the answer. Sit still fold your arms."

Davey had no problem with the questions but watched as Toots struggled with the first two, for the second two he was slower than the rest of the class. They sat, arms folded, looking round at their fellows with airs of supreme confidence waiting for the slow-coach to catch up, Mr Quirk appeared to be occupied in preening his moustache.

"Davey, what's number four..." whispered Toots without turning his head.

Even before Davey had time to decide if he dared risk it Fergusson stood up, Mr Quirk heard the boy's movement, "What is it now Fergusson?" he snapped, "Is there something else in the room you wish to destroy?" Mr Quirk gave a slight twitch of his head. The same twitch was also used to indicate that he would allow laughter, the half-laughs from the pupils showed the nervous game they played.

"Sir, Mr Quirk, Sir, Davey McCann's cheatin'!" snatched the informant desperate to obtain his master's trust and prepared to take desperate measures to achieve it.

The heavy cane battered down against the desk lid.

"Are you McCann?" asked Mr Quirk in an overly polite voice which betrayed the menace behind every word. He was like a cat with cream, he would savour this.

"Who, me Sir?" said Davey, pointing at himself and looking round hopefully as if somebody else in the room must be the cause of such attention.

"YES! YOU SIR!" screamed Mr Quirk. One half of his red face had turned white, the class knew the sign.

"Come out here McCann," said the teacher in a calm quiet tone which was so different from his previous outburst that it made it seem all the more frightening.

Davey walked slowly along the aisle, between the dark oak desks and the row of pupils who sat still as stone.

"Don't you know the answer Davey?" asked Mr Quirk, putting on an affectionate tone.

"Yes Sir," said Davey quietly.

"THEN WHY AREN'T YOU GETTING ON WITH THE TEST!" roared Mr Quirk, "The only reason why you are talking is because you don't know! If you don't know then you must be stupid. Stupid people are dunce's," he shouted towards the rest of the class, "AREN'T THEY!"

"Yes Sir Mr Quirk Sir," the class said as one.

"Fergusson, fetch the dunce's hat."

Grinning madly to himself Fergusson marched off full of his own importance, proud to have been elevated to his previous status.

"Tell me McCann, why does a big boy like yourself need his daddy to walk him to school every day? Is it because you might lose your way?" His head twitched madly, laughter started, hesitatingly at first, but when no action was taken it increased.

"Come on, tell us, out with it. Do you need your daddy to show you the way to school?" insisted Mr Quirk with a great twitch. The class roared with laughter, only Tony Toohey remained faithful, he tried staring threateningly but was outnumbered and ignored.

Fergusson marched proudly into the room, holding out the pointed hat with the big black "D" on it as if it were a crown for a king.

"Place it on him," said Mr Quirk to his assistant. Fergusson approached Davey timidly, it was one thing to operate behind the protection of his master, it was quite another to involve himself directly, Mr Quirk rapped his cane which provided all the encouragement he needed. He approached Davey from behind and showed a silly mock ceremonial face to the class. Someone called out, "If the hat fits wear it!" which sent them all into howls. Mr Quirk raised his cane slightly, it was enough to quell them into total silence.

Davey smiled as the hat was placed upon his head, the smile was seen by Mr Quirk whose face went ashen as the blood drained from the remaining half. He leapt to his feet thrashing his cane so that it sang through the air but decided upon a less direct form of cruelty. "I want you to do me a favour, could you do that for me?" he said in a voice filled with menace.

"Yes...Sir," said Davey falteringly, the first flush of rebellion flowing through his veins.

"Thank you," said Mr Quirk, "I want you to go next door to my wife her and give her a message. Are you listening?"

"Yes Sir," said Davey, his eyes were giving away his feelings but Mr Quirk was unimpressed, he recited his message, "Mr Quirk says to tell you *I'm a dunce*. Can you remember that?"

Davey shrugged his shoulders. It was an insignificant action but one which sent a tremor through the whole class. It amounted to mutiny. Mr Quirk was livid, "There will be serious consequences for you if you do not. Do I make myself clear McCann?"

Davey waited until Mr Quirk was about to explode then muttered, "Yeah," with such an expression of disinterest upon his face that the Mr Quirk erupted, roaring into his face, "MANNERS MAKETH MAN! That's what is known as *alliteration* but you wouldn't know that would you, now, tell us what you're to say."

"Mr Quirk says to tell you I'm a dunce *Miss*," said Davey.

"There's a good boy, now you won't forget will you?" asked Mr Quirk in a friendly voice with an even bigger twitch. Davey's reply was drowned out in the nervous laughter which followed.

The whole class was still laughing as he knocked on the door to the classroom next door, "Enter," called Mr Bateman. The hat knocked against the top of the door frame and he had to duck low to get under, both Davey's class and the class next door roared with laughter. Davey walked to Mr Bateman.

"Please Sir, I've a message for Mrs Quirk, can I come through?" the teacher nodded towards the next door, this was not the first time he had been interrupted in such fashion. Again the process was repeated, only that the class next door were waiting expectantly for whatever was coming their way which was causing such hysterics.

"Come in," called Miss Renshaw, she held up a hand for silence, no one dared utter a sound.

"Oh you stupid boy, do you really have to disturb us when we're in the middle of lessons?"

"Please Miss, I'm to give Mrs Quirk a message," said Davey maintaining such an air of superiority to the humiliation that the class quickly silenced.

"And what may that message be which is so important that you need to disturb us?"

"Mr Quirk says to tell you I'm a dunce," answered Davey unconcernedly.

"That is painfully obvious," said Miss Renshaw, "carry on."

When Davey reached the hall which separated the girls school from the boys, he sat down on a bench for a few moments to collect himself. He remembered his father's words and decided that the time had come for him to stop playing these silly games. He threw the hat to the floor and made for a doorway but motivated by a feeling of mischievousness decided to finish the nonsense.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THIS?" screamed Mrs Quirk as he entered, "You've upset half the school with your silly antics. Stupid boy. What do you want?"

"Mr Quirk says to tell you you're a dunce," replied Davey.

Her face distorted in rage but Davey quickly threw in the correction, "I mean that *I'm a dunce*."

"Then face the class so that they can see what a dunce is," snarled Mrs Quirk. "My husband's told me all about *you*." She seemed relieved that this boy who her husband had been unable to subdue like the rest of them was

not challenging her. Davey faced the class, grinning. Aimie Toohey was there. Davey could tell that she was as fearful as the rest of the girls. He smiled at her but she did not dare to smile back.

Mrs Quirk was up to something, she wrote on a piece of paper with a thick stick of charcoal, I AM AN ASS. "Now where's that pin?" she searched through a jumble of rubbish inside her desk drawer and eventually emerged with a safety-pin.

"Now turn round, there's a good boy, I'm going to do you a favour so that you won't need to tell anybody how stupid you are, they'll read it for themselves. Now where's that paper?" Search as she might she was unable to find it, she rummaged around the clutter on the desk, it was nowhere to be found.

"Oh begone with you, you stupid boy," she ordered. Titters spread round the room, she looked angrily at the class. Davey took off the hat and passed it to her, she took hold of it without thinking, "Miss, I think this would fit you better than me!" he said.

Mrs Quirk's face transformed into a sinister mask, the class went into shocked silence, someone had dared to defy the tyranny of the husband and wife.

"Come here boy," she ordered but Davey was already walking away, her room had a door which led out onto the playground he headed towards it but she yelled, "No, here boy!"

A brave soul in the class distracted her with the first of the donkey sounds which was to follow her that day, "EE-AWW!" laughter erupted, she whirled, scanning faces, trying to find the culprit.

As he left the old tin can never to return Davey gave a last smile to Aimie, she rewarded him with a smile of her own, his heart soared and bounded as he walked boldly across the playground to the exit gate. Behind him laughter and loud braying came from the class as more pupils rebelled and responded to the paper fitted onto the front of Mrs Quirk's desk.

He raced past the reservoir and past the baths feeling the freedom in his soul and the elation of the escapee not caring for the consequences but enjoying the moment.

His progress was halted at the canal bridge, it had been swung open, along the tow-path great cart-horses dug their massive hooves into the turf hauling a line of barges in their wake. He was forced to sit at the roadside whilst they passed, they were loaded to the gunwales with grey slates; gaily painted flowers bedecked everything moveable with intricate blossoms and bouquets, one of the bargeman was singing *Men of Harlech* in a deep Welsh accent.

The lead cart horse was led by a thick-set youth who was dwarfed by the animals mass.

"Where you from?" asked Davey.

The youth replied, "Llangollen boyo, can't you read?" he pointed at the boat's name and place of origin. Davey bleated like a sheep by way of an answer.

"You'll be tasting my fist boyo!" said the youth, he slowed and caused the tow-rope to dip into the canal forcing the bargeman to make a sharp correction on the tiller, a fierce rebuke directed him back to his task.

"Go on yer nannypadger!" jeered Davey.

It was a day of defiance, a permanent smile was fixed to Davey's face as another potential diversion was spotted. There was no mistaking the skinny frame which stalked up the road on the opposite side of the canal.

"Hey Doggo!" he called, "what happened to you lot!"

"We'll have yer next time," Doggo called back.

"Get out of it yer spotty dog," taunted Davey.

Doggo shook a boney fist at him, "I'll 'ave yer now!" he warned.

"You an' whose army?" came the stock reply.

The barges dragged their toilsome way along, finally the last barge passed and the bridge-keeper cranked the bridge closed, Davey recognised another figure slowly wending its way towards the bridge and as Doggo leapt towards him he called, "Leave it out Doggo, me dad's coming!"

Doggo seemed grateful to be given the opportunity to drop his threat, the match would have been far too even for his liking, he muttered some more dire threats and continued on his way.

Davey ran across the bridge to Hugh, "You're early, problems son?"

"Yeah," said Davey. It was enough.

Hugh looked deep into his son's eyes and said, "Well won't be long now lad and you'll be out in the big wide world, you may as well make the most of this time while you can, it won't last forever."

Davey swung into position beneath Hugh's arm and felt the comfort of his father's weight upon him, "Dad, can we stop somewhere for a minute?" he asked.

Hugh wheezed at his side, "Let's get up the hill lad, we can sit in the park."

They walked together up the slight rise which Hugh described as a hill, on its top several cast-iron bollards, once used for mooring ships on the Mersey had been embedded into the pavement, linked together by a chain they formed an entrance to a small park. Father and son walked in together past a carved stone which read OTTERSPOOL PARK.

Leaves covered the trees in the russets; reds, pale yellows and faded greens of Autumn; Hugh huddled into his old greatcoat to shield him from the chill breeze as squirrels darted hither and thither collecting stores of nuts ready for the forthcoming winter. It was beneath a tower once used as a marker for sailing ships that they found a bench and sat down.

"Fine view son," said Hugh.

Ahead of them a small field curved down towards the river; in the distance, over the docks and over the streets, over the sweep of water and the factory chimneys which nestled on the far bank rose the Welsh hills, already they were draped in a blanket of snow.

"Time was when all this was forest and King John and his men hunted deer in these woods and fishermen hauled their nets through water teeming with salmon." Davey loved to listen to his father's tales although he'd heard them all a dozen times before, "*Otterspool*. Just over there it was, down by the river."

Davey looked at the turgid brown polluted waters of the Mersey swirling far beneath them, now totally devoid of any life. Out in mid-water a liner plunged through the ebbing tide belching black smoke into the steel grey sky.

"Dad, I've seen those olden days."

Hugh choked, "What do you mean lad?"

"I wore your helmet from the war and I saw things. I saw the White Lady."

Hugh coughed and spluttered and gasped for air. Davey was immediately sorry for what he had said, "I was just kidding Dad," he tried to laugh then changed the subject, "Where's that liner going then Dad?"

Hugh recovered his composure, nodded his head slightly and looked thoughtful, from his greatcoat pocket he took out his pipe and sucked on it unlit not daring to inhale even a whiff of tobacco smoke. "Time was lad when I'd have been down there loading it with the other lads, I've loaded them all, the *Mauritania*, the *Queen Mary*... finest vessel afloat." Out of habit he tapped the pipe bowl on his boot heel. The liner roared it's farewell's drowning out his words. "After all this time, thought I'd just imagined it, They were bad days son, very bad days." His face set into the grimace it always did when he thought of his experiences, Davey knew the look and his mother's comment so well, "Don't disturb him son, he's thinking of the war."

Hugh took off his spectacles and wiped the lenses before replacing them, then sat quietly sucking on his pipe stem. Davey watched the traffic along the Dock Road; trams, horses and carts, cars and vans all fought for space as they bustled in and out of the docks.

"Everything alright Dad?" he asked.

"Aye lad," said Hugh, "best be getting home."

They walked slowly homewards to Copperfield Street, Hugh cuffed Davey gently, "Go on in lad tell your mum I won't be a minute, I'm just nipping over to your Uncle Paddy's."

"What's up with yer? Yer look as though you've got all the worries in the world on yer shoulders," said Paddy.

Hugh sat down, "It's the lad Pad, I'm worried about him, says he's *seen* things. He's talking about that helmet. I don't know, I should have chucked it into the bottom of the deepest shell-hole."

"What sort of things is 'e talking about?" he asked.

Paddy's reaction to what Hugh told him was one of instant belief. "I told yer Hughie, there's something about that thing. You'd never 'ave carried me out of there without it. And the gas. Remember that, nobody could believe 'ow you managed to walk out of that alive!"

"I don't know Pad. It was like a dream to me, I don't know if the lad's got a good imagination or what. One thing's for sure that Quirk feller's upsetting him, he had another go at him today."

Paddy's face altered, his lips turned white in his temper. "Got just the thing for 'im Hughie!" he poked with his walking stick at a cupboard door, the door was set into the wall at the side of the bed where it extended from floor to ceiling. As he pushed it open Paddy said, "stick yer hand in there, it's at the back."

Hugh felt past blankets, past Paddy's uniforms; battledress, parade dress, cape, puttees; boots, helmet, gas mask were all placed onto shelves exactly in the same order that they had been placed into his locker. When his fingers came into contact with something that was cold, hard and cylindrical he knew exactly what it was and pulled out a rifle.

"Got it off Wally Pritchard, it was his lad's. It's only an air rifle but it'll hit the target from 40 paces." He coughed furiously.

Hugh placed the weapon back. "Don't you be getting yourself all het up Pad," he said closing the cupboard door. "Het up? I'll give 'im het up if 'e ever show's his flippin' face down 'ere."

"Weapons never solved nothing, you know that Pad."

"Maybe not but if 'e's goin' round pickin' on little kids then he's gotta expect repercussions. But there's a bit more to this than meet's the eye Hughie, it's setting me thinkin'."

"Careful Pad." The two friends laughed.

"Well either yer lad's gone nuts or 'e's seen sommat, an' 'e don't seem nuts to me. There's some thing's 'appen which we can't explain," said Paddy.

Hugh shook his head, "You and yer old girl, you'll be reading the tea leaves next."

Paddy cleared his throat and gave a great booming cough. In a cracking voice he said, "They were all good lads weren't they Hughie. None of them deserved to die fighting for a flippin' ridge. Before we bought our ticket home I did a night watch, sat out in a listening trench I was with only the stars to keep me company but I heard them, our boys were there; moving round, asking why, what had happened, whispering in the dark..." his voice dwindled. "Lost souls they was...Walter Pritchard went over there to try to find his lad, he told me 'e heard them, moaning and crying..."

Seeing how upset his friend was getting Hugh chose not to say anything.

Paddy asked quietly, "Did you ever tell the lad what happened over there Hughie?"

"Not a word Pad, not a word. Best if we wait till he's older."

"Get him round here, I'll keep me eye on the lad and have a natter with him," said Paddy coughing so loudly that Mrs Murtagh called up the stairs, "Need anything Paddy?"

Paddy slammed his stick against the floor.

"You sure yer up to it Pad?"

"Do me the world of good Hugh, do me the world of good, send 'im over."

Hugh shook his friend's hand, "Thanks Pad, I knew I could count on you."

Later that evening, after dinner when they sat round listening to the wireless, as if by chance Hugh mentioned that he had popped in to see Paddy, in reply to his wife's enquiry he said, "He's a bit under the weather."

Liz looked up from her sowing, "He'll be alright won't he?" she asked, lowering her work.

"Oh you know him, strength of an ox, he's asked if Davey'd mind stopping over there for a few nights, you know to keep him company."

"Can I Mum?" pleaded Davey.

"Course you can son," she answered but then a thought occurred to her and turning to Hugh she questioned, "but he won't get enough sleep will he? what with all Paddy's war stories, filling his head full of politics, and his coughing."

"Won't bother me Mum," cut in Davey, "probably be the other way round if I start snoring!"

That same night after dire warnings from Mrs Murtagh, "*don't be pollyticking the boy*," Davey sat with Paddy quietly chatting away. The only sound in the room was that of the gas lamp which purred away as it cast its soft yellowy light upon the furnishings.

It was not long after they heard Mrs Murtagh finally settle down that Paddy, propped up in a mountain of pillows, wheezed, "Right lad, I want the whole truth an' nothing but the truth."

"What do you mean Uncle Paddy?"

"I've 'ad a bit of a chat with yer old feller, 'e's a bit worried about something yer said to 'im about a certain 'elmet."

Davey's jaw dropped in shock, Paddy smiled.

"Has me Dad told you?" he asked incredulously, "but I thought he didn't believe me."

"He does and he doesn't," said Paddy, "but don't be saying anything to him now, some people aren't cut out for these sort of things."

"Do *you* believe me Uncle Paddy?"

"First off, are yer making it up or 'ave yer seen sommat?"

"It's all true; the White Lady, the men in the carriage, they killed a native..."

"Whoa, 'ang on the slack there, let's 'ave it from the start."

Davey told what he had seen from the beginning and Paddy listened without interruption save for saying, "Umm, umm," at various points. Davey tried not to miss anything out, it was a great relief to him to be able to get it all off his chest, when he finished he again asked, "Do you believe me Uncle Paddy?"

"If that girl's asked for 'elp then that's what she'll get. Dead or alive, it don't make no difference," his eyes moistened, "Most people round 'ere have heard about the White Lady of Carnatic, what I'm wondering is what she meant about the 'elmet being the key or sommat?"

"That's what that kid Fleabag called the place - Carnatic. I've no idea what she meant though, she even said she'd seen me before."

"It's weird, there's no other word for it lad. Where's the 'elmet now? You haven't chucked it away have yer?"

"It's behind the outhouse."

"Go on then what yer waiting for."

"You mean..."

"Go on and get the thing, the sooner we get to the bottom of this the better."

Davey began creeping across the floor to the door.

"Don't worry about disturbing the old girl lad, a bomb couldn't wake 'er up, she wears mufflers over 'er ear plugs so's my coughing won't disturb 'er," they both laughed at the image, "go on hurry yerself up."

Davey ran out of the house excited but concerned that he would be unable to prove the truth of his tale. When he returned Paddy was sat up in bed with his chess board on his knees, on it were several sheets of thin paper with various notes scrawled over them.

"Got it Uncle Paddy!" he said breathlessly.

"Sit yerself down on the end of the bed lad," but sensing Davey's nervousness he joked, "watch yer don't see yerself in that mirror, yer not a pretty sight!" he coughed deeply.

Davey sat down next to the little dressing table with its cracked mirror, he cradled the helmet on his lap, "Will it be alright Uncle Paddy?"

"Don't you be worrying little feller, I looked after yer old man an' I'll look after you. Stick it on yer 'ead."

Slowly Davey placed the helmet upon his head.

"Nothing's happening Uncle Paddy. I can't see anything."

"Give us a go son, I'll see if I can see owt." Davey passed it to him.

Paddy sat staring hopefully, when nothing happened he began to swivel his eyes slowly from side to side as if trying to see back inside the helmet. Still nothing happened. "I've gone stark raving bloody bonkers," he swore, "sat up in me bed trying on 'elmet's. I'll be joining old Nick next door the way I'm going on, *Can anyone tell me if I'm awake*," he mimicked, "'ere lad, 'ave it back, there's nowt in it for me!"

Davey could hear the disappointment in his voice but he had noticed something, "Uncle Paddy it fitted you and it fits me but your head is as big as Birkenhead!"

"Cheeky," said Paddy but all the same he looked thoughtful, " 'ere try it on again, I was never meant for any of this fancy stuff."

Davey received the helmet uncertainly.

"Go on, give it another go," urged Paddy.

Gingerly Davey put the helmet back on. "Nothing," he said, "honest Uncle Paddy I'm not making this up, I really did see men in the olden days." As he turned back to Paddy his gaze fell on the mirror, within it something moved.

"What was that?" he gasped.

"What was what lad?"

Davey looked again, "It's there! they're there! there in the mirror!" he said excitedly.

"Yer 'aving me on, aren't yer, come on now it's you and yer old feller, you've both set me up for this haven't yer."

"Have a look Uncle Paddy," Davey pleaded frantically, "it's all in there, those men and everything."

"If yer up to yer shenanigan's I'll murder yer."

Davey turned back towards the mirror and was immediately transfixed by the scenes before him.

CHAPTER 7

"What is this that stands before me?"

"What is it! What's there then lad?"

A guard had heard something, he lowered his fearsome pike and moved forwards swinging the murderous axe-head to and fro through the cold mist which surrounded him.

Mesmerised by the images Davey did not even hear Paddy's voice.

"Can yer see anythin'?"

"Halt, who goes?" hissed the guard.

Paddy pushed back the bedcovers and with painstaking care slowly swung his feet to the floor straight on top of a flattened pair of leather slippers which Mrs Murtagh had carefully placed for him, he flattened them still further muttering, *"Silly old woman,"* then aided by his walking stick moved down the bed.

"Relax Joaquim, it is I, Alvarez!" came the reply from out of the mist. The men raised their pikes bringing them to rest upon their shoulders. Alvarez beat his arms against his body trying to warm himself with the pummelling, "That sergeant has it in for us. Last watch! A plague on him." He spat on the ground for emphasis. His hound, all but concealed by the icy vapours, sniffed at its master's warm spittle.

"Some says there's ways round these things," returned Joaquim, slowly looking up at the murderous axe heads which towered above.

The dog's master laughed scornfully at the idea, "The squad leaders would cut you down before you knew it," laughing at the idea as he walked away he said, "I'll rouse the cook, the sooner this day starts the sooner it ends." He turned in towards the camp, his legs forging a pathway through the soaking murk which encircled them.

As Paddy looked into the mirror he yelled, *"JesusMaryJoseph and the Holy flippin' ghost!"* he dropped down heavily next to Davey, *"Who the hell are these boyos?"* he asked as they watched the guard march over the frosted ground.

Davey didn't answer he was unable to do anything but stare.

Each heavy footstep crunched through the icy surface, Davey and Paddy were not the only people to hear them, an old man who was beginning to awaken knew that another arduous day had begun.

"Get yourself up!" rasped the guard but the blanket held the old man in its warmth.

"Get up I say!" was followed by a kick. The hound lunged intending to bite but the guard jerked it back.

"You'll have that owing to you with interest Alvarez," hissed the old man after the guard's retreating back. The hound turned to growl viciously at him.

Slowly and painfully the old man rose to his feet; hands on his knees then onto his hips, he pushed his hands forwards forcing his back to straighten, the damp cut into him like knives making his bones ache. He wrapped his blanket around his shoulders, then shielded from the penetrating dampness began to rekindle the fire whose embers had warmed him through the night.

"Come on my little beauty. By the Saints it be cold," he said quietly to himself, poking life into the fire with a steel ramrod. Soon hopeful looking wisps of smoke began to rise and he added fresh kindling. Seeming satisfied, he took out his sheath knife and cut himself a piece of resinous material from a fist-sized block.

"He's got chewing baccy!" exclaimed Paddy.

As the old man chewed, warm air escaped from his mouth, condensed and added to the smoke from the fire. He sat staring into the bright embers working the plug with teeth and tongue until the fire began to glow and faint licks of flame began to reveal themselves, soon he was confident enough of his success to direct a well-aimed mouthful into its bright red heart. Puffs of ash billowed out showering over a grey-haired black man who lay asleep near its warmth.

"Rise yourself Jésus," said the old man, prodding the side of the slave with the ramrod.

Long thin arms stretched as the slave shook off the traces of sleep, slowly he sat up. The sun, although still hidden by the dark distant outline of the mountains had risen a little higher and its first rays were beginning to disperse the mist.

"It is to be a bee-utiful day," said Jésus to the old man.

All around them were men, sleeping, fully clothed apart from the heavier pieces of their armour which were laid to one side. Muskets, pikes and swords lay at the ready or stood in small piles stacked against each other available for instant use.

"*They're soldiers Uncle Paddy,*" said Davey as if giving a delayed answer to Paddy's question. As he spoke he turned slightly towards Paddy, the view before them altered and showed the side of the camp towards which his head had turned.

"*Do that again! Look the other way!*"

Again Davey turned back and the view swung round, "*It's as if I was there, watching it all!*"

"*Have a look around, we'll see what's going on 'ere,*" Paddy said rubbing his hands together.

Small artillery pieces were ranged around the outside of the camp, their fuses indicated that they were primed and ready for immediate use. Sharpened stakes were embedded into the ground, around the perimeter guards patrolled back and forth.

"*These boyos are expecting trouble.*"

Davey looked back towards the old man.

"*Listen, he's saying sommat,*" said Paddy.

Taking care not to awaken the sleeping men who lay all around the old man whispered to his helper, "Stoke the fire my friend."

Jésu moved like a stick insect, stealthily he placed some ready cut lengths upon the glowing embers. "That'll do nicely," said the cook, "come now."

Behind them the sun had started throwing its first faint rays, ahead of them the sky had not yet begun to form. Their eyes gazed out into the vast depths of the universe where stars weakly flickered above the outline of the mountains which loomed as dark silhouettes against the night sky. Quietly they crossed carefully over arms and supplies to a small cart. Here they were out of earshot and could relax, two guards on either side of the cart lay asleep against each of its wheels both were snoring heavily, "Look at these sleeping babes, they shall not be spared if the commander learns of it," said the cook, "here, lend a hand."

He took hold of a cauldron, it needed stronger arms than he possessed but their combined strength was enough to move it into position to allow it to drop down, its weight almost jerking

their arms from their sockets whilst they prevented it from crashing onto the ground, the guards leapt to their feet, "Who goes?" questioned the shorter of the two.

"Rest yourselves," said the old man, "it is I and Jésus."

"Do not be afraid old man, the gold could not be in better hands," said the guard patting a relieved hand on top of a strongbox, knowing the punishment for sleeping on duty he added, "we were just resting. Were we not Ricardo?"

"Resting, why yes, of course," blurted out Ricardo, he changed the subject, "think what riches there be in this country if those were *poor* natives who carried all this wealth, eh Vargas?" encouraging him to do the same.

Vargas did so, "More than the whole of Spain. They spoke of cities of gold," a fevered look was in his eyes, "and these Incas they told of who wear gold like me and thee wear clothes. But they do be a brave people, it were only under the knife they told their tale."

"Screamed like stuck pigs," grinned Ricardo.

"*These are the men who stabbed the prisoner!*" exclaimed Davey.

"*Hold it steady lad,*" said Paddy, "*ang on a mo' let's try this,*" he jabbed into the face of Vargas with his walking stick.

"*Stop Uncle Paddy, you'll break the mirror,*" Davey exclaimed as the little dressing table was jolted backwards.

"*Eh you, over 'ere!*" yelled Paddy at Vargas but he was not heard.

"Come Jésus, we need water to boil," the old man said adding in a lower voice, "these murdering scum can't march on empty stomachs." Taking a handle of the cauldron each and a hand-axe in their free hands they set off. Behind them an argument broke out between the two men.

"Stick with the old bloke," said Paddy.

They watched the old man and slave leave the encampment, as they crossed a line of horses Alvarez was waiting for them. He grunted, "That swill yesterday were gut rot."

The old man paused and looked at the dog which stood with its head thrust forward, gums drawn back, eyeing them viciously.

"You know where there be fresh meat," he said spitting the contents of his mouth accurately onto the animal's head, the black man's grin revealed rows of white teeth as the thick brown tobacco juices rolled down the dog's face. The guard was left behind them cursing under his breath as they moved down the line of horses towards the jungle.

Davey and Paddy sat smiling together.

"Eh! Eh! Hold my beauties," said the old man to the horses patting some of them on the nose as they passed. "They be skittish Jésus, take care," he said to his companion. The horses all seemed uneasy, pawing the ground, twitching nervously and pricking up their ears towards the jungle.

"Eet may be a jaguar," offered Jésus.

The jungle floor was soft and springy underfoot, little light penetrated the leafy canopy high overhead, the birds and animals were just beginning to rouse themselves for another busy day.

"This be a likely trail," said the old man pointing to a well worn path, "let us follow it, there is sure to be water somewhere down there."

His companion grunted an acknowledgement, "Eet was good that you showed Alvarez," he laughed, "and his dog!"

"You know the sort Jésus, it won't be forgotten, now I shall have to make sure of not standing before his pike and the Incas if I'm not to feel something more than my heart between my ribs. But listen, is that not water?"

A faint sound hummed and throbbed in the distance. The old man and the slave began moving more quickly. They decided to put down the heavy cauldron on the track until they had discovered the source then to return for it. Freed from their burden they made much quicker time.

Down and down they went, taking turns at blazing a trail by cutting deep wedges into the trees with their axes.

"It's like flippin' Hansel and Gretel."

The hum and throb of sound grew louder. The Spaniard and the black man were clearly not happy about what they heard.

"Listen," said Jésus stopping, "the birds they do not sing, the jungle is silent. It does not sound like water."

They listened intently, the old man was quite sure, "It is not water," he answered. "Let us find out, quietly, what makes such strange sound. Tread carefully, Incas might be trying to surround the encampment."

They crept onwards until the sound grew to be a pulsing throbbing noise that rose and fell. Frightened, they moved nearer. The light which had begun to filter through the leafy canopy high above them was weak but now there was a dull violet tinge to it.

"Jésu, stay back here, I shall see what be causing this strange sound," said the old man. The slave did not need a second bidding.

Creeping forwards on all fours the old man moved towards the source.

"Stick with 'im lad," urged Paddy. They watched the old man worming his way along furtively burrowing through the undergrowth. Davey jumped with fright as a hand appeared out of nowhere and fastened itself to the old man's shoulder - but it was Jésus.

"Do not go down there my friend, the Devil is in thees woods!" his voice was high pitched and cracked with fear. The old man's hair stood up on the back of his neck at the mention, the look of terror on the face of Jésus was clear but he answered, "Devil or no I shall not leave till I know the truth of it," and shook him off.

The ground began to slope so steeply that the old man was unable to even crawl. He lay down on his stomach and slithered downhill, slowing his descent by digging the tips of his boots into the soft earth. In this way he was able to steer himself along, nosing small branches and shoots from his path until he was almost on top of the sound. Carefully he pushed his head through a gap in some brushwood. The rise and fall of noise now had an unearthly screech added to it like the scream of an animal caught in a trap.

"Uncle Paddy I just want to see if the other man's okay." Davey swept his gaze back up the mirror until the image of Jésus appeared. On his own he sat on his haunches, holding his knees tightly to his chest, staring terrified into the jungle which surrounded him.

"'e's alright, get back to yer man."

From behind the cover of the brushwood the old man peered forwards, the sound was all around him, it throbbed and pulsed burying itself into his chilled marrow.

"What is this that stands before me?" cried the old man in a voice filled with fear.

"'ave a look lad! 'e's seen sommat!"

Davey swept their view forwards.

"Everything's shaking and breaking up Uncle Paddy! Why can't we see anything."

"Get back to the old bloke! Look at 'im, 'e's terrified! Sommat must have give him the eeby-jeeby's, have another dekho!"

Again the same thing happened, the images shook and broke up.

"Whatever's there we can't see it."

"Stick with the old bloke," urged Paddy. "he's onto sommat!"

The old man's body went rigid. They watched as he slowly turned round.

"I know that feeling lad, whatever's there is behind 'im!"

They stared all around but the images looked as if they were being viewed through a kaleidoscope, a mass of colours and slants swept and flowed.

"Christ Almighty!"

The old man's face convulsed into a mask of terror. With each rise in sound his eyes seemed to be pulled from their sockets then be forced back in with the fall. The sound intensity increased drowning out the screams from his wide-open mouth.

The temple on the left hand side of his head began to pulse furiously, swelling up and down with the ebb and flow. Screaming, "Oh my Lord NO!" the old man raised his hand to his head just as the swollen vessel exploded.

"Flippin' 'eck!"

"What's happened? Is he dead Uncle Paddy?"

Davey tried to see the old man but broken images of colour and light filled the mirror, shimmering, sparkling and fading.

Jésu had heard the scream of agony, he answered it with a cry of his own.

"What's 'appening to 'im!"

Back up the forested slopes Jésus hurtled, his long thin limbs propelled him through the undergrowth, his eyes had rolled backwards in terror. Vines and thorns tore at him but he ignored them in his headlong flight.

"Juju majoba, juju majoba, juju majoba!" he shouted the phrase over and over. As he neared the encampment a volley of shots whistled through the trees, snapping off branches and spraying bark into the air around him. He tore towards the sentry line like a terrified dog.

An officer recognised him, "Hold! let him pass!" he yelled to a man who was about to touch a smouldering linstock to a cannon, and ordered his men, "Keep your eyes on the jungle! Something's put the wind up him." Straight at the perimeter stakes Jésus ran, with gangly limbs flying everywhere he leapt high trying to hurdle the sharpened tips, the effort was too much and he landed, wedged between two barbarous points.

"Take him! he has lost his wits!" the officer ordered men-at-arms.

The camp was roused, men ran to their stations, orders were yelled. Muskets were shouldered and swords drawn. Above the commotion could be heard Jésus shrieking, "The Devil is upon us!"

Paddy wiped his spectacles which had steamed up with the excitement on a blanket, *"That poor idjit thinks the devil's got his mate."*

It was difficult to extricate Jésus who fought off all attempts to help him. A heavy thumping blow to his stomach allowed time to free him and hold him securely.

"Take him to the commander," the officer ordered.

The struggle had lasted some time, during it a trumpet was blown which sounded the signal for the camp to stand down. Men returned to their preparations for the day.

Jésu was marched down between rows of small bivouacs where men were busy cleaning muskets, oiling scabbards and sharpening weapons. Heads raised as he was forced past.

"Hey there Jesus. Where's the Devil?" various comments and jeers were made but the look of terror on the face of their victim brought about silence.

At the tent of the commander they halted whilst one of the men-at-arms reported the situation.

"Sir, the cook be missing, this slave has deserted him."

The commander sat at a table beneath an awning which extended out from the front of his tent. Resting his elbows on the desk lid and holding his hands to his lips as if praying he studied the terrified man. There was a cruel look about the lips of the commander, they seemed to be shaped into a permanent sneer. With a look of total disgust as if even speaking to the slave was beneath him he turned to an officer who sat at his side.

"Francesco, do you wish to question him? you have a certain way in these matters."

Francesco nodded assent. He walked round the table, the spurs on his long thigh-length riding boots rattled as he moved. He was a short but thick-set man, his padded leather fighting jacket made him seem bigger than he actually was. "This is not like you Jésus. Where is the old man? he was a friend to you I understand. What happened to make you leave him?"

Jésu stood, long skinny legs knocking together, repeating, *"The Devil,"* through chattering teeth.

Francesco adjusted the silk scarf he wore around his neck, his fingers combed his long hair into place. He moved towards the slave and placed his hands upon his shoulders. "Come Jésus, you can tell me what happened, do not be afraid, you are safe with us."

Jésu's eyes rolled round as if expecting that at any moment something would appear.

Francesco's hands slid from the man's shoulders and held him by the tunic, without the slightest emotion he shook the skinny slave fiercely. "WHY did you desert your master? HAVE you seen the Incas? HAS your master been taken?" The crazy answers told him he was wasting his time.

"Sergeant!" he ordered throwing Jésus so forcefully to the ground that the breath was knocked from his body, "Arrest this loon until he has the sense to talk."

Francesco smoothed his long locks back into place and replaced his scarf.

A rope was brought but as soon as it touched Jésus's wrists he went berserk.

"Seize him!" shouted the sergeant.

Jésu threw off two men and started to run, Francesco coolly tripped him allowing the men time to charge back. They used all their combined strength to force Jésus to the ground but the slave's terror enabled him to jerk and twist so wildly that they could not keep a grip upon him. He jumped to his feet and, as if surprised himself that he had escaped the hold of the two men stood still for a moment. Francesco pulled a dagger from his belt flipped it around so that he held the blade then struck Jésus a glancing blow with the pommel.

"Take him away!" he ordered the men returning to his seat.

"These fellers aren't messing about are they lad."

"Was it the Devil, Uncle Paddy?"

"Eh come on now, get a grip. Might have been Mrs Fegan but it weren't the Devil!" he laughed, *"then again what's the difference! Eh up, 'ere's someone who might know."*

A priest joined the commander and Francesco, his long brown cassock hung so close to the ground that it almost covered the flimsy sandals which were all the protection he wore upon his bare feet. Draped around his neck was a large wooden cross, a leather strap which passed beneath the large hood of the cassock held it in place. Flecks of blood upon the priest's half-shaven crown gave a clue as to what activity had been disturbed by all the turmoil.

"Commander," the priest bowed towards the officers.

"Father Salamanga," the commander and Francesco stood up and returned the salutation. "Please be seated Father," said the commander waving towards a chair.

The priest was a large, fleshy man, a thick black beard so fully covered his heavy jowls that when he spoke it was difficult to tell from where the sound came. He said, "I shall not waste your time Commander, it has been reported to me that the slave Jésus has made mention of the *evil one*." He touched his cross and raised his bushy eyebrows as he waited for an answer.

The commander smiled, it was a smile in which his eyes took no part. Knowing that the priest was correct in his condemnation he made no attempt to reply.

The priest continued, "Such matters fall under the authority of the church, as the representative of the church it should have fallen upon me to question this man."

"Father Salamanga," said the commander, his lips formed a sneer. "It was not our desire to offend your good self nor the holy church...."

The priest interrupted, "Then Commander, why was I not sent for immediately," from the sleeves of his cassock he drew a large leather backed Bible, tapping his fingers on the book he said, "this is not purely a military matter."

The commander was about to return to his answer but Francesco gripped him by the upper arm. The commander did not like to be touched in such a manner, his stiff ruffed collar quivered slightly betraying his annoyance as he turned to his officer. But Francesco stared into the air, some of the other men also stared. The commander followed their gaze then he too stood still, staring.

"What 'ave they seen? Take a look lad."

The sky above the jungle was glowing, as they looked it faded to a light ruby colour then flashed back further into the sky, deeper and brighter.

"Give the jungle a quick once over, maybe it's the old bloke."

Davey did as he was asked but they saw nothing.

"There's nothing there, he's gone."

"'ang on a mo' what's that over there?" said Paddy poking towards something with his stick.

"It's the crack in the glass Uncle Paddy."

"Oh yeah," said Paddy, realising his error. They both grinned.

"It's good this isn't it lad."

"Amazing'!"

They returned to the encampment where they saw Jésus being carried by three men. Trussed like a chicken he came to and began heaving with all his might against the ropes which bound him. When they reached a cart the men heaved together and threw him in.

"Put another turn around his wrists, Sancho," said one of the men, "you won't wish him free again."

Talk of the devil had disturbed them.

"Some says the cook has been eaten."

"Demons live in the jungle, they devour the flesh of men."

"Look on that strange light, does it not go against God?"

The meeting between the officers and the priest had ended. The priest was kneeling down, holding up his cross towards the light, the officers were busy issuing orders.

"Order the men to move out," said Francesco to the sergeant aware that both men and horses were showing signs of panic.

"Make ready! Move out!" yelled the sergeant lashing with a short stick he carried at whoever came within range. Men ran to their stations; horses were bridled, saddled and made ready, carts and cannons were harnessed

to the heavier draught horses. The camp dissolved rapidly; men toileted, then cleansed and dusted their feet ready for another day of hard marching.

Squad leaders inspected their troops, bawled out the laggards and praised the unselfish.

A disciplined force of men took up their positions; heavy armour to the rear with pikes sloping upwards twice the height of the tallest man, lighter forces to the front.

"Mount up!" ordered the sergeant.

To a hand signal from an officer the column set off. Men on horseback galloped into scouting positions, heavier horses strained against their traces dragging the cannon into movement.

"Hey up, Gaaa!" urged the team leaders lashing the great draught horses. The heavy cannon rumbled forwards, their great iron clad wheels tearing through the sod, bouncing and bumping over rises and depressions.

The column moved forward over a vast plain, trailing along like a great snake. All eyes continued to look towards the flashing light above the jungle but when the hubbub and commotion of breaking camp had been left behind a strange sound could also be heard.

"Listen, do you not hear it?" Francesco asked the commander.

The commander sat up higher in his horse. It was eerie, the quiet was broken by a faint throbbing so close to the threshold of hearing it could barely be heard.

Men who could not hear anything asked, "What is it, what disturbs you?"

"Steady yourselves!" shouted the squad leaders sensing the fear.

The sound intensity increased until soon every man in the force could hear it.

"Sound the horns!" yelled the sergeant; soon horns were blowing, pipes were playing and drums were banging, drowning out the weird sound which flooded all around. They marched onwards. Overhead the vermilion sky grew, spreading itself from the depths of the jungle. The hues and tones of colour seemed to pulse with the sound.

Jésu recovered consciousness, "The Devil is upon us," he said quietly, his soft, quiet voice seemed to frighten the men who guarded him more than his ranting.

"These feller's are losin' it," said Paddy. He nodded his head up and down as if appreciating the sense of fear of the men.

Within the column men dropped their weapons and would have scattered but for their battle-hardened squad leaders. "If any man moves he shall have me to deal with!" roared Pancho, he was a thick-necked bull of a man. The men remained where they were.

"Dismount! Tend to the horses!" ordered the officers.

"Father what makes such sound and such strange light?" asked Francesco of the priest who rode on the back of a small donkey.

The priest answered loudly so that the commander would hear him. "Perhaps if I had been given the opportunity to question the slave?" He paused before continuing, "These matters are understood by men of the cloth. Was I not warned by my Lord Abbott?" He jabbed a sharp stick into the donkey's hindquarters, the animal, which struggled to support his mass, was forced towards the brightness. After a short distance he slid off the poor beast and held up his cross.

Scarlet lights pulsed and flowed enveloping the morning sky, the drums and pipes were silent as the men looked on in awe. The sound increased to an ear-splitting volume, the light grew so bright that the priest was forced to look down at the ground. With a screech like a thousand screams, the light began to ascend from the depths of the jungle. Something rose from the depths.

The priest screamed, "Do not look upon it!"

"What the 'eck's that? I don't believe what I'm seein', it's some sort of flippin' Zeppelin!"

Its crimson brightness hurt to look upon, lights flashed a myriad of colours, the screams of men and animals rose in terror. The vessel made no sound, slowly it floated across the tree-tops skimming the tallest trees which arched back away from it.

"They always said Fritz 'ad 'iself a secret weapon. I reckon we're seein' it."

Men fought with their horses, metal bits were jerked until the blood flowed but panic caused the animals to ignore the pain, blankets were thrown over their eyes to try to calm them.

The vessel began moving, slowly at first but in an instant it moved so rapidly that it hurtled like a shooting star through the skies before disappearing into the glowering constellations.

"What in the name of Patrick was that? No Zeppelin could do that!"

Davey's baffled expression was answer enough.

The same question was being asked by the men of the column.

"Pray what was it?" the commander and Francesco asked of each other but both were totally perplexed. The priest joined them handing the reins of his donkey to a servant.

"In Heaven's name what was that strange craft Father?" asked Francesco, he had drawn his sword but seeing the futility of the action returned it to its scabbard.

Father Salamanga's trembling fingers thumbed through his Bible. It was only moments before he found the passage he sought but in that time the fear of the men around him increased.

"I have read of this mystery in the Revelation as given to us by John," he quoted from the book, "'the scarlet beast which is full of blasphemous names had seven heads. I will tell you the mystery of the beast: it is to ascend from the bottomless pit and go into perdition. The beast is not yet an eighth but it is one of the seven.'"

"What does it mean?" asked the commander, "Is it a sign that we should give up our mission and return to Spain?"

The priest answered, "Do not be so easily swayed from our divine mission Commander, it is our holy duty to defeat this evil! Listen for it is written." He returned to his book, "'The seven will give their power to the beast, they will make war on the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them for He is Lord of Lords and King of Kings!' It is our destiny to conquer these people and all the foul demons they send against us! We are the Lamb!" The light of religious mania burned in his eyes. He re-mounted, tugged at his reins then turned aside from the head of the column.

Squad-leaders were yelling orders, "Stand firm! Keep your posts!" but it was to be some time before the column could be brought back to the march and discipline restored.

As men passed him Father Salamanga held out his cross and blessed them. The soldiers crossed themselves as they received his benediction,

"Bless you Father...praise the Lord...forgive me for I have sinned."

The priest rejoined the column as the cart which carried Jésus trundled past. For some time he rode along, carefully watching the prisoner, studying his every move. Jésus did not hear him, he sat bumping from side to side as the wheels lurched over the uneven ground, his eyes were glazed over, they stared blankly at everything around him.

"Well what do you reckon?" asked Paddy who was clearly enjoying himself.

"Uncle Paddy, what's happened to the old man? Why are we seeing these things?"

"No idea lad but it's good ain't it!"

Davey was about to make another reply but the priest dismounted and tied his donkey to the rear of the cart.

"ang on, what's this holy idjit up to?"

Frowning gravely the priest took a small phial from around his neck. Making the sign of the cross he pushed back the slave's head and sprinkled drops of water from the phial into the vacant eyes. Jésus did not even blink. "This is not a good sign," the priest said pursing his hairy lips together and shaking his head. He re-mounted and jabbed his donkey unmercifully, forcing it back to the head of the column. With cassock blowing and donkey braying he forced his way between the lancers who surrounded the commander.

"Commander, I must speak with you immediately. I have seen certain *signs*."

On his magnificent bay the commander rode a good head and shoulders higher than the priest.

Although the look upon his face indicated that he could do without any unnecessary interruption he had clearly been disturbed by the recent events, he handed his reins to a lancer and dismounted. "At your service good Father."

Walking alongside the priest their heads were level, the donkey braced itself as the priest leant towards the commander and whispered, "I have applied a test to the prisoner as prescribed by the Holy Inquisitioners of Toledo. My findings have given me cause for concern. It is necessary to investigate this matter further, if needs be the slave must be cleansed immediately before he has time to infect us with the evil in his blood."

The commander considered the priest's words before replying, "This is not good ground for us to call a halt to the column Father. This wide open space is hard to defend, we are exposed on all flanks, can this matter not wait until we reach a safer haven? It will not go well for us if we are attacked here."

"The affairs of men can wait, those of heaven cannot," replied the priest.

The commander's attention was drawn to an approaching cloud of dust.

"Riders Sire!" called Francesco who had a brass spy-glass raised to his eyes, "It is Garcilaso!"

The commander begged the priest's pardon.

Scouts returned to the main body, their leader, Garcilaso dismounted and made his report.

"Commander, two leagues to the east a great river has carved its way, the column will be able to make far easier passage along its banks."

"This is good news Garcilaso, is this the river of which the captives spoke?"

"We cannot yet tell Sire, it is immense, it is unlike any river that flows through Spain, even following its path it shall take several days before we begin to ascend into the mountains."

"You have done well. Advance into the land before us, you know your task!"

"What is their task Uncle Paddy?"

"These boyos are only interested in one thing lad, gold, and heaven 'elp anyone that gets in their way."

Garcilaso motioned to his men that they should re-mount, they swung up into their saddles and rode off at a fast trot.

Father Salamanga reluctantly accepted that the river would provide safer opportunity to call a halt, he moved aside from the head of the column until the cart carrying Jésus drew alongside then returned to his position of watching over the prisoner.

The dull roar was heard long before the river was sighted, it was wide, a cannon shot would not reach the far side but it still had power. It swept onwards, racing through its huge valley which they entered like ants against the vastness. Floodwaters had cleared away most of the vegetation, only twisted and gnarled roots and the occasional tree trunk embedded deep into the fertile earth blocked their path along the banks. Men were sent forward to clear away obstacles before the column encountered them.

Father Salamanga stared grimly at Jésus, if anyone approached he ushered them away with gestures and cries of, "Do not tempt the Lord thy God!"

Jésu sat mumbling, unaware of whatever was to become of him.

"Can we do something to help him Uncle Paddy?"

"Let's try sommat."

He tapped on the glass with the handle of his walking stick but there was no reaction from the men within.

"Careful Uncle Paddy!" said Davey as frustrated with his efforts Paddy began tapping harder.

"Eh you. Yer flippin' idjit!" called Paddy at the priest. There was no response. *"You try it lad, you're wearin' the 'elmet!"*

"Hey you. You on the donkey!" called Davey. *"Nothing,"* he added shaking his head which caused the picture to move from left to right.

"Eh up, they've stopped."

The column was halted at a great bend in the river where floodwaters had powered over the bank gouging out a great semi-circle. The men seated themselves on this natural arena, Jésus and the priest remained below so that all could see. Father Salamanga shouted above the flowing waters, "We have gathered here out of a necessity. The necessity imposed upon us by the actions of this man." He gestured towards Jésus who was held between two men-at-arms. "Jesus Christ our Lord told us that of two men working in the field, one will be spared and the other taken, it is our task today to determine why the cook was taken and this man spared."

The men sat in silence.

"Let us look at the facts, two men go into the jungle, one of them disappears the other escapes supposedly running for his life," he paused, "BUT what did he shout?"

He looked round the circle, no-one dared return his gaze.

"He used the secret name of the devil himself, such name is known only to those learned in the black arts. I have a certain knowledge in such matters and will dare to utter it, let no other man repeat it for fear of losing his soul."

Such was the attention of the men upon him that he only needed to whisper the word.

"*Majoba*. That is what he shouted, he named the devil himself."

Men crossed themselves and looked fearfully around.

"But let this matter not rest upon the word of one of God's sworn missionaries, if there are any among us who require proof then I shall prove it."

Many men shook their heads to indicate that they were not to be considered as requiring proof. Salamanga ignored them and ripped open the shirt across the back of Jésus. Taking hold of a whip he brought it down with full force across the man's shoulders. In his trance-like state Jésus did not even flinch.

"Look on the workings of the Devil, have I not told you. He does not feel pain!"

The priest ran towards the river and threw the whip into the racing waters far below. He returned to the waiting men and washed his hands in a small bowl. Without looking up he said quietly,

"Scourge him, that the beasts of the air...."

With a loud popping sound the gas lamp went out, casting the room into a darkness broken only by the faint glimmer of the street lights. The images in the mirror dimmed and were shrouded by a thick mist.

"Flamin' meters run out," said Paddy.

"Uncle Paddy, what are they going to do to him?" asked Davey.

"These boyos are playing for keeps lad. You sure you want to keep seeing it?" he held up a shilling and looked towards Davey for an answer.

Davey didn't hesitate, he reached out and took hold of the coin.

Paddy stared at him, "Yer an old head on young shoulders that's for sure and that's something that I can't figure, there's definitely something going on 'ere."

"The White Lady told me the helmet was the key," said Davey, "did me dad tell you about her. Did he believe me?"

"Hey lad, better leave yer old feller out of this, if 'e knew what was going on he'd have a coronary. I believe yer. After this little lot if you told me the Mersey was fit to drink I'd believe yer but there's a riddle to be solved here I just can't put me finger on it." He again stared hard at Davey and chewed the corner of his lip as he always did when thinking.

"Should I put this in the meter Uncle Paddy?" asked Davey.

"Yeah go on," he said not really paying attention he was so deep in thought.

Davey made his way down the staircase and along the lobby to the gas-meter. It was not until he pushed the shilling into the slot that he realised that he could clearly see what he was doing, he lifted the helmet from his head, all around was instantly plunged into darkness.

When he returned to the room Paddy was fumbling round on the dressing table for matches.

"There they are Uncle Paddy," said Davey taking hold of the box.

"How'd yer do that lad?" asked Paddy, "it's like the black hole of Calcutta in here."

"It's the helmet," he said excitedly, "I can see in the dark with it."

"Pass us it 'ere lad and give us a bit of light, I wanna check this thing out again."

Davey struck a match near to the lamp. Because they had forgotten to turn off the gas it burst into light with a roar and a bang. He pulled his hand back quickly to avoid the emission of flame.

"Nearly had me!" he said then halted in surprise when he saw Paddy staring into the mirror, on his head was the helmet. "Anything Uncle Paddy?"

Paddy sat motionless, staring fixedly, determination set into his grim face. "Not a ruddy sausage, just some ugly old git staring at me wearing a stupid 'elmet."

He threw the helmet onto the bed disappointedly.

As Davey thought about what Paddy had said the words began to tickle him, his face spread into a grin, the grin became a stifled laugh. Paddy looked at him quizzically and realised what he had said. Davey could no longer contain himself but exploded into an almighty bellyache. Paddy followed a close second, for him it seemed the medicine he could not afford, for both it was a release from the game they were playing and the sights they had witnessed.

They laughed until the tears ran down their cheeks, until each cried with the pain and Paddy went into a coughing fit.

"Shush!" he said, "she'll 'ear us, *Need anything Paddy ... Need anything Paddy*," he mimicked.

It brought fresh howls of laughter from the pair of them. The noise increased so that even the thick earmuffs and plugs of Mrs Murtagh could not drown out the sound, she sat up in bed and removed the protection from one of her ears, "Need anything Paddy!" she called in her high-pitched voice. Screams and yells of hysterical convulsions were returned to her. She smiled to herself, replaced the earplugs and lay back down listening to their loudest cries and yells with the first beam of happiness upon her face in as long as she could remember.

"Well what yer waiting for? the 39 bus? Stick it on yer 'ead!"

Davey watched himself in the mirror as he slowly lowered the helmet onto his head.

CHAPTER 8

Thy Will be Done

Riders galloped towards the column at a fearsome pace. The sharp eyes of Carlos picked them out, "Sire it is Garcilaso!"

Rapidly they drew nearer until soon the lather of sweat upon the animals forequarters could be seen. The riders reined their horses so fiercely that a shower of stones hurtled through the air. The scout vaulted from his mount throwing his reins to his companion, "Sire!.." he wished to blurt out his information but the commander raised a hand and waited until military protocol was established.

"Good-day to you Garcilaso, pray, make your report," he said quietly.

"Sire, not more than five leagues onwards the jungle clears and gives way to a broad plain of grassland. We have travelled into that plain and made a reconnaissance. Sire, there is a settlement there! The captives did not lie. Even from our distant vantage we have seen thick bands of gold upon women and men wearing complete breastplates of the same."

The excitement could be seen rushing through the officers and the men. The commander again held up his hand, his military mind more concerned with the practicalities of their task, "What is there by way of defence?"

"It has only a low earth bank surrounding; there are few guards, they suspect nothing, we shall have the element of surprise."

"Good, this is most good, you have done well," the commander praised the leader of the scouts. He turned to Francesco, "Instruct guards to remain with the baggage. The body of men will advance and upon leaving the river will develop an encircling movement, their aim will be to surround the settlement. The given signal for attack shall be the first cannon shot. Father Salamanga do you wish to address the men."

"Thank you commander," said the priest.

"There's that flippin' idjit again," said Paddy, "ave a look and see what's 'appened to the black feller."

Davey swung his gaze around the mirror but all they could see was the land near to the column.

"He must be further away," said Davey, "they've moved too far since the lamp went out. He's had it hasn't he Uncle Paddy."

"It's high stakes lad, they've smelled the gold, now there'll be no stopping them."

With sandals flapping the priest walked to one side of the column then cried out, "This campaign seeks to provide Philip the Second, Lord of Castile and Aragon with new territory, the Pope himself has granted permission to act thus!" At the mention of the Pope he made the sign of the cross then coughed politely to clear his throat before continuing, "The savages in these new lands do not accept or recognise the teachings of Our Lord Jesus Christ," his voice rose almost to a scream, "It is our holy duty to seek out and destroy this evil and clear these lands for good and decent Christian people! His words were having the desired effect of stirring up the tempers of the men. He screamed, "Put on the armour of God that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the Devil!"

"That feller's a flippin' maniac!"

"What are they going to do?"

"Things are going to get rougher now lad. You sure you're up to it? Maybe we should just leave it 'ere, I don't want you getting yerself upset now."

"I'm thinking that this is all something to do with the White Lady, we've got to watch," answered Davey.

"ang on to yer seat then little feller cos its goin' to be a rough crossing."

"Move out!" yelled the sergeant-at-arms. "Keep close order make no sound."

The commander and officers withdrew for a final plan of attack.

"This is to be the first attack of this campaign," said Francesco, "many men are unblooded, shall we take precautions and perhaps keep back a rearguard of the more seasoned troops?"

One officer replied, "Sire, you need not be concerned with how the men will acquit themselves," he carried on grinning with his brother officers, "It should be of more concern that following our letting them loose upon these savages there shall not be anything left!"

"Well said, Enrique!" said the commander, "you shall have the honour of accompanying these fine fellows you speak of into the settlement."

The grin left the face of Enrique.

The stealth with which the men left the banks of the river and the concealment of the jungle to move into position across the open plain, brought words of praise from the commander.

"Very commendable, inform the officers directly," he told messengers.

Cannon with rushes tied to their wheels to act as padding were rolled silently into position. Pikemen slithered like snakes dragging their great weapons along at their sides ready to form an impassable mass of spike and steel.

"This is goin' to be a flippin massacre," said Paddy, "I'm not sure yer should be seeing this lad."

Davey sat still and silent. Paddy looked at him and repeated his previous words.

"Yer an old 'ead on young shoulders Davey McCann."

From his vantage point on a small hillock the commander surveyed the area, he addressed Francesco, "It shall be a glorious start to the campaign Francesco."

Francesco raised an eyeglass and studied the settlement, the attack when it came would be a total surprise. Women were outside weaving and repairing cloth or preparing food. Men were tending crops in perfectly kept garden-like enclosures, children played together chasing after fat little dogs which yelped in their excitement.

The commander nodded to the sergeant-at-arms, "Fire when ready," he told him but Francesco had spotted something, "Hold!" he called. He passed the spyglass to the commander.

"What's 'e seen, 'ave a look!" said Paddy.

They swept their view across the plain.

From the direction of the settlement a band of richly costumed natives began walking towards the commander's position. They were clothed in the finest materials, bright colours and rich trappings covered them from head to foot. Upon the heads of the leading men were long bright bunches of red feathers; around them wild beasts ranged on leads of pure gold, brilliantly coloured birds hummed above their heads fastened by the thinnest of gold threads. On their shoulders, seated on a stretcher, they carried a naked young man.

The commander delayed, "Squad leaders shall hold thy men steady!" fleet of foot messengers ran to deliver his orders. He spoke to his officers, "It shall be shrewd to see what these fellows are about," and added in quieter tones, "If they serve no purpose they shall receive what is due unto them."

"flamin' officers! This boyo's a snake in the grass!"

The party approached to within a spear's throw.

"Their dress speaks of high breeding," said Francesco, "they are not armed."

The richly attired natives flung themselves to the ground and crawled forwards the remains of the distance.

"What trickery is this?" asked the officers of each other, "Is it to be so easy to defeat these people that they crawl before they have even tasted our mettle?"

"Inform the men to be on their guard. At the first sign we attack. Carlos, come join me," ordered the commander.

The envy of Carlos's brother officers was plain to see but their greed overcame their envy. "They carry the finest gold I have ever seen," whispered one of them in amazement. "Look at the thickness of those armlets," said another, "they are worth more than..." another interrupted, "Silence fool, these men have come to meet us. They have known where we are to be found. Their warriors could be ready and waiting!"

The men on the ground kept their faces buried into the dirt, the commander told Carlos, "Speak with them that we may learn the cause of their mission."

Carlos walked to the leader of the group. "Cómo Estás?" The man did not stir. Carlos took hold of him by the arm and tried to lift him to his feet but the man screamed then tried to break free. Carlos physically hugged him to prevent his escape. "Steady!" he shouted when a number of pikemen lowered their weapons ready to intervene. He held on, reassuring the man by repeating, "*Amigos*" until he calmed. Then by pointing at the other prostrate natives and lifting the palms of his hands upwards he indicated to the man that he should tell them to rise.

The men stood up but still averted their eyes from looking upon the faces of the soldiers.

"Me nombre es Carlos," said Carlos pointing at his own chest.

After repeating the phrase and action several times the native leader had recovered his wits enough to reply. He pointed at himself, "Suté can Bonampak."

The Spaniards clapped the man who instead of being encouraged once again flattened himself to the earth so that the whole process had to be repeated. However Carlos gradually succeeded in gaining an element of trust and the conversation continued as much by sign-language as by speech. He was soon able to inform the commander, "These men are high-born Incas, they have brought gifts and give praise to us, their Gods who have returned."

"What mockery is this?" asked the priest.

"It is as they say Father," said Carlos.

The commander wished to know more, "Returned? Us *Gods*? What do they mean, how can we return when we haven't been away," he laughed but then his face instantly became serious as he ordered, "Ask them who has sent them, how did they know our position?"

The Inca traced a finger across the sky, jabbed it into the air all around, then raised both hands to his eyes and spread them far apart.

"He speaks of someone they call the Shaman, a man of power who sees us even as we speak, he has sent them to greet us," said Carlos.

"Search the surrounding area!" ordered Francesco to a squad of pikemen. Armour clanked as the men ran off.

"And why do they refer to us as *Gods*?" asked the commander.

The priest warned Carlos, "Careful my son, these are dangerous matters. I do not like what I am hearing Commander."

Nevertheless Carlos put the question. The Inca raised his arms into the air and opened and closed his hands rapidly.

"It is their belief we have travelled in crafts from the stars, the lights of our ship have been seen," said Carlos.

A low-murmur went round the officers, "The lights in the sky! The shooting star!" One of them voiced the thought that was in all their minds, "They really do think we are Gods!"

The priest overheard him, "Watch your mouth!" he cried, "To speak in this way is blasphemy."

"Forgive me Father," stammered the officer, "but have they not humbled themselves before us.."

The priest interrupted, "Silence! I demand that this man be punished. He needs to be scourged immediately."

Francesco held up his hand to cut short the priest, "I do believe though Father that if these savages do fear us to be their gods then shall we not find it the more easier to convert them to the way of true Christians!"

The commander was even more cunning, "Think Father, if without war we establish ourselves over this country it shall be all the more quickly brought under the sway of the Holy Catholic Church".

The priest held his tongue.

"Ask more of this *Shaman*," said the commander, "where does he hide?"

"He is far away but also near," said Carlos, "It be hard to understand but one thing be plain - fear of him grips them."

At the mention of the Shaman the man who had named himself as Bonampak made gestures of offering which were clear to all without Carlos' translation.

"Then let us witness what gifts they would wish to give to their Gods," said the commander.

All thoughts of treachery or ambush were forgotten, even when the pikemen returned to report the area clear nobody listened. All eyes feasted upon undreamt of riches; small chests inlaid with mother-of-pearl which were opened to reveal brilliantly polished clusters of priceless gems.

"Look! A king's ransom!" men cried as greedy fingers dug deep dripping diamonds, sapphires and rubies. Heavy necklaces of gold were piled upon bracelets; delicately wrought vessels of silver contained trinkets of the bright yellow metal. Bonampak gestured excitedly at one of the pikemen.

"What does this dolt want?" asked the pikeman

"He wishes to offer a gift in exchange for your helmet Surtees," Carlos told him.

Surtees laughed, "this thing is rusted so badly it is of more danger than protection!" he rapped the helmet with his knuckles.

A small chest of pure gold dust was presented. Surtees accepted the exchange greedily. The nobleman immediately handed the helmet to a slave, "Sit-Nalta!" he ordered, the slave started to run off carrying the expensive prize.

"Stop that man!" yelled the sergeant. A pikeman swept the butt end of his pike low over the ground, the heavy stave hit the slave above the ankles and sent him flying down clutching his shins in agony.

"ere we go! If them Inkers 'ave got any sense they'll get the hell out of there," said Paddy.

"Ask him to where the slave goes with the helmet," said Francesco.

Carlos questioned Bonampak, "He goes to their city, they call it 'Sit-Nalta'," said Carlos.

"Of what importance is the helmet?" asked Francesco.

"He says the Shaman has such a helmet Sire. He will not say more, I sense these people are more afraid of whoever has sent them here than they be for their own lives."

The Incas had retreated away from the Spaniards, Francesco made a suggestion.

"Sire they know of our position already, as a gesture of friendship should we not allow the slave to take the helmet, it is worthless to us."

Surtees could be seen with hands together praying that the commander would agree, he had no wish to part with his new found wealth.

The priest muttered into the commanders ear adding his agreement, "Sire, it is as you have said, these people shall be of more use to us if they follow us willingly as opposed to unwillingly."

"Allow the slave to depart," said the commander, "see to it that none other leaves."

"Yes Sir!" barked the sergeant-at-arms.

The gesture appeased the Incas, Carlos asked how far away was the city.

"Hiscong chua Sit-Nalta," replied Bonampak.

"Nine days, to the city Sire," translated Carlos. The commander, Francesco and the officers were ecstatic with the news.

The Inca nobleman signalled the stretcher-bearers, they advanced forwards then gently lowered their burden to the ground. The young man's body was shaven from head to foot, his skin spoke of the softness of gentle living. Swiftly the stretcher-bearers took hold of his wrists and ankles, spreadeagling his limbs upon the ground.

"What gives rise to this Carlos?" asked the commander.

Before the interpreter had time to reply the priest shouted, "They make a mockery of the sign of the holy crucifix, this youth is placed in imitation of the Son!"

"Sinchí songöyoy!" called Bonampak, motioning with his hands that the Spaniards should come nearer. The red feathers of his head-dress bobbed in the breeze as he knelt down at the young man's side. In a speedy movement he drew a knife from his waist...

"Don't look lad!" shouted Paddy placing one of his great hands in front of Davey's eyes, *"Christ he's done him in!"*

The nobleman offered the gruesome prize to the commander, "Sinchí songöyoy!"

"Lord reap thy revenge!" screamed the priest.

"FIRE!" yelled the sergeant-at-arms. Cannons flashed and roared sending grapeshot ripping through the settlement slicing down everything in its path. The grapeshot literally exploded as it left the barrel of the cannons, chains opened spreading their murderous capacity wide, heavy iron balls whirled and spun. Pikemen charged, they ran the Incas through then discarded the cumbersome weapons in favour of short stabbing swords.

"I told yer this was goin' to get rough lad, do yer still wanna watch or what?"

Davey was too fascinated to make any reply.

"Seize that man!" ordered the commander, thereby preventing the death of Bonampak. His comrades were not so fortunate. The settlement was the fulcrum for heavy firepower. Screams rent the air as women ran to their children, men cried in terror. This was the Gods sent to punish!

"Flee, flee!" warriors yelled as they ran, their words caused many more to follow them in headlong flight. They ran blindly and aimlessly, some ran straight into the mouths of cannon others ran into the waiting troops, "It is the Gods! The Gods!" shouted the men as they saw the armoured men whose thunderous voice was death.

The troops advanced menacingly mopping up any faint show of resistance. The cannon had done their job. Men, women and children were seized and herded together like cattle.

Father Salamanga rode his donkey amidst the carnage, "Slay them, spare nobody, they are abominations in the eyes of the Lord!"

Swords and axes flashed grimly as they carried out his holy orders.

A great heap was formed from captured weapons. The priest looked up into the sky and cried, "In the name of God we cleanse these savages with fire." He threw a burning branch onto the heap. It quickly caught light and roared upwards. Men on horseback galloped in and seized the burning weapons. They raced round the settlement flinging the flaming clubs onto the roofs of the dwellings, bundles of dried reeds burst into flames leaping hungrily from home to home, walls of clay bricks cracked with the intense heat.

A number of horsemen moved amongst the assembled people. By shouts and gestures, using their horses and cracking fierce black whips, they began forcing the captives into an ever smaller crowd. Without their weapons the warriors were powerless to do anything. They stood huddled together, feeling naked without their great war clubs.

"Form up. Form up!" yelled squad leaders above the roar of the flames. Horsemen galloped together, jostled for position, then presented themselves as a disciplined, well-trained body of men, able to act upon a single word of command.

The priest screamed, "We act in the name of the Lord! In His name thy will be done! Those who live by the sword die by the sword!" He held up his cross towards the heavens and then bent down upon one knee, deep in prayer.

The horsemen drew their swords and charged.

"This is getting a bit rough for you lad," said Paddy. He held his hand in front of Davey's eyes.

The priest's voice could still be heard, shouting above the devastation.

"You are angels of the Lord, you shall carry out His holy judgement."

Paddy waited until the screams and cries had ended,

"If I could get in there with a machine-gun I'd have the flippin' lot of them," he said as he removed his hand.

"Congratulate the men," the commander said to his officers, "this has been a successful start to what is to become an illustrious campaign. Oh, Enrique," he smiled, "Now I see what you meant about those fine fellows of yours!"

His brother officers laughed at this but Enrique was still seeking to earn praise, "Thank you Commander, do you wish us to begin collecting the victors spoils?" he asked.

"Patience Enrique there be plenty of time for that, first let the men relax, they have waited long for this victory."

They watched as a group of the men set free a young woman who ran terrified towards the waiting safety of the jungle. Before she had taken a dozen strides two fierce hounds were set loose after her, the men took bets over how far she would get before the hounds brought her down.

"See," laughed the commander, "they are enjoying themselves."

"Eh, take that thing off lad, I don't like this, these fellers aren't just off to war, it's like that feller just said they're enjoying themselves."

Davey lifted the helmet from his head, the images stopped. "What's it all mean Uncle Paddy?"

Paddy was chewing away at his lip, turning the situation over in his mind. "We're watching something that took place long ago lad, that's for sure. These Spanish are attacking these Inkers." He chewed his lip some more. "It's like the answer's there on the tip of me tongue but I just can't seem to get hold of it. You're involved in this little lot in some way lad, don't ask me how I know it, I just do. I must 'ave some of me old girl in me after all."

"Do *you* think it's got something to do with the ghost Uncle Paddy?"

"I'm listenin' to what yer saying and reckon yer right lad, there's a connection somewhere. Maybe we're seeing what happened a long time ago to be able to 'elp her now."

"I'm sure of it."

Paddy nodded slowly in agreement then asked,

"Look lad yer seeing some nasty goings on 'ere, you sure yer up to it?"

Davey nodded.

"Right then, first things first, get yerself back down them stairs an' make us a cuppa."

Davey smiled and started to walk off.

"And stick this thing on yer 'ead, we don't want you falling down them stairs."

CHAPTER 9

The Quipu

"*Ready lad?*" asked Paddy sitting sipping his tea.

"*I'm ready.*"

Paddy pushed the helmet onto his head.

The scene in the mirror was of the jungle, dawn was breaking and a heavy rain beat down upon the myriads of leaves and plants which filled the screen before them.

"'ave a nosey around, there must be sommat 'ere."

Davey scanned back and forth, they saw only jungle.

"Yer could hide an army in that lot and we wouldn't know it."

Davey sat back onto the bed. The view they saw altered as though they had moved further away, they were able to take in more of the scene but saw less detail.

"See what happened then Uncle Paddy!"

"Move in closer!"

Davey sat slightly nearer to the mirror, they were able to move forwards through the undergrowth, penetrating the thickest cover, parting the densest vegetation.

"Something's in there!" Davey cried peering forwards.

Men sat huddled together shivering in fear as much as from the cold, their frightened eyes peered from deep within the thicket upon the cold light of the new day. One man cupped his hands and put the back of his thumbs to his mouth, he blew the call of a shriek owl, the sound echoed out and mingled with the cries of the other jungle creatures. His call was answered, "It must be Chichen," he whispered turning to the two other men who shared his hiding-place. Other calls sounded. Dithering they left their places of concealment and joined together.

"My family are all dead. There is nothing for us back there," said one of the men.

"My wife and child are taken by the Gods. They will surely die," said another.

"We must never return," said a third, "they will be waiting for us."

"These poor fellers are from the village."

"What's that, over there!" Davey exclaimed turning his head.

"What was what, what did yer see?"

"Something moved, in the long grassy stuff."

"There's nothing there lad, yer must 'ave imagined it."

Davey moved nearer to the mirror, the smallest parts of the picture were shown to them.

Davey pointed, *"Look there. See him!"*

A warrior, dressed for war, was creeping stealthily into position. He wore a fierce animal mask and the skin of the jaguar. In one hand he held a vicious club with a number of glassy spikes set into its length, in the other hand was a brightly coloured shield. As he turned his face could be seen, it was painted with such stark colours it sent a shiver down Davey's back.

"Look, there's another!" said Paddy.

Davey searched through the grass, each time they spotted a warrior Paddy cried out, *"There's one!"* Each warrior carried club and feathered shield, some also carried long thin blow-pipes. All blended into their surroundings as if invisible. *"Those fellers from the village are getting surrounded, this lot are going to finish them off!"*

The tiniest movement from the leader of the warriors sent his men into position, gradually they crept nearer and nearer to their quarry. A hand signal caused hands to tighten on clubs as they bunched their legs beneath their bodies ready for the final dash to close quarters. One man inserted a thin dart into his blow-pipe then raised it to his lips. He lined it up, drew a breath then puffed. The dart flew into the side of a villagers neck. The man collapsed instantly. As the others began to scatter the leader of the warriors suddenly stood up.

He was a tall, powerfully built man, upon his head he wore a splendid head-dress of eagle feathers. The ground around him seemed to come alive as twelve more warriors rose to their feet. "YAU!" the warrior shouted, "Stay where you are!" The voice had such a commanding quality to it that the villagers hesitated long enough to recognise the greeting. The man shouted once more, "It is I! Lord Axa!"

Yau!" cried the men as they ran to their chieftain. They recognised two more of his warriors but in their shock and fear they sought only to yell out their own stories.

"Silence," said the warrior, holding up a hand, the muscles in his arm were finely toned, each looked as if was sculpted from stone. He turned to one of his men and asked him, "What was the strength of the poison Edzna?"

"He will waken my Lord," replied the warrior.

Lord Axa nodded, then pointing at Chichen said firmly, "Speak, I wish to know what has happened, why you are in hiding and what has made you so afraid."

The man bowed to him then began talking quickly in a distressed voice. "My Lord, yesterday the gods themselves came into our village and punished us for our wickedness. All our families are slain, everyone is slain except those you see standing here. Nothing can stand against them, they are without mercy."

"These *gods* you speak of, what did they look like?" questioned the warrior.

"My Lord, they are terrifying to behold. They wear skins of shining metal so bright it hurt the eyes to look upon them," as he spoke he looked at his friends for help.

One man said, "Their flesh was as white as freshly fallen snow."

Another added, "They held sticks of thunder and monstrous beasts carried them like the wind."

The second man to have spoken showed a deep gash to his arm, "Their weapons slice through flesh and bone like a hand slices through water."

Lord Axa again held up his hand for silence, thinking out loud he said, "The return of the gods has long been foretold but if what you speak is true they bring a far harsher punishment than even the Shaman...."

A warrior interrupted, "My Lord Axa, the Lady Axa and your children are in Sit-Nalta where they are *protected* by the Shaman."

Lord Axa nodded towards him, "I hear you Hochob." He turned to his men, "Gods or not they shall learn the power of the Inca warrior." The warriors raised their clubs in answer.

"At last, someone with a bit of backbone, these boyos will given them Spanish a run for their money."

A man from the village begged, "My Lord, we seek your help, we have lost everything and need your guidance, what should we do?"

Axa replied instantly, "Join us and fight like men, not like the frightened dogs who run yelping at the first sign of the jaguar. You cannot bring back your loved ones but you can avenge them."

None of the men moved. They fidgeted a little but remained where they were. "Huh!" exclaimed the warrior seeing the men had no mind to fight. He led his warriors a short distance away. They scanned the area with half-closed eyes as if choosing the best ground then squatted down resting their strong forearms on their clubs. Some

wore the skin of the jaguar; great canine teeth curved low over their foreheads glinting in the morning sun, others wore feathers from the eagle and the condor. Only Axa wore an eagle head-dress, a ceramic disk of interlocking serpents was fixed to the head-band which centred upon his forehead.

"Lord Axa, my wife and child live in the village," said Hochob, "So too are the family of the runner Hotchas."

"We must see these so-called Gods, whatever they be they are enemies of mine," said Axa. As he bit his teeth together the muscles in his face bulged, "Come let us travel!" He tossed aside his heavy war shield, his warriors copied him, they would be moving fast.

He shouted to the men from the village, "Is there none amongst you who will take the way of the warrior?" Nobody moved other than to look slowly away as if their shame prevented them from looking at their chieftain. "Then we go alone!" he shouted, turning his back on the men and striding off.

Down jungle paths, across streams and through valleys the warriors trotted in single file. The villagers had run all night, much ground had been covered in their terror. As the warriors travelled they turned their heads from side to side carefully scanning the surrounding jungle, sometimes one of them would stop and face back up the track to check for signs of pursuit before running back to rejoin the group.

Axa led the band, alongside him trotted a warrior who was clearly finding it difficult to keep from hurtling ahead. Axa turned to him. "Hotchas, find out what you can and wait for us."

"I shall return to you my Lord!" answered the warrior handing his club and head-dress to one of his comrades. He tore off in front of the band with blistering pace. It was quite fantastic that a man was able to cover the ground at such speed.

"Who should I stay with?" asked Davey.

"It's up to you lad, you're the one doin' all the work."

They watched the runner disappear from view ahead of the warriors who followed in his wake.

The men trotted on under the hot sun paying no attention to their own discomfort, their faces were set for battle. It was to be some time before Hochob indicated to Lord Axa that they were near to the village.

"Smoke is in the air," said a warrior.

"Hotchas does not meet us," said Axa, "it is not a good sign."

A hand signal spread his men out into a fan-like formation, they trotted up a slight rise until they overlooked the village but the carnage and desolation which met their eyes caused them to forget all thoughts of caution, with wild animal yells they roared down the slope seeking anything on which to vent their anger.

"Hey lad, these fellers are goin' to see the doin's of those Spanish. I reckon yer best not to see what went on in this place."

"But won't we need to see what happened so we know how to help the girl?"

"Seeing how men, women and children have been slaughtered never 'elped anybody."

Davey began to sweep their view away from the village but shouts from one of the warriors caused him to direct his gaze back.

"My Lord," called the warrior, "Hotchas lies here!" he pointed towards the fallen runner.

As the warriors moved towards his limp body four men ran out from the wreckage of one of the huts, one wore a steel surcoat, as they ran the man yelled, "Don't waste your shots! RAISE... FIRE!"

Muskets were aimed and blasted at the warriors. A shower of sparks, a puff of black smoke and Hochob and two other men fell to the ground.

"Reload!" shouted the man in armour. "Quickly now, before they recover!" Horns poured black powder into musket barrels, wadding was inserted, ramrods were produced and frantic hands rammed the charges home.

The warriors stood, stunned, watching in disbelief.

"Rough!" yelled Lord Axa, he hurtled forwards followed by his eight remaining men.

The Spaniards did not have time to prime their muskets for a second shot. Outnumbered, two of them swung their muskets like clubs, the other two dropped their muskets in favour of short swords. They could not withstand the fury of the Inca charge; long obsidian edged clubs hacked mercilessly.

The warriors stood over their victims examining them.

"Are these the gods of whom it has been prophesied?" asked a warrior.

"Gods do not bleed," stated Lord Axa simply.

"My Lord, I struck this one three times and each blow bounced off."

Axa picked up a fallen sword. He looked at its bright curving blade which glinted wickedly in the strong sunlight and tapped it against the shiny surcoat of the fallen Spaniard. "This is no *god*," he said, "this is a man. These are all men. They die and bleed! Topac strike him with your club." The club broke its teeth on the armour. "Now, strike against this white flesh," he indicated with the point of the sword where the warrior should strike. This time the blow had the desired effect. "Search the village for signs of life. Then we shall give chase to these so-called gods!"

"Let's get out of 'ere lad, it's like a flippin' butchers shop."

A large wooden cross cast its dark shadow over their path as they swept from the village.

"Who's this then?" asked Paddy as Davey's gaze settled upon a lone figure.

Davey moved towards the man until he could be seen more clearly. *"It's that old man who was in the jungle!"* said Davey.

They watched him staggering along.

"He must be injured lad."

"I can't see anything wrong with him Uncle Paddy."

"Well he must have 'ad a skin-full then, cause he's reeling worse than a jack-tar."

They watched him continue to stagger drunkenly towards the village. As he approached nearer Davey was able to get a closer look at him. *"He's got some kind of mark on his temple where his head exploded, look, it's like a big red scar."*

"Yeah, I can see it now. Question is how did he get that thing fixed up."

"I'm wondering if it was anything to do with the thing in the sky," said Davey.

Paddy grinned, *"This is good stuff isn't it lad!"*

"What will happen to him if the warriors see him?" asked Davey.

"Eh, you've got a point there, let's hope they've moved off before he gets any nearer. Take a look and see, they should 'ave finished looking around."

"It were better for Hochob that he did not witness this," said Lord Axa.

"By the great god Huitzilopochtli vengeance shall be ours!" shouted the men.

Hotchas had collapsed with shock. "Live to reap revenge," his comrades urged him as he revived.

Lord Axa spoke to his men. "The white-skins head towards Sit-Nalta," he motioned with his club in the direction they had taken, "Topac has followed their tracks," he nodded at the warrior.

Topac spoke, "They leave strange tracks, tracks of large animals, larger than the biggest llama and set wider and further apart. They drag things, the sod is cut, They make no effort to hide their passage, we could follow them on the darkest night, my Lord, I fear that the animals making these tracks move at speed. They send the earth flying. They must surely be fearsome in battle."

"It is the will of the gods," said Manco, an old warrior, "did not the men from the village say they moved like the wind?"

Lord Axa ignored him. "Can we catch them?" he asked the tracker.

"Whatever they drag is very heavy, look at these cuts," he pointed to the deep grooves made by the wheels of the heavy cannon, "and there are many on foot."

"If they must walk then we must run," replied Axa.

"YAGH!" yelled the warriors as one man.

As if in answer to their prayers one of the white-skins walked into the village. He was an old man, he walked unsteadily and nearly fell to the ground but managed to keep on staggering.

Three warriors shot towards him lifting their clubs to striking positions as they ran.

The moment before the clubs struck Axa blew the horn he carried. The warriors halted and waited for him. He stared at the old man. "This one is no threat to us. Kabah, Labnah, take hold of him that we may find out more about these white-skins."

The two warriors pinned the arms of the old man to his sides then bent down on their knees forcing him to the floor. The old man did not struggle.

"He is weak my Lord, he wears no hard skin," said Kabah.

"He may be faking, tie him fast," ordered Axa.

Ropes were brought and fastened to the old man until he was scarcely able to breathe. Only then did they examine him more closely.

"This man is stunned or injured, my Lord, perhaps the men of the village hurt him in the attack?"

"I do not think this white-skin is a fighting man. He has a bewildered look about him, a strange look. His eyes look at us but do not see us."

"He has a fresh scar here," said Labnah pointing at the old man's temple. The warriors examined the spot. "This wound ought to have killed him my Lord," said one of them.

"I hear what you say Cocho, you are well skilled in the repair of fighting men, have you ever seen a man survive injury in that place before? I have never seen the like."

Cocho examined the mark more closely. "No my lord, this wound and scar are fresh, I have never seen the like."

"We will take him with us until we can find out more. We must catch these murderers before they reach the city. The warriors must be warned and prepared to fight! Come, we shall not stay to bury the dead, the dead can wait, the living cannot!"

Manco said, "The old man will slow us," he advanced threateningly raising his club to a striking position.

Axa ordered, "Wait! fate has sent this man into our hands, there is something about him...Bring him!" A rope was tied from each of the old man's wrists to a warrior. They jerked him along, the old man stared vacantly into the air as if he had no knowledge of what was happening. In single file they moved out, above them giant condors circled as numerous as the flies on the ground waiting for their bravest to begin the long drop to the feast below. The warriors jogged at an easy trot but the old man was unable to maintain the pace, Cocho reached into a pouch, took out a leaf and thrust it into the old man's mouth forcing him to swallow, before long the old man was able to keep up.

When the sun had climbed to its highest they reached a roadway which followed the contours of the land, here they made better time. Steadily they climbed until they looked down upon a massive valley through which threaded a great river, the mountains loomed ahead, beneath them the jungle sprawled like a great beast overpowering everything with which it came into contact.

The old man was pulled along at the end of the ropes which bound him, occasionally a warrior would jerk too hard and send him sprawling to the ground. They made their way higher until they reached the shoulders of the great peaks there the roadway reached a rise then dipped down revealing a small staging post. The reed-roof and stone walls caused it to merge unnoticeably into its surroundings.

"My Lord," said Hotchas, "the woman who lives here can tie a quipu, if your sign is tied into it the warriors will know it is your message. I shall deliver it far ahead of you."

"You are wise in your counsel Hotchas," said Lord Axa, "you are able to reach Sit-Nalta long before we even near it, the warriors can be made ready."

An old Inca woman welcomed the warriors into her home. She remembered Hotchas from his days as a runner. She listened to their tale in silence, everyone she knew had lived in the settlement. "You are no God!" she screamed spitting into the old man's face. He did not even notice what she had done.

"To work woman," ordered Lord Axa. Soon her gnarled fingers were twisting and knotting five threads together. Two red, two brown, one green; knots were tied into certain places, sometimes next to each other, sometimes far apart.

"Your sign my Lord," said the old woman. Axa removed the disk from his head-dress, she twisted it into the pattern of knots. There was an urgency in her movements but occasionally she would have to pause to consult diagrams drawn onto a reed scroll that lay opened upon the table. The poor light from the candles made it difficult for her to see, she peered intently...

"Hurry!" The harsh shout caused the woman to jump, "It is lives that depend upon this, get it right, or they will be slaughtered like pigs," Kabah rose to his feet, his fearsome face was made horrific in the shadowy light, "they will not fight until they are told the truth. These murderers are not Gods. They are MURDERERS!" he yelled.

Labnah went to his side, "Well said my brother."

"It is nearly done," replied the woman, "the runner will carry this until his lungs crack and his heart bursts." With a final few twists and a large heavy knot to seal the message she passed the quipu, "My Lord, take it, Hotchas waits."

Axa bent down under the low entrance and went outside.

"You know what you must do," the chieftain stated.

Hotchas stood, his mind was fixed on the task ahead, his eyes seemed unfocussed, they peered into the distance in the direction he must journey. "I shall run more swiftly than I have ever travelled my Lord," said Hotchas emphatically.

"Be careful, trust nobody, traitors are everywhere, my family are in the city their lives depend on you." He added his final few words quietly.

Hotchas finished attaching the cord to his belt. "I pray Viracocha may lend me speed," he stepped forwards, breaking into a slow-moving trot.

"May Inti shine upon you," called Lord Axa as he departed.

The runners muscles rippled as he moved, they were tight, hard sheaths which covered his trained frame. He wore only a loin cloth above which was the belt to which he had attached the quipu. He carried nothing save a small skin of water, slung across his back.

Lord Axa watched him move away. The pace seemed slow and yet it was incredible how rapidly it ate up the distance. He gripped his war club tightly and vowed to himself that it would taste blood again soon.

"Eh lad, 'ave a look and see where those flamin' Spanish are," said Paddy.

Davey followed the roadway back down the mountain but was unable to see any further than the area around the staging-post.

"Do you reckon the runner will warn their city before the Spaniards get there?" asked Davey.

"Your guess is as good as mine lad," Paddy shook his head slowly, "it's like a game of chess this, all the pieces are moving around making their opening moves, so something's got to 'appen, but eh up, get after that runner, we can follow 'im away from 'ere."

CHAPTER 10

Sit-Nalta

Deep in the measureless landscape the runner Hotchas ran hard and fast, each stride was lost in the massiveness of his surroundings. Peak after peak towered into the icy air where clouds were whipped and split by the mass of immovable mountains. His pace was tremendous as he snaked along, painstakingly drawing nearer to his goal.

"This feller's got a fine pair of lungs on 'im," said Paddy coughing a great booming cough.

They sat watching as the runner toiled onwards. Davey sat further back and their view of the area grew greater until the runner was but a speck in the imposing panorama.

"This helmet's got something going for it ain't it," said Paddy. "But I'm thinking where'd it come from. Someone must 'ave made the flippin' thing. Do yer see what I'm getting at?"

"You're right Uncle Paddy but how come me dad got hold of it?"

"You've got me with that one," said Paddy chewing his lip.

"Uncle Paddy."

"Yeah."

"Now I'm sitting further away the runner's miles further on than he was."

Paddy studied the images, "Yer right lad! Either 'e's moving faster or you've speeded things up. "Let's try this!" said Davey. He leant back still further away from the mirror, a great expanse of territory was shown, the runner was no longer visible but the day passed rapidly and the night set in. "It's all speeding up! Look it's another day!"

"Check the runner out!" said Paddy.

Davey leant nearer to the mirror, the detail increased until they could see Hotchas pounding along, eyes fixed into the distance.

"'e's run all flippin' night!" said Paddy, "this boyo's fit! Shift 'im along a bit, I wanna see what's going to happen here."

Again Davey leant back but this time he noticed something, "What's that down there Uncle Paddy?" he altered the view down towards whatever he had seen, "it's a city. Look! It's where the runner's heading!"

"Get in there lad! Let's have a dekkol!"

Down the sheer drop from the roadway, down towards the great river then over slopes and banks to a flat-plained valley Davey swept their view.

"This place is beautiful," said Paddy in amazement.

The city nestled in the valley, its great walls were painted in bright colours; blues, purples and emerald glistened in the brilliant sunlight. As the detail increased they saw that the buildings were all neatly laid out in geometric precision. Paddy was the first to spot the temple.

"There's a flamin' pyramid there! like the ones they 'ave in Egypt!" he cried excitedly.

"It's got big steps on it though, the one's in Egypt are smooth."

"What are all these people doing down there lad? Get down and take a look!"

Down into a crowd they moved. The crowd filled the temple square and lined the sides of an avenue leading to the square.

"What's that feller saying?" Paddy pointed to a man who struggled to maintain his position amongst the heaving mass of bodies.

The man wore a brightly coloured hat with ear-flaps which were tied together under his chin,

"I hear tell it took five warriors to capture him in the battle," said the man loudly into the ear of a woman who was squashed alongside him.

"If he was so good he wouldn't have been captured," came the reply as people pressed and jostled.

Another man shouted above the noise, "When he was at the stake this warrior beat two of ours with the toothless club."

"No, it was not as you say...." came a reply with yet more variations on how brave and how skilful the captured warrior had been.

Filling one corner of the temple square was a palace, one side of its graceful walls helped form part of the captives route. Most people in the palace were leaning out over balconies, craning their necks like the crowd below for the first glimpse of the captive.

"Look at that place!" said Paddy, *"it's like the sort of house you live in when you go to heaven."*

"I want to go in there," said Davey, *"look Uncle Paddy, we're going in. I only thought it that time but look! we're going in!"*

Within a large room, its walls lined with beautiful tapestries and carvings, a beautiful woman had gathered two children to her side.

"We're actually looking at them!" said Paddy appearing to suddenly realise how incredible the images were.

"Hush Uncle Paddy she's telling them something."

Glancing all around the room as if watching for some concealed listener the woman had moved with the children towards the centre of the room. The dark carved tiles beneath their feet betrayed no sound of movement as she knelt down to speak to them. The sudden increase in noise from the street below did not distract her but instead caused her to put her head closer to theirs in case they missed anything she had to say.

"You must listen carefully, my daughters," she spoke in a low, calm voice, she did not wish to alarm them,

"Today the Shaman is to sacrifice the bravest man captured in the raids. Tomorrow he will seek out a child from our own people. You must hide yourselves in the mountains until the sacrifice is over."

"How can you know that a child is to be sacrificed Lady Axa?" asked the eldest daughter.

In even quieter tones the mother answered, "It is not safe for you to know my child but your father has *friends*. The Shaman says the gods themselves are near and the highest sacrifice must be made."

"But Lady Axa," interrupted the youngest daughter, "we cannot leave you here and hide ourselves. And where would we hide?" she added, as if that was the end of the matter.

"Panqui, this is not a time for quarrel, this is something you must do," their mother answered firmly.

The elder and taller of the two children joined in. "Father would not wish us to leave you on your own. If we go then you must join us."

"Oh, Chacuti," she stroked the child's hair, "you are both so good but I cannot," she said smiling, proud of her children. "The Shaman has spies everywhere. Only by taking part in the raids was your father able to leave the city. If I were to be found trying to leave with you even he could not protect us."

Davey focused upon the girl's face then cried out, *"She's the ghost! Uncle Paddy! She's the ghost. The White Lady, this girl's the same one I saw in Carnatic Hall. She's younger but it's her. Honest it is!"* Davey was beside himself with excitement.

"Hold it steady lad, things are starting to fit."

A great thumping sound filled the palace. "Listen! the captive comes!" said the family as they crossed to the window, from a balcony they looked down upon the scene below. An unbroken line of warriors kept the crowd at bay. Another great thump resounded as they beat their clubs onto their shields.

"Look! Here comes the warrior," cried Chacuti. As the crowd glimpsed the captive they cheered wildly. The warriors braced themselves against the push.

"He is as brave as father," said Panqui, pointing at the man who strode alone between the files of armed men. His steps were met with the reverberating crash of clubs upon shields.

"What do yer reckon's going on 'ere then lad? I reckon this woman's Axa's missus and these are his kids."

"She's talking about the Shaman like those nobles in the village did. They're all terrified of him."

"Hey up, what's this!"

Six beautiful girls dressed in flowing white veils led a procession, each girl carried a deadly snake, its bright bands of colour twisted and curled round their slender arms as they danced and gyrated. Behind them, garbed in his war costume, the warrior looked neither to right or left as he strode forwards. He was a handsome, tall and proud man, several scars highlighted his cheekbones.

"See how brave he is," said Lady Axa to her children, "he goes to his death like a man."

"Did she say he's going to be killed lad? What are these flippin' idjits doing. It's them Spanish they should be killing, not each other."

The dancers led the way up the temple steps, a group of guards followed behind the captive. As they reached the top of each of the three temple layers they halted whilst praises were made to the gods, the warrior looked around him with an air of contempt.

"He is so handsome Lady Axa, must he die?" asked Chacuti.

"It is the way of the Inca," replied her mother slowly shaking her head, "Lord Axa has dared to question it."

The sudden silence of the crowd sent their eyes racing back to the top of the temple, for a brief instant they saw the Shaman, he stood, arms raised, then in a flash of fire disappeared.

The captive mounted the steps of the last layer alone, in total silence.

"What's 'e up to up there?"

They swept up the sides of the temple and entered the small chamber at its top.

Paddy cried out, *"Get out of here it's Hell!"*

Davey was too shocked to move away from the images. Claws, teeth, huge staring eyes, disfigured faces and distorted bodies presented themselves. The Shaman appeared in their midst, he was naked, his filthy skin stood out in contrast to the garishly coloured costumes of his helpers making him more menacing. Fearsome men, dressed in the skins of animals and wearing masks carved with terrible features took hold of the warrior, they stretched him out over the sacrificial stone....

"Get out of here Davey!"

Davey dragged his gaze away and returned to the spot where Lady Axa stood with her children.

A loud cheer from the crowd told them that the Shaman had completed his grisly act. The sound roused Lady Axa into action, "Come I will show you what you must do," she led her children by the hands to a marble table on top of which was arranged heavy working sandals; coarse dresses, overcoats and leather satchels. "You will need to wear these my children, I will help you to dress".

With few words of complaint from Chacuti but several moans from Panqui she dressed them.

"But Mother I look like a servant girl," Panqui cried.

Trying hard to keep up the children's spirits the woman laughed, "Well it is time you started to do something useful Panqui, now pick up the satchels and follow me".

"They're heavy Mother, what is in them?" asked Chacuti.

"It is salt. You will learn why. But come quickly now, follow me."

"I can see now why she wants to get her kids away from that nutter."

"What do they kill each other for?"

"God knows, stick with the woman lad, we'll get to the bottom of it."

Lady Axa led her children along marble passageways and down wide flowing stairs then across a courtyard in which delicate fountains tinkled gaily into ponds filled with fattened fish, fruit trees scented the air in a garden where humming birds buzzed and hummed as they darted among beautiful flowers. "Keep close to me now," she urged her children.

From the darkness of an archway a man stepped into the light.

"Uncle Popacata!" cried the children as they ran to him and were rewarded with a hug.

"Shush, my nieces," said the elder quietly, "you do look the part in those clothes," he tried to sound cheerful but the children could hear the tension in his words, "there is no time to lose, look, high up there," he looked towards the peaks which towered above, dwarfing the city, "See the one shrouded in mist," he pointed towards a peak which had a great claw-like summit which disappeared into the clouds, "You must head towards the top of the Tryden, near its shoulder, see, where the other peak cuts into it, is a roadway. You can follow the roadway to the high pastures."

"Will anybody be there to meet us?" asked Chacuti.

"It would not be safe child, nobody will be up there but a few old llamas and vicuñas. If you are stopped you must say that the salt you carry is for them. You must find a herdsman's hut and stay in it."

Lady Axa kissed her children goodbye. "Do not return until the day after tomorrow, it would kill me should anything happen to you." She turned and walked away, tears running down her cheeks.

"Stick with her!"

Davey followed the woman for some moments before he said, *"It's the girl we need to follow Uncle Paddy, she's the one who has asked for help."*

"Yer right lad, get back to them."

The elder led the children along deserted back roads holding tightly to their hands. Chacuti spoke to him quietly so that her sister did not hear. "Uncle, has Lady Axa learnt that *we* were to be chosen for the sacrifice?" He did not reply but his silence spoke louder than words.

They passed unnoticed to a city gate. "The guards here are faithful to your father," said Popacata. He gave them a farewell hug then urged them to begin their long trek not until they had passed through the gate did he turn back into the city.

Together they walked through fields and plantations making towards the foot of the great slopes, ditches filled with water gurgled by their sides carrying water to thirsty crops. In places the ditches met canals which had to be crossed by thin footbridges, a flimsy rope bridge had to be used in one place. They crossed safely to the other side where a group of workers tilling a field called, "Yau."

"Don't speak Panqui, just wave," the elder child cautioned the younger.

Soon they reached the start of the slopes of the great peaks. They toiled upwards struggling against the incline and the weight of the heavy leather satchels.

"Move back out from them," said Paddy, "those lassies are going to take a long time getting up them hills."

Davey moved away until they could tell by the light from the sun which moved quickly through the heavens that the time had speeded up.

"See how they're getting on now lad."

It was nearly midday, the children had reached a terrific height but the mountains around them soared forever higher. Against their vastness and immense presence they looked insignificant.

"Not much further now, we'll soon be there," encouraged Chacuti, pausing to wait for her sister to slowly catch up. She was a tall, thin girl who had just reached her early teens, her body carried not even the slightest amount of excess flesh, all her energy went towards lifting herself up the steep slopes. Such was not the case with Panqui, her plump, younger body toiled under the extra burden of puppy fat that she carried. Every step she took seemed to be a hardship.

Panqui reached her sister's side, drawing in thin lungfuls of the beautifully crisp mountain air as she panted, "Please Chacuti, can we not stop *now* even for a very short time?"

Chacuti gazed up above, her eyes following the twists and turns of the path as it snaked its way higher and higher up the mountainside. "Here, take my hand," she said. Panqui's chubby hand sank gratefully into hers, Chacuti pulled and strained against the extra load.

For a short time they continued but Panqui was insistent.

"Can we not stop and take a short rest?" she begged, "I am so tired."

"Panqui, mother has told us what we must do. Now stop moaning," said Chacuti, "You would not want to be up here in the dark would you?"

"Well I don't think we need to go so quickly, that's all!" snapped Panqui as she hoisted her pack high on her shoulders and bent her back to the load.

The path they climbed was steep and sheer, every step they took threatened to cause the slight force which held them to the earth to release its hold and allow them to be plucked off. Even the ground itself was unhappy with its tenuous hold on the mountainside. It was tussocky and uneven, covered here and there with thin grass which would break off in clumps when used as a handhold. The soil was dry and arid. Cacti and succulents with large knife-edged leaves clung to the thin dirt occasionally growing so thickly that they forced the children to leave the path, when this happened they had to scramble upwards over treacherous rocky outcrops until they were able to return.

Chacuti helped her sister over yet another of these stretches, "Look, up there Panqui, there is the shoulder of the peak, the roadway cannot be far. Here put your foot in that hole," she pushed Panqui's foot into a good solid foothold almost causing herself to slip with the effort.

With constant words of encouragement from Chacuti the pair slowly made their way over the rocks. The distance was deceptive, against the cruel gradient they made very slow time until they reached the roadway. Chacuti saw it first, "Come on Panqui, look up there, it is the roadway, we are nearly there."

With hearts beating loudly and heads thumping with the strain of breathing such thin air, the children staggered onto the first level ground they had seen that day. The side of the roadway was a sheer drop into space but on its gentle slope they would be able to recover.

"Should we stop and have a rest?" shouted Panqui to her sister who was already some way ahead. This time the request was not so much pleading but was more expectant. Chacuti laughed and turned back towards her sister who, although a full two years younger, was far heavier and stouter than herself. She tried to persuade Panqui to continue, "Oh Panqui, you know what will happen if we stop. You will make some excuse about having hurt your leg or something and we'll never get going again. Come on keep going, it's not far now and then we'll eat." She waited for her sister to catch up with her then they strolled on together holding hands, Panqui leant back slightly to receive a tow.

"Question is lad, if this is the girl you says you've seen, then how on earth did she end up in flippin' Liverpool?"

"It is her Uncle Paddy, there's no mistaking her."

"Well this is one puzzle that's beyond my solving but I'm beginning to see the pieces are taking up their positions on the board. I only wish we could help move them around that's all. Tell yer what while not much is 'appenin' see if these kids can hear yer."

"Hello!" called Davey towards the mirror, "HELLO!" he called loudly, the children obviously could not hear him.

"Try tappin' on the glass again."

Davey picked a silver-backed brush off the dressing table and rapped on the mirror.

"Naw nothing," said Paddy, "forget it the girl's talkin'."

"Look down there Panqui!" said Chacuti in yet another attempt to take her sisters mind off the effort of walking, "the Sun is going to leave the city." She pointed to the shadow of a small cloud which slowly moved its way across the valley floor far below. The shadow flowed over the neat walls and terraces which were cut into the hillsides, it crossed the irrigation channels and the fields coloured with endless varieties of crops.

Panqui cried, "Mummy! Watch out the Sun is going to leave you!"

Far below the workers were plunged into shade. Men and women paused from their toil, raised their heads to the sky and said, "Inti be praised."

High above them Chacuti and Panqui did likewise.

"There's Lord Axa!" claimed Panqui pointing to a file of men who could only be warriors by the way they covered the ground. She had no way of knowing which of the dots of people so far below could be her father or even where her father was but her claim had achieved its affect, Chacuti peered intently down from their great

height until she realised that Panqui had somehow managed to get them to stop. "At least we are not sitting," she sighed to herself. She knew better than to disagree with Panqui and feeling the strain in her own legs knew that her younger sister must be in a far worse state than herself. Maybe a short stop would do them both good. "Yes that does look like Father," Chacuti laughed, "and look there is Lady Axa!" she said pointing to the city.

Panqui pulled one of her cross faces, "It is Lord Axa, Cuti!" she said, pushing out her lips as she always did when annoyed. She sat down looking very sorry for herself. Chacuti sat down at Panqui's side, their feet dangled down at the roadway's edge over the sheer drop below. "We must carry on," she implored, stroking her sister's hair, "It's not far now, then we can rest as much as we want." Her answer was a high-pitched squeal. "Come on, show me," said Chacuti holding out her hand.

Panqui reached into her top. After some rummaging around which was accompanied by giggles she extracted a rather shaken looking guinea-pig, it blinked its little brown eyes as it was brought out into the brightness. "He'll be good, I promise," said Panqui, "won't you little Chibcha," she said as they rubbed noses.

"Mother told you to leave him at home," said Chacuti resignedly.

"We can both share him Chacuti," answered Panqui, she pushed the guinea-pig onto her sister's lap. Chacuti was immediately won over when the little animal sneezed and looked so sorry for itself that she had to give it a hug. The girls sat playing with Chibcha looking down from their precarious vantage point on the scene below. They were so high that the people beneath them were mere specks that blinked in and out of vision as they moved. Set within the fields in almost a dream landscape was Sit-Nalta.

"Look down there, Panqui, they are starting a ball-game," Chacuti pointed to a large courtyard where a concentration of dots was gathered in preparation.

"Perhaps it is the warriors taking practice," Panqui said excitedly, "maybe Tizoc is there!"

Chacuti blushed slightly, Panqui teased her.

Through the stillness the sounds of the city floated thinly up to their ears. It was so calm and peaceful where they rested but far below was the hubbub and commotion of thousands of men, women and children going about their business. They could see the market packed with buyers and sellers, goods of every description stacking out the stalls - fruit and vegetables, brightly coloured clothing, fish fresh from the sea, pottery, crockery, utensils and harvest brought in from the countryside. The roads to the city were thronged with people carrying loads on their backs or tied to llamas and alpacas.

"Should we go back and check out the city?" asked Davey.

"Just hold it 'ere for a moment lad. I'm trying to figure this lot out, just listen to this." Paddy gave a deep bite to his lip then began, "we've got a ghost stuck 'ere in Liverpool who's asked yer to help her, this helmet is letting us see what happened to her in the past. Now I'm asking myself the question, 'why should it bother to show us the past', the only answer I can come up with is that in some way or other yer going to need to know what's happened to be able to help her."

"If we're seeing what happened in the olden days so we can help her, then we wouldn't see anything which wasn't important, would we? asked Davey.

"Yer not wrong, yer might even be right lad."

"I'm going to check around here to make sure they're safe," said Davey.

He moved his head back from the mirror and their view panned out, the mountains soared massively upwards until they disappeared into the cloud base. The first of the winter snows had already fallen like a cloak on the higher peaks. The clouds receded rapidly revealing the brilliant whiteness of the icy mantles and the dazzling sunshine which streamed down upon them.

"God what would I give to breathe in some of that good clean air," sighed Paddy.

"There's the runner!" exclaimed Davey. "He's on the same roadway as the kids!"

"I knew it!" said Paddy, "the pieces are coming together now. Go to 'im lad something's going to 'appen 'ere."

They watched Hotchas pounding along, the length of his stride never altered whether running uphill or down, it would be but a matter of time until he reached the children.

"He's going so fast he might run into them!" said Davey.

"There's no danger from him lad, he's got perfect control, look at him go," Paddy assured him.

"Let's see to the kids!" said Davey.

"Will Mother be safe?" Panqui asked as she flicked pieces of moss off her knee, the faint breeze blew them out over the gaping drop beneath them.

"Lord Axa will always see us safe," replied Chacuti. She passed Chibcha back and took out her pan pipes. Panqui danced around on the roadway with the tiny animal singing the words to the song, Chibcha's little back legs kicked up into the air as he bucked about. The pan pipes blew and echoed, floated and dreamt their way into the air, the notes hanging and lingering until they dissolved into the blue.

"Play the one Mother taught you," said Panqui breathlessly.

Chacuti saw a runner came into view on the roadway, he was so fit the energy and power simply oozed out of him. As he bounded along a coloured, knotted quipu flapped wildly from his belt. She removed the pan pipes from her lips and began to shout to Panqui to move from his path but at that same instant something appeared directly in front of her which was so frightening and grotesque she was unable to move.

"Why doesn't she tell the little girl to get out the way?" asked Paddy. "Shift yerself!" he shouted.

"There's something stopping her, it's in that cloud!"

A small dark cloud, like a heavy puff of smoke from a damp fire seemed held in the air before Chacuti. They watched as the shape rapidly altered.

"What in the name of the Lord Almighty is that!"

The shape had formed itself into that of a man.

Davey was too terrified by the horrible image to be able to even think.

Evil eyes stared out from the black mass and fixed the girl, they pinned her into position and prevented her from moving. In the faintest of voices she begged, "Please..don't..hurt me."

"What's the matter Cuti, why have you stopped?" asked Panqui.

The runner was moving swiftly. He had blocked out all thoughts save that of covering distance, his body was in tune with the task, the distance was disappearing under his feet. He felt as though the Earth was moving and he remained still. This would be a run which would never be equalled, a run he would boast about. No thoughts clouded his concentration, until suddenly, a child was directly in front of him.

He swerved to avoid her.

His swerve caused him to lose balance. He could see the sheer drop looming nearer as he fought desperately to regain his control. Time seemed to have stopped as he shot off the roadway into space. No cry escaped his lips but his legs still pumped furiously, unable to understand that they no longer made contact with the ground.

Chacuti was at last freed from the hold of the devilish form before her, the evil creature smiled wickedly as it slowly turned its gaze upon the plummeting runner then swept downwards after him at an immense speed.

"Panqui!" screeched Chacuti, getting to her feet and running across to her sister.

Panqui was so shocked by what had happened she just kept calling for her little pet. "Chibcha, Chibcha, Chibcha..." she called over again.

Chacuti cradled her as they both sat shocked and frightened staring at the spot where the runner had given up his hold on life.

It was the guinea-pig scurrying along near to the edge which aided them in recovering. They rose to retrieve it. Panqui had been spared the sight of the phantom but was badly shaken, she picked up the little animal and placed it back into the safety of her top. "Please, can we go home?" she asked.

In a shaky voice Chacuti answered, "No Panqui, we cannot, there is danger in the city. We must leave now if we are to reach shelter before nightfall."

"Them poor lassie's must be scared out of her wits," said Paddy. "We must be able to do something to 'elp them lad, think!"

Chacuti kept her fears to herself, holding her sister's hand they continued but had not taken more than a couple of steps when Panqui cried, "Look Chacuti, look!" and picked something up from the roadway.

"Chacuti!" she screeched, "It is a quipu. It carries father's sign!" She showed the cord excitedly to Chacuti who forced the knots apart to reveal the twin black snakes intertwined against a blue background.

"The runner carried it for Father," said Panqui. "It must be very important. The runner was moving very fast wasn't he?"

"I do not know Panqui," replied Chacuti hesitantly, "see, there are not many knots and there are very few colours..."

Panqui interrupted with, "But it would not contain the seal of Lord Axa if it were not terribly important. Would it Chacuti?" she asked.

"She knows it's important Uncle Paddy, or else why would that thing have appeared and caused the runners death."

"Yer right lad, their's more twists and turns in this lot than in the best of games I've played."

"Come Panqui, we shall return to Sit-Nalta," said Chacuti turning and starting to retrace their steps.

Panqui was in a state of panic. She kept on and on, talking at an ever faster rate, "It could be for Lord Axa's warriors, or even the Shaman. Or Mother. Is Father injured? I wonder what it tells, will I get into trouble, I didn't mean it. Will the llamas be alright...."

Chacuti was in too much of a turmoil to think straight, "Mother will know what to do...." she mumbled in answer to the frightened Panqui.

"They were told not to go back to the city!"

"Flippin' heck how can we do anything!" said Paddy. "Think lad, there must be something we can do!"

"Maybe if we knew more about whatever that thing was that got them we could help," suggested Davey.

Paddy latched onto the idea immediately, "Follow it down that cliff lad!"

Their view shot down the cliff, at its base lay the broken body of Hotchas. They scoured the area looking for some sign but saw nothing.

"The thing's gone," said Davey.

Paddy did not reply, he sat with his head in his hands, Davey was suddenly concerned that the strain of what they were witnessing was telling upon him. "Are you alright Uncle Paddy?"

Paddy turned towards him, "You know how we found that when you move yer head back from the mirror we see more of the picture and it speeds things up?"

"Yeah" said Davey relieved that Paddy was still in the fight.

"Well stick yer 'ead closer to the mirror, then see what 'appens."

Davey moved his face nearer to the mirror.

"That's it! Stay there! Can yer see what's 'appening?" asked Paddy.

The sun's going back the other way now," said Davey.

"Right that's it STOP. Take a look!"

Davey looked, "It's the runner! He's running along the roadway again. He's still alive!" Davey exclaimed.

"No lad. He's dead. What yer seeing is before 'e reaches the girls. It's all going to 'appen exactly as it did but you've just moved it all back so that we get to see it again. Just like yer speeded it forwards yer can speed it backwards!"

"But what good is it though Uncle Paddy?"

"Right, just 'ang on with me a minute, yer old feller will tell yer that Paddy Murtagh's not the kind of man to start playing chess with, swing yer gaze back up to the kids."

Davey did as he was asked, there were the children playing unsuspectingly.

"Now that thing 'ad to come from somewhere, give me a guess who it was an' were it come from."

Davey did not need to think, "The Shaman. The temple!" he almost spat the words out.

"Get down there lad, we'll find out everything we can about this evil little sod. Like I told yer Davey lad, knowing yer opponent is half the battle, this is only the opening game, wait till we get into it proper!"

CHAPTER 11

The Flight of the Shaman

Within the depths of the temples numerous passageways and chambers was the vilest cell. Large blocks of stonework protruded into the cell dividing it up into smaller sections, on top of the stone blocks sat seven crystal skulls carved in grotesque likeness of human form. The light from flaming torches could not penetrate the dark recesses formed by the blocks.

"There's something in there," whispered Davey afraid to talk any louder.

A hideous creature skulked around.

"No animal could survive in 'ere, it's either a man or a monster. Listen lad, you sure you want to keep watching this, it's getting a bit scary ain't it?"

Davey's answer was to move slightly forward and take their view into the cell.

The evil intelligence displayed in the creatures eyes pierced through the repulsive air, it seemed alone but voices, harsh rasping voices could be heard.

"Who's doin' the talkin'? Them flamin' bombs 'ave wrecked me hearing."

"It's them skulls, they're saying things!" said Davey in astonishment.

No part of the carved crystal moved but the voices came directly from them. The voices were as evil as their surroundings. The very air was rotten, tainted with the stench of decaying flesh.

"Don't look lad, this place is a flamin' slaughter-house," said Paddy shielding Davey from seeing what littered the floor. *"There it is, over there in the corner!"* he said directing Davey's gaze towards the creature but somehow managing to hide the fearful sights from him, *"This ain't real! I don't believe what I'm seeing this thing's a flippin' demon. What the hell is it eatin'!"*

It spat a lump of gristle from between its jagged teeth.

From one of the skulls a fierce voice spoke, "It is well Shaman. The souls of the victims of the sacrifice have increased our power to its strongest. Go forth and assist the Gods. We appointed you as our successor, you are to be the fortunate one who will sit on the right hand of the Gods themselves. Our power will soon hold sway over the Earth."

Naked and covered in gore the Shaman rolled in the filth upon the floor. Thick ash from the sputtering fire baked itself onto the damp patches upon his body. It was like watching an animal wallowing in the blood from the kill. But this was not nature, it was pure evil. The scene from Hell was made worse by the look of sinister purpose in the Shaman's eyes.

Another, more evil sounding voice spoke out of the stinking air. "We are seven you are to be the eighth. Now make ready, we see danger unless you act swiftly."

Caked in filth the Shaman crossed to a low bench upon which were the tools of his disgusting craft; a beautifully ugly obsidian knife with jewelled hilt, a turquoise mask covered in a mosaic of precious stones; an ornate snake made from turquoise. Vicious hooks and pointed stakes littered the bench, amongst them was a helmet.

"It's a helmet, like this one!" said Paddy. In his surprise he had forgotten to hide the sights from Davey who now sat watching every action.

The skulls intoned sacred chants as the Shaman placed the helmet upon his head.

"We have tired the child, all awaits you, you must not fail," sang one of the skulls.

"Go now, seek the Gods, assist their holy slaughter," said another as the Shaman's hooked fingers picked up the knife.

"Look, the helmet's even got them holes in the back of it!" exclaimed Davey as the Shaman turned away from them.

"Check out the walls lad! There's something on 'em," said Paddy.

In the dim light carvings of strange figures could be seen. Some of the figures wore helmets, some carried large backpacks from which tubes connected to the helmets. People were shown bowing down low in reverence to the wearers.

As if to a secret signal which they had not noticed, an assistant entered the cell. In each fist he held a snake, bands of orange and white along their length indicated the reptiles venomous quality. The assistant's hands were clamped close behind the head of the thin snakes as they writhed and whipped and sought to free themselves. By the time he had reached the Shaman their lower jaws had dropped away revealing poison fangs which dripped pure globules of death as they tried to twist their heads back and pump their venom into the assistant.

In a harsh, guttural voice the Shaman called upon the Gods, "Many have been slain in your honour and in thanks to your return. My ancestors waited for you over the distant past as I have awaited you. Now the prophecy is fulfilled, you have travelled from the stars to return to us, it is my duty to prepare the way for you. The Earth shall be ours!"

Raising his arms above his head he stepped towards the assistant who pushed the heads of the snakes against his chest. The fangs embedded themselves, the heads quivered slightly as the sacs of poison emptied their deadly loads. From all around came a humming sound as the skulls altered their chant. The sound rose and fell, throbbing and pulsing in its intensity, growing louder as the Shaman began to feel the effects of the poison. A loud screech began to be heard amongst the background of the chant; almost immediately the Shaman went into a seizure, his body jerked downwards from the waist and his legs shot out from under him so that he smashed onto the floor.

"He's done 'imself in!" said Paddy.

The Shaman writhed around in agony, white foam began frothing from his mouth and his eyes rolled back so far that only the whites could be seen. Suddenly he lay perfectly still. The assistant waited for the reptiles to release themselves, they lay by the side of the Shaman exhausted by their actions, he collected them then left the Shaman to his fate.

"Is he dead Uncle Paddy?"

Paddy was about to reply but they witnessed something terrifyingly amazing happening, the body of the Shaman remained where it was but from out of it rose a see-through version of the body.

"It's his ghost!" said Davey.

The spectre rose to a sitting position then stood up.

"Go now assist the holy slaughter," chanted the skulls.

The spectre disappeared.

"Follow it lad, he's not dead, that must be what got the girl."

"I can't follow it if I can't see it," said Davey, *"it's gone."*

"Do like yer did when yer looked in the temple, remember, yer said that you were just thinking it then next thing we was in there!"

Davey tried but they did not leave the confines of the cell.

"Maybe yer trying too hard lad, relax a bit....That's it. There he is!"

Sweeping through the ether high above the earth the Shaman flew; watching, looking down upon the Gods, discovering how he might best help them in their return. Some of the Gods had changed themselves into magical animals; strong, as fast as the wind, able to fly across the land as they carried the Gods onwards. That the people needed cleansing there was no doubt - had he not asked the Emperor many times, but always in vain to allow him to do this. The Gods were infinite in their wisdom. They cleansed with fire, a wide sweep of the land over which they travelled was burnt, blackened and laid waste. The people were mown down like reeds. In his mind's eye he saw a runner using a roadway that was normally never used, "Fools! How can you ever hope to understand!" he cried.

The runner would not stop for anything, the speed he swept across the ground indicated the urgency with which he was intent upon delivering his message. The people must not oppose fate. The Gods were acting upon Earth, nothing must stand in their way.

Swooping through the ether like a great bird of prey he swept down lower above the Gods. The prophecy was correct! They wore the helmets of power, even their skins were made of the same strange substance. He watched a peasant try to escape their wrath. A God pointed a magic stick at her, with a burst of fire and voice of thunder the peasant was smashed into the dust.

Such fury! Such power!

"It is time! It is high time!" shouted the Shaman into the ether, "All will be mine!"

He swept onwards over a great valley, above a great river to northwards to intercept the runner.

Unable to act in the physical sense of the word he could but observe the world and its inhabitants and yet the runner must be stopped.

But wait! What was that further along the roadway? Destiny had decreed it, children were playing, the runner would not expect them to be there.

One child sat playing her pipes, she would see the runner from where she sat and would be able to warn her friend to move from his path.

The Shaman began willing himself to materialise, he could plainly hear the notes from her pipes which surrounded him with their irritating noise. It must be! He must show himself to this child if this accursed runner was to be stopped from interfering with the plans of the Gods.

The runner was almost upon them! The child saw him, realised the danger and began to warn her friend.

A last chance. As the child turned away towards its friend she saw his eyes, their snakelike look held her fast, she was gripped by them and the longer they held her the greater the grip became. He knew he had her, he knew she would not be able to tear free and warn the other child of the runners approach.

"It was 'im Davey lad, I'll have him yet you see if I don't!" said Paddy as the runner leapt into space.

Davey followed the runner down the sheer drop, Hotchas' legs still pounded away as if they would somehow strike something solid and allow him to escape, it was not to be.

The Shaman's face was an evil grimace as he drew his obsidian edged knife.

The runner's soul rose from the wreckage to seek its future destiny, in that instant the Shaman pierced it.

"That demon's killed his flippin' soul," said Paddy.

The effort of forcing himself to appear to the girl had weakened the effect of the poison. The Shaman felt his phantom self being pulled back to the body which waited to confine him within its bounds. As he retreated into the distance the children could again be seen, they were starting to melt into a smoky haze. But they were picking something up from the roadway.

"No! It cannot be!" he yelled. The quipu was found!

The pull of the body was too strong he could not fight it. The ether was becoming dim, it swirled and misted all around. He was drawn swiftly through tunnels of cloud as his phantom self drew nearer to its prison.

Soon he could see the body lying on the cell floor. It was always difficult to re-enter that useless heap of flesh and tissue, other priests had failed to do so and had remained trapped in the ether until finally the body had ceased to live. The chant of the skulls reached his ears, rising and falling, throbbing and pulsing, the sound helped him to focus on the physical world. The weird shrieks helped take him down from the heights and to re-enter the world of the living. His body rose from the floor.

"Summon the city elders!" he screamed at the assistant.

He crossed to the bench where he replaced the helmet and picked up the ornate snake. The snake was carved from deep green jade, its body was encrusted with jewels. The Shaman focused his mind on the snake. Rapidly the pupils of his eyes narrowed then stretched upwards and downwards, narrowing until they were a thin black slit, the rest of the eye began to glaze over and to alter colour until they were a dull yellow and seemed to have a hardness to them which could be touched. His body seemed to lose all its strength as it slowly crumpled to the floor, his head slumped to the ground. The body seemed to have lost the will to hold itself together as it kept on flattening, sinking and stretching. The arms were the first to be absorbed into the scaly casing which was beginning to form; the legs lengthened and combined, stretched and elongated to form a tail; his head was the last to transform, his tongue split and lengthened and began spitting out tasting the air about him.

The snake slithered across the cell floor to the skulls, raising its head it took a skull in its mouth and swallowed it, the lump of the skull could be seen being contracted along its body by the walls of muscle. All seven skulls were swallowed one by one.

"This can't be real lad," said Paddy shaking his head in astonishment, *"this is taking the mickey. I thought I was starting to understand what was happening 'ere but this lot's beyond me."*

Near a corner of the cell, where the wall met the floor was a hole. The hole was slightly smaller than a man's head, the snake undulated over the awful mess which littered the ground and pushed its head into the hole, its muscles rippled along its thick body as the rest of it entered, with a final flick of the tail it had gone.

"Follow it lad!"

Davey did not dare to enter. He did not dare to leave. He remained within that terrible room.

Paddy turned to him and slowly lifted the helmet from his head.

"Come on now, that all got a bit much for you there didn't it. I said meself it was beyond me. Here look outside, there's the feller putting out the lamps."

He parted the heavy net curtains which protected his weak eyes during the day, the first rays of the sun were coming up and the lampman was turning off the gas to each lamp, putting out the little flames.

It did the trick, Davey looked out and began to recover from the total fear he had experienced.

"What's it all about Uncle Paddy?" he asked, "why is it me that can see these things? What can I do to help someone who's already dead?"

"Eh calm yerself down there lad, yer letting this lot get to yer. That girl in the mirror has asked yer for help and I don't care if the devil 'imself is involved. We're going to 'elp. I see it like this lad, what's the point of all this if at the end of the day there's nowt we can do? It must all be 'appenin' for a reason, and that reason can only be because she needs yer help and only you can give it. Now that make sense to me, 'ow about you?"

"I see what you're getting at Uncle Paddy but it's all so terrible."

"Eh, if you think that lot's terrible it's nothing compared to what me and yer old feller 'ave seen. I'd tell yer it all now but yer dad reckons we should wait till yer older."

"Did me dad know this helmet could do these things?" asked Davey.

"Well it's like I was saying, there's folk and there's folk, some of us can get into this sort of stuff and some of us think different. Yer old feller did brave things over there lad and I tell you what, nothing but nothing scares him. If 'e were 'ere now he'd be sorting something out, you mark my words, no snakey little devil would bother 'im!" Davey thought about what he had said then answered, "Let's carry on Uncle Paddy."

"Naw, I reckon you've 'ad just about all yer can take for today."

"I'll have to go back home soon, me mam'll be expecting me for breakfast, we can stop then. Honest Uncle Paddy I want to go on, I mean *we're* safe aren't we, nothing can harm us, we're just watching."

Paddy hesitated before replying. "I don't know if it's goin' to be that simple lad, I'll be straight with yer, this lot's no flippin' game, this is the real thing."

"Pass me the helmet Uncle Paddy," was Davey's answer.

The snake twisted and turned its way deeper into the bowels of the temple, the scratching of its scales echoed through the darkness as it pressed its great muscles against the tunnel sides forcing itself onwards. A rat screamed in terror as the reptile bore down upon it, it turned and ran. The tunnel sloped upwards, it was slimy but a million scales gripped the tiniest imperfections, without pausing the rat was caught and swallowed.

"That feller can't have had his breakfast," said Paddy making a joke of the horror, *"yer okay, just watch where the thing goes,"* he encouraged.

The head of the snake emerged from a hole set low into the wall of another chamber. A solitary firebrand broke the pitch darkness as the snake's tongue flicked along carvings on the walls to a sacred spot where it coiled itself up and waited. Slowly each skull was drawn along the stomach back towards the head, where by distending its lower jaw the snake was able to spit out the shining crystals. The Shaman waited for his body to regain its human form.

"The elders come as you have ordered Shaman," rasped one of the skulls.

"One of the elders is not true to our ways," rasped another.

"Go outside lad and follow them in, the more we know about this hell-hole the better. I've got a feelin' that sooner than later we're goin' to need to know an awful lot about what's goin' on 'ere."

Fire from burning torches lit their way as the elders made their way deeper into the depths of the temple. The fear could be seen distorting their features as they moved along from one dark narrow passageway to another. Filthy blood-stained walls stretched away into the blackness, the flaring lights revealed bones from victims scattered upon the stone floors. Long shadows made everything seem unreal.

As if from nowhere a jaguar warrior appeared, on his arms and legs he wore snake-skins.

"Why have you come to this place?" he demanded.

A grey-bearded elder who wore the feathers of the condor spoke for the group, "The Shaman has summoned us as a matter of urgency."

The warrior motioned with a wave of his club for the elders to follow. Without effort he moved swiftly away.

"Keep up with him!" whispered one of the elders, "or else we may never see daylight again!"

Down corridors and passageways they followed, trotting to keep up with the warrior. Sometimes he moved ahead of their lights but although he carried none he was able to find his way without hesitation. Finally he stopped along a long stretch of corridor which had blazing brands fixed to its walls casting their eerie light along its length. He asked the ritual questions;

"Do you come as friends to this place?"

The grey-bearded elder answered, "We are friends."

"Do you know the secret ways?"

"Our fathers knew of them," said the elder.

"Then enter." He pushed against the wall. A section swung smoothly open to reveal a very narrow passageway. The warrior signalled the men to go in. Quietly they filed into the gloom. At the end of the passageway the open mouth of a stone snake gaped at them. Its fangs were carved from stone and hung so low they formed bars to the opening. Into this the elders crawled.

Into the chamber of the snake.

The fingers of firelight played out until they showed the Shaman. He sat swaying slightly, deep in trance. Before him he held a highly polished dark stone. The stone had been cut and polished to give a large flat surface, onto this he breathed until the surface condensed, misting the stone with his foul breath. He concentrated his gaze into the mist.

The elders were terrified, one of them whispered, "Did you speak?" but nobody answered.

The walls were lined with ancient writings, seven niches contained seven skulls, but the elders attention was solely upon the Shaman whose whole being was focused upon the dark stone.

"Tezcatlipoca," said the Shaman harshly, breathing softly. Within the smoking mirror something stirred. Mists swirled, parted and closed then began to shape themselves into an image; two children were seen, the elders saw one of them cause a runner to fall to his death. The man fell down a cliff face, his look of terror was imprinted on the stones surface.

"They are the children of Lord Axa," whispered the elders.

The Shaman's bark caused the elders to jump with fright, "I want these children. They are evil and must pay the price for the runner's life!"

The mirror had not finished displaying its insights into what must be. Images rushed across its black surface as if time was passing in a blur of movement. The eldest child became the only image but she was growing older, after but a few moments she was no longer a child but a young woman. She wore the strangest of clothes, long white clothes which swept upon the ground as she walked, strange footwear with pointed heels which made her walk taller, her neck was adorned with jewellery and her long black flowing hair was fastened with gold clasps.

"She is beautiful," whispered one of the elders almost to himself.

"It's her! That's the ghost! The White Lady," exclaimed Davey.

"Watch closely lad, we might find out something 'ere."

Her image became clearer but it was so strange, the body was transparent.

"It is a ghost, the ghost of the girl," whispered one of the elders into the ear of another.

They watched the spirit slowly dissolving into the mists.

The Shaman returned the stone to a deep groove set into the floor from where it leant against a wall. The elders began to leave, jostling each other in their hurry to escape.

"Wait!" hissed the Shaman, a forked tongue betrayed his former change.

Another image was being formed. The image was a man. The body of a man. Gradually the mists cleared away until a naked upper body emerged - it was unlike anything the elders had ever seen; the head was shaven white skin, the face was ferocious, but it was the tattoos imprinted upon the man's body which brought gasps of astonishment. A dragon, lizard and sea-monster fought with a roaring tiger who protected mermaids upon the man's chest. His stomach was covered with two tusked elephants ramming their heads together, they formed the stand for a huge set of scales which extended up the centreline of the body to the balance-arm which crossed from shoulder to shoulder, ending in chains which ran down each arm to the man's hands.

*"Now **they're** what yer call tatt's."* Paddy looked ruefully at the fading lady wrapped round an anchor on his own forearm.

"Look!" whispered one of them, in fear and excitement. The others hushed him into silence.

The Shaman bent forwards and breathed softly over the stone. The surface misted over slightly then quickly unclouded to show the complete body of the man. Peering out, the man seemed to know he was being watched. He could not tell from where but twisted round, looking all about him, his mouth opened wide as his face contorted with the effort of shouting, "I seek thee Shaman! Feel my rage!" he screamed. He was encased in stone. Stone surrounded him so tightly he could barely move yet his fury was such that the Shaman stepped back. The man's head rose from out of the mirror. Hunger had forced his features back so far that his eyes seemed to protrude from their deep sockets, they looked around, they saw the elders, they saw the Shaman. The body of the man followed. It rose in jerky movements pulling itself clear of the stone. He raised his hands seeking to take hold of the Shaman but his hands lacked all solidity.

A skull cried out terrifying the elders so that they were scarcely able to breathe, "He carries signs! Beware!"

On each palm of the man's hands where the chains ended, was a symbol; one depicted two interlocking triangles, the other was a circle shaded with a curious motif.

Opposite page to show an illustration of the man v the Shaman, the man's hands would be shown with ☯✧
Although the man was unable to take hold of the Shaman he held his hands around the area of the Shaman's throat, slowly forcing him to the floor. The Shaman could not shake off whatever it was that held him.

"The signs are upon him!" came a harsh shout.

The elders could sense that the Shaman grew weaker with each passing moment. Never could they have imagined that any creature, of dark or light, could defeat him.

An evil voice rasped from out of the darkness. "We must act now. The Shaman's task is not complete, he is needed!"

One of the elders felt something touch his shoulder, in his fright he dropped the flaming brand he carried, it rolled towards the strange but deadly combat before them. The flare from its light gave the Shaman's eyes something to focus upon. He snapped out of his deep trance-like state and lay exhausted upon the floor. The phantom raged at the Shaman but the link which held it to him was broken. It slowly disappeared, swallowed up by the stone which entombed it.

The elders rushed out of the chamber.

"Who the hell was that? He's my kind of boyo whoever 'e is. Anyone who can tackle that fiend is alright by me!"

Safely back in the light, the elders walked a long way from the temple before they dared to speak of what had happened. The grey-bearded man spoke, "We must swear by Inti not to pass on what we have seen today. Some have already begun to question the old ways. Should the people know of this trouble might result."

They stared up into the full blaze of the sun.

"So may it be," they swore, nobody noticed that no sound came from the lips of one of the men.

The grey-bearded man said, "We have witnessed the children of Lord Axa cause the death of the runner, send out the guards, arrest them!"

The Shaman lay still, staring into the stone. His evil eyes burnt into its depths, the image of a boy, wearing the helmet, fixed itself for an instant. He lifted his head from the floor and stared hard. His face filled the mirror as his eyes stared around the bedroom.

Davey screamed in terror and pushed the helmet off his head.

"Don't panic lad! I'm 'ere," said Paddy..

"What's happening! Paddy are you alright!" screeched Mrs Murtagh woken from a dream in which her son's gas mask was slowly slipping from his face and he was screaming for air. They heard her bed creaking as she jumped up.

"Get yer 'ead down!" whispered Paddy as he stood slowly up. Davey lay down on the heavy blankets which had been laid out on the floor to serve as his mattress.

"The 'elmet!" warned Paddy just as Mrs Murtagh burst through the door Davey pushed it under the bed.

"Just goin' the lav" said Paddy, "what yer shouting about now?"

"Sorry son," said Mrs Murtagh looking round the room but was satisfied when she saw Davey apparently asleep, she whispered, "had a bad dream, that cheese you know, doesn't agree with me workings."

Neither Paddy or Davey dared to risk alarming Mrs Murtagh by making any more sounds, they lay still, thinking over the sights they had witnessed. Sleep got the better of Davey, even when Mrs Murtagh rose and busied herself about the house and called up the stairs, "Need anything Paddy," before setting off to the corner shop he did not waken.

Sat in his armchair Hugh watched Mrs Murtagh leave the house then called to his wife, "Liz I won't be long, just going to see how Davey got on last night."

"Tell him his breakfast is ready," she called from the kitchen. Hugh walked over and let himself in. Paddy had watched his progress across the road and called down the stairs, "Up 'ere Hughie!"

The shout wakened Davey who sat up with a bewildered look upon his face as the memories of the night came flooding back to him.

"ave we got news for you Hughie boy!" said Paddy.

"What's been happening?" asked Hugh.

Davey looked at Paddy.

"Do you want to tell 'im or should I?" said Paddy.

Davey managed to splutter, "Y-you."

"Yer lad 'ere's got some imagination Hughie, 'e's spent half the night telling me tales of ghosts, dragons and I tell yer what," he winked at Hugh, "'e's got an eye for the ladies, beautiful women here, there and everywhere! Eh Davey!"

Davey just grinned, uncertain what to say as Hugh studied him closely.

"I tell yer what Hughie if I'd a silver tongue like yer lad there's no way I'd still be a bachelor boy, that lad 'ud talk the fur off a bear."

"That right Davey?" joked Hugh.

Davey laughed nervously.

"Get yerself home lad, your mum's got your breakfast ready for yer," said Hugh. As soon as Davey had left the room Hugh questioned Paddy more closely. "You sure everything was alright with him?"

"Yer worrying yerself over nothing Hughie, that lad's no closer to losing his slates than old Nick is to losing his."

"But he's already lost his!" laughed Hugh.

"Exactly! that's what I'm telling yer, how can he lose them if they're already lost?"

"I don't know Paddy, you'll do me head in one of these days," said Hugh, "you've done a good job me old mate." He slapped Paddy lightly on his upper arm. As Hugh left he asked, "do you still want him to come round again or have you had enough?"

"Tell the lad he's always welcome 'ere Hughie. You know that, what else is there these days?"

"Chin up old feller," said Hugh, he smiled weakly as Paddy slumped back into his nest and lay staring blankly at the ceiling.

CHAPTER 12

An Army of Rats

Davey's mouth was watering with the smells wafting from the kitchen. He went through to where his mother was removing a fresh-baked loaf from the range.

"Hi Mum! Missed me?"

"Oh so there you are darling, what have you been up to then eh? What's that Paddy been telling you?"

"Well he didn't tell me much but I did find out *something*," replied Davey.

"Come on then, out with it," she smiled.

"Well you'll never guess what happened, Mrs Murtagh made me up a bed of old blankets on the floor but these blankets were proper Indian blankets, you know like they put on their horses. I asked her where they were from and she said Uncle Paddy traded them for half a dozen eggs from an Indian in the war, she said they're blood-brothers now and this Indian is going to come and stay here and live."

"You're kidding me!" said Liz.

"No honest Mum, ask her yourself if you don't believe me."

Hugh was standing in the little doorway, "Eh don't start listening to that feller," he laughed, "even Paddy says that lad's the tallest teller of tales he's ever come across."

Liz laughed, "Oh Davey go on with you, I nearly believed you then. You're not getting your breakfast now."

Davey ran behind her and pushed his thumbs into the sides of her waist, shrieks of laughter and howls of "Mercy !" only ended when gave in and agreed to provide the meal.

Hugh stood grinning from ear to ear as Liz dished out eggs and beans with a doorstep sized chunk of fresh bread. "Eh up," he said as a loud knock came on the door, "who's that then?"

"That'll be the tallyman come for the rent," whispered Liz. "You answer it Davey, tell him we're out."

Hugh and Liz hid in the kitchen as Davey went to the door, the man who waited was not the talley-man, he caused Davey such surprise that he stammered, "Me Mam said to tell you she's out."

"Oh no, what's he saying," said Liz.

"Stay there girl, I'll sort it out."

He went to the door where the bulk of Mr Quirk filled the frame.

"Morning Mr McCann," he introduced himself, "Mr Quirk." Holding out a large perfectly manicured hand towards Hugh and totally ignoring Davey.

Although Hugh stood in the hallway which was higher than the pavement outside Mr Quirk still towered above him. He took the extended hand and felt the strength of the teacher but the softness of his skin felt almost sickly to a man used to working out of doors.

"Pleased to meet you Mr Quirk," said Hugh politely but not inviting him in.

"I won't waste your time Mr McCann. I've come about your boy. Yesterday he walked out of school without permission, he was offensive and rude to myself and my wife and...." He stopped as Liz called from the kitchen.

"What does four feather's want?"

"Excuse me Mr Quirk," said Hugh. He walked back in to the house and spoke quietly with his wife, "Now now Liz, let's hear him out there's a good girl." He winked at her and Davey and whispered, "Then I'll get rid of him." He returned to the unwelcome visitor, "I do apologise Mr Quirk, you were saying?"

Totally unruffled Mr Quirk straightened an imaginary kink in his perfectly flat tie. "I have placed my concerns in writing Mr McCann." He passed Hugh a letter then continued, "We, at the school, take the view that David must be *disciplined* for his actions." He emphasised the word disciplined.

Hugh opened the letter, "One moment Mr Quirk whiles a fetch me reading glasses." He walked into the kitchen and took the glasses from his trouser pocket. "Let's leave him to stew for a bit should we?" he whispered. He started reading the letter, "Put the kettle on there's a girl, these glasses are hard to find." But as he read the letter he grew more and more annoyed, "This is a pack of lies if ever there was one!"

"Calm yourself down now Hugh," urged Liz seeing that he was beginning to get upset but Hugh was already walking back to the door. "This *disciplined*," said Hugh in a fairly good effort at copying the emphasis even down to the twitch, "does it mean that you want to hit him with a stick or humiliate him in some other fashion?"

Mr Quirk grinned, he could see that Hugh was losing his cool. "Appropriate disciplinary measures will be taken Mr McCann."

"Apprpr.." Hugh began to repeat the sentence in disgust but his anger had affected his breathing and he coughed. Once started he could not stop but began wheezing and gasping for air.

"Perhaps another time when you are more able?" smirked Mr Quirk.

"Hughie, are you alright!" cried Liz running to his aid.

Hugh reached to undo his shirt collar stud and dropped the letter.

"Another time, Mrs McCann," repeated Mr Quirk, "it's all in this," he bent down to retrieve the letter to pass to her.

"Little bit lower, that's it, perfect," said Paddy as he trained the sight on its target.

A sound like a hammer striking an anvil as the rifle was fired was followed almost immediately by a loud scream from Mr Quirk. He jerked himself bolt upright and clasped his hands to his injury. The pain forced tears from his eyes as he screeched, "I've been shot!" Off he hobbled looking frantically around, keeping his back to the wall for fear of receiving another wound to the same area.

The laughter from number 99 could be heard the full length of the street as Paddy pinged pellets off the pavement to spur him on his way.

"Well that'll be the last we'll see of him," said Liz when Hugh had finally begun to regain control of his breathing. He lay propped up on the sofa .

"He's a right pain in the backside, now he's got one himself," said Hugh.

Howls of laughter erupted.

"I tell you what that Paddy's still a crack-shot."

They all fell about laughing. It was to be some minutes before Liz was able to disappear into the kitchen and return with Davey's breakfast.

"Here y'are son," she said, "have this now before it gets too cold."

She indicated that he should not to do anything to cause Hugh to laugh, they could hear his lungs grating away as they sought to cope with the extra demands for air.

Davey tucked into the meal, throughout it he did not dare exchange glances with his father, the slightest thing would have triggered them both off, it was all he could do to eat without thinking of the expression on Mr Quirk's face as the slug buried itself into him. By the time he had finished Hugh had settled down.

"Feeling alright now Dad?"

"Fine lad, fine," he grinned, "Well Davey it doesn't look like you'll be going back to that place even if you wanted to, it's just as well, your mum went round to Mrs Fegan's last night and she's got something for you. Go and see 'er." Hugh sank back onto the sofa.

Curious Davey walked through into the kitchen and smiled when he saw his mother in 'her spot'. "Me dad said you've got something for me Mum?"

"Yes, I have," she laughed, "this is a story *you'd* be proud of you little tinker."

"What is it Mum?"

"Well you know how Mrs Fegan always goes on about her granddad working on the railroads in London?"

"Yeah" said Davey.

"Well what you don't know is that most of the parts for them engines are made here in Liverpool, in a factory called Stilsons, do you know the one, on the Dock Road?"

"The great big place opposite the grain warehouses?"

"Yeah that's the one. Well Mrs Fegan's granddad orders those parts from Stilsons. So I got to thinking and went round and had a word with her, there's a letter from her on the sideboard."

Davey went back into the living room, Hugh was fast asleep, his breath rattled in and out.

"Look at the poor love," said Liz, "I few measly quid and 'e' could be so much better."

Davey opened the letter and read it.

Dear Mr Stilson,

I am the grand-daughter of Mr Fegan of Great Western Railways. I have sent round this young man to see you, he is the son of a friend of mine. He is a good lad who has just left school and is after a job. I would be grateful if you could have a word with him and see what you think, I know he won't let you down.

"Wow! This is fantastic Mum. When should I go down!"

"Well now's as good a time as any. Get yourself washed and dressed, I've hung your best stuff in the wardrobe."

Davey went into the kitchen and filled the bowl, the cold water cleared away any cobwebs that were lurking after his long night, then he dashed upstairs. It was the quickest Liz had ever known him to get dressed.

"How'd I look Mum?"

"As bright as a button. Tell you what, sneak out now while yer Dad's asleep, when he wakes up I'll tell him what's happening."

"Thanks Mum," he said as he pecked her on the cheek.

"Oh Davey. On the shelf in the outhouse, on your way out. Give them boots of your's a good polishing. Shoes are important, they always check your boots."

With the letter clutched in his hand Davey walked down onto the Dock Road. It would be several miles of hard walking before he reached Stilsons. Past the huge sugar factories where ships were queuing at anchor waiting to off-load their cargoes of cane the air smelt sweet and sickly, above the massive ten storey high building flocks of pigeons fattened on molasses flapped in great flocks. Past the cotton warehouses where powerful men with muscular chests and arms hauled on hoists heaving great bales six or seven storeys high. The lines of men who stood beneath watched enviously. They stood silently with hungry, worried looks on their faces, almost hoping that someone would reach out a little too far. Past the tannery and brewery where the fetid smell of curing leather mingled with the stench of hops poisoning the air and making him afraid to breathe. Even after he had left them behind the smell clung to his clothes.

Against the high wall which separated the docks themselves from the road, unemployed men stood in great lines, in some places five deep, waiting for the chance that someone might offer work. Occasionally an overseer would appear at one of the narrow entrances and a small number of lucky men would be taken on to unload a newly arrived vessel. The ebb tide would see them return to the line.

As he continued on his way, Davey walked on the opposite side of the road to the men. Mile after mile the lines stretched. He could feel the anger rising from their mass but they held themselves in check knowing that their only reward for displaying their temper would be black-listing. Although carts, trams and other vehicles separated him from them, occasionally when the traffic died down he would attract their bored attentions. After one man had shouted, "Eh lad, is that letter for me, tell them I'm not available at present!" he hid it inside his jacket. Not much further on a tram came past, he ran after it hoping to hitch a ride on its bumper but was spotted by the conductor, "Hop it! Don't even think about it!"

Past carpet manufacturers where rough girls and coarse women on lunch-break teased him. "Looking for work sweetie! Come on up 'ere, we'll put yer to work!" Davey's face coloured as he rushed on to further cat-calls.

The huge silos of the grain warehouse came in sight and he knew he was nearing Stilsons. Many was the tale he'd heard of the grain silos, myriads of rats were said to inhabit them, he could well imagine it. They towered above every other factory along the waterfront.

Up a steep, cobbled side street lay Stilsons. As he turned up it he stepped over a gutter, set into the gutter was a metal grid, a faint noise from the grid caused him to look down into it. He thought he glimpsed a pair of glinting eyes and shivered with the memory of the giant snake. The night's adventures had seemed part of another world but the eyes gave him a different feeling. His thoughts flashed to the white lady and he knew he would do everything he could to help her. He passed another grid and heard another noise, hardly daring to look he glanced down ready at any moment to run for it and saw the same pair of eyes, they were set into the head of a huge rat which stared back at him, it was trying to force its way out between the heavy iron bars.

Davey shuddered and walked more quickly up the street, keeping away from the gutter, to where a sign over the front of a large building read **STILSONS - METAL WORKING.**

Underneath the sign a notice said NO WORK but four men had formed a queue. Past their staring eyes Davey walked to the entrance. A man in a uniform who sat in a little wooden hut stopped him. "Got a 'pointment?" asked the man.

Davey showed him the letter.

"Ten a penny those son. Get to the back of the queue."

"But me Mam said...."

The man did not even answer, he just swung his thumb towards the line.

In despair Davey walked the short distance to the back of the queue. The man in front of him had a totally bald patch on the back of his head, long unkempt hair straggled over the bald patch as though the man had made some half-hearted attempt to hide the offending area. After some time he turned round and asked, "Alrighty there sunshine, after a job?"

"Aye."

"There's not a lot going today. Now last week I was lucky, 'appened to find a nice little number down at the tannery."

"Been waiting here long?"

"Naw, only joined this one an hour ago. But looking at this sityation realistically, givin' due attention to all those concerned with due respects given accordingly I'd say we've got as much chance of getting a job 'ere as an eskymo 'as of gettin' a sun tan."

Davey laughed, he felt his spirits beginning to pick up.

"That's more like it young 'un, yer've got to toughen up to this or yer might as well throw yer hand in. It's like me old sergeant used to tell me, 'Face the fact Fletcher, yer a failure, the sooner yer accept it the better it'll be for the both of us."

Davey felt he could trust the man, he reached into his jacket and took out his letter, "Me Mam got me this letter."

Fletcher read it, "Now that's an intryduction that is. An intryduction like that could get yer a steady job. 'It's not what yer know, it' oo yer know."

"But the man on the gate..."

"'e's just some know nowt, a brown-nosing, lick spittling, suck-holing nobody. That feller's kissed so many rear-ends 'e' doesn't know if 'e's coming or going. What you've got there lad is an *intryduction*."

"But how do I get to show it to someone if I can't even get in the place?"

"Yer looking at complycations now. That's a diffrent matter. Take me for example, I'm a qualified, indentured 'prenticed fitter. I can take a block of metal and do thinks with it yer wouldn't believe. I can mill, grind, shape, turn, braze, burnish and buff standin' on me flippin' 'ead. Now if I 'ad me an intryduction like that, I'm away, can't see me for scurf."

Davey's look of confusion seemed to bring clarification.

"What I mean is this, once yer in, yer in. Simple as that. What yer needs to do is come back 'ere tomorrow, dead early, before anybody else. Then, soon as yer get the chance, yer get in there and show them yer letter!"

"So its not worth me waiting here now?"

"Naw, yer wasting yer time 'ere now lad."

Davey stood pondering what he had been told then said, "Thanks a lot mister. I'll come back tomorrow."

Fletcher watched Davey walk away then turned to another man, he gave a sly nudge with his elbow then said, "Like they say 'It's not what yer know but who yer know'. Flamin' qualyfications I've got, then this snotty nosed kid comes along with a flippin' intryduction. I got rid of 'im but he says he'll be comin' back tomorrow."

The man had a shock of ginger hair and an angry face, his face grew even angrier as he thought about what Fletcher had told him, "Well we'll just 'ave to point 'im in another direction won't we, I'll get me lad to nobble 'im before he get 'ere."

Davey walked disconsolately back down toward the Dock Road. As he walked he heard a metallic clanking sound intermingled with thousands of tiny high-pitched squeals. The men in the queue also heard the noise, they looked down the road towards him. Again they heard the metallic sound this time the squeals were clearer. One man in the queue shouted, "It's a rat army!" and ran up the steep street away from the river.

Fletcher, the red-headed man, and the other man left in the queue did not wish to give up their places but they were unsettled.

Ignoring the sounds Davey carried on. In the centre of the street he heard a sudden clank and saw movement, the inspection hatch to a large sewer bumped up into the air before settling back down. His eyes saw the rats forcing against its weight. When he reached the Dock Road a pony and cart went hurtling past with two men clinging to the back but no driver, dozens of men running as fast as their legs would carry them were close behind to avoid their rush Davey jumped back against the side of a building.

"Run for it lad, the rats are on the move!" yelled one of the men.

Choosing not to follow the men Davey ran back up the side street, as he neared Stilsons he saw huge steel shutters being lowered at its entrance. He sprinted for them but from one of the inspection hatches a mass of rats erupted. The three men left in the queue begged the guard to allow them into his hut, they forced themselves inside and shut the door. Davey was deciding whether to join them or not when Fletcher shouted out through the window, "Only room for us in 'ere lad!"

Davey found himself alone, the rats were pouring into the street from all directions, every grid cover was opened, the cobbles were alive. He looked down at the Dock Road, a cyclist had rested a pedal of his bike against the kerb and was perched with his feet up on the handlebars, the rats swarmed beneath. Back against the high walls of Stilsons he was pressed, frantically he looked around for some means of escape. The tall slender

column of a street lamp was his only hope. A number of rats seemed to understand his intention and ran to cut him off. He took off his jacket and thrashed at the rats, he kicked out with his boots, connecting with some. By the time he had reached the lamp he was completely surrounded and leapt for the post. One of the rats jumped after him and managed to sink its teeth into his trouser leg. "Get off it!" he shouted as he kicked and shook his leg forcing it to dislodge its grip. Quickly he shinned up further until he was out of reach but the ground beneath him turned brown with swarming bodies.

Just beneath the light, two wrought iron arms protruded. He took hold of one of the arms and swung free. The rodents looked eagerly up at him seeing that their chance might come, but his grip was secure, he clambered up onto the arm and sat there, looking down at the heaving mass.

A particularly large rat walked amongst the others, its tail was the thickness of a child's wrist, the animal was as long as a man's step. The giant rat seemed to be controlling the mass of bodies around it, wherever it moved the mass flowed. Davey searched through his pockets for something to throw at it. Finding nothing he turned his attention to the gas lamp, he wrapped round his hand then smashed the panels knocking the glass into the lamp. The first chunk missed the giant rat but it was impossible not to hit one of the others, it sheared into a tail, slicing it off sending the animal squealing away. Another throw, this time just missing the giant rat. It looked evilly up at him, realised what he was doing and began making off, droves of rats followed in its wake. Some of them did not make it, they fell victims to the razor sharp shards winging amongst them. A final throw sent a segment of glass spinning through the air, it dipped down sharply and sliced into the back of the giant rat's head, it squealed in pain before it followed the brown mass, down, down into the sewers.

Davey's actions had not been witnessed by the men crowded into the guard's hut. He slid down, ran across and fastened a small bolt in place, locking the men inside. Fletcher was squeaking like a rat, "What do you reckon? Have they all gone? Don't go out there they could be hiding round the corner!"

The steel shutters of Stilsons started sliding open. Davey walked across the yard and into the building.

Sparks and flashes of light arced through the air. Motors whirled driving thick belts which led to machines of every shape and size. Raw-metal ingots clanged along rollers to begin undergoing the various processes of heat, hammer and hardening. Men were leaning over huge lathes which turned steel blocks at fantastic speeds; as they manipulated dials and levers to apply cutting tools, white coolant liquid dropped onto the blocks singeing and tainting the air with the smell but preventing the coils of cut metal from burning.

"Could I see the manager please, I've got a letter for him," said Davey to a man wearing a full-length boiler suit which was covered in thick oil-stains, the man was wiping his hands with an equally oily rag. "Up there lad!" he shouted above the clanging and battering, he pointed across the factory floor to a metal stairway. At the top of the stairway, apparently suspended in mid-air, was a flat hut-like building with windows set into the side which looked down upon the workers.

Davey's thankyou was engulfed in the noise. He crossed the factory floor passing close to whirring machines, four men ran past him, each carried a heavy floor brush. As they ran through a large opening into another area of the factory a door at the top of the stairway opened, out stepped a man dressed in a suit whose large beer-belly threatened to topple him down the stairs.

"Oi! You lot!" he yelled after the disappearing brush carriers then began to descend the stairs, encumbered by his belly which rolled and bounced around, the only thing that seemed to hold it in place was a thick leather belt. By the time he had reached the bottom the effort had slowed him enough for Davey to be able to hand him his letter. Out of breath, the man took the excuse to stop and read.

"Foller me lad!" he panted as he pocketed it. Through the doorway they went, into a workshop where men staggered as they carried heavy crucibles of white-hot molten metal. The men wore leather gauntlets; leather aprons, steel toe-capped boots and helmets which protected their heads. Davey's mind jerked when he saw the helmets but the shout of, "In 'ere!" sent him following through a door.

They emerged into a large room. Against one wall barrels of oil were stacked, where there was a slight gap between the barrels wads of rags had been stuffed. Standing around the room holding their brushes in various stages of readiness were the five men.

"What's this then?" asked the beer-bellied man, "A flippin' lynch-mob with nowt to lynch?"

Without looking up a tall thin man with a rough beard pointed up above their heads. Pipes of various diameter ran the length of the room, where they exited through the walls all the gaps around them had been packed with rags.

"What yer trying to say? Have yer all gone religious or sommat?" asked the man with the belly.

He got his answer as a rat fell down almost landing on his head, instantly five brushes were curving in almighty swings as they scrambled to connect with the rodent. The shouts and yells were murderous as the rat scurried round trying to escape but found all exits barred.

Bending low the man led Davey from the room, "I'll deal with them in a minute," he said trying to sound officious but the dislodged hair-piece upon his head lent him such a comical appearance that Davey was barely able to stop himself from laughing. A shout came from the workshop, "WIGGY!"

Ignoring the shout but re-settling his wig the man introduced himself, "Mr Stilson Junior at your service young man, anything Stilson's can do for Mrs Fegan is a pleasure." He shook Davey's hand warmly, "Follow me to my office where we will discuss matters further."

As they walked through the workshop he scowled at the workers as if daring them to make another sound. Safely back in the safety of his office he motioned for Davey to take a seat. His secretary looked up from a typewriter as they entered, tutted to herself, then returned to her work.

"They're all good blokes in 'ere lad. Most of 'em kept this country going against Kaiser Bill, without Stilson's England wouldn't have an Empire, the Great wouldn't be in Britain. Look at 'em," he stood standing proudly at the window taking a cigar out of his breast pocket. His secretary flicked a lighter from which Mr Stilson lit up, "engineers, fitters, machinists, you name it Stilson's 'as got it."

"How many men work here Mr Stilson?" asked Davey trying to sound enthusiastic.

Mr Stilson choked on his cigar, "Half of them lad!" It started him coughing, the cough was unlike those Davey was used to, it was a long screech then a sudden stop.

"Right my lad, you're going to learn yourself a trade. I'll put yer under Mr Herbert Henry Hodgson, he's me best man, City and Guilds First Class. An engineer you're goin' to be lad, a credit to Stilson's and to yer country."

His speech ended Mr Stilson opened the door and roared, "BERT!" and to the returning brush carriers he shouted, "Bloody heroes. I'll see you lot later about yer medals."

He returned and sat down opposite Davey blowing smoke rings up into the air, from the factory floor the workers looked up, saw the rings and slowed work almost to a stop.

"Shirley," said Mr Stilson turning to his secretary who totally ignored him, he wheezed, then said rapidly, "Tanner a week, three days annual leave, six till six weekdays, six days a week, one Sunday in four." He turned back to Davey, "Start tomorrow, provide own lunch and footwear," he looked down at Davey's, "they'll do, company'll provide the rest."

After some minutes a light tap came at the door.

"Yarse," called the secretary without looking up.

Bert had to bend down to enter, he was so tall. But he could have fitted through a railing fence, Davey could almost hear Paddy saying, "*I've seen more meat on a butcher's hook.*"

"Yes Mr Stilson," said Bert in a gruff but friendly voice that had a sing-song quality to it.

"This 'ere lad is goin' to train to be an engineer. I'm putting 'im under yer wing Bert, educate and elucidate 'im..."

Mr Stilson's words were lost upon Davey, he was so taken aback by Bert's appearance; a boiler suit which was two sizes too small revealed hairy ankles and even hairier wrists, the body of the suit cut up tightly between his legs making them seem even longer than they were. On his head was perched a bobble hat, minus the bobble. There was barely an inch of skin on his hands which did not have sticking plaster either sticking to it or trying to hang grimly on by gripping to a few hairs. Wrapped around his elbows were thick rags taped into position with black insulation tape, the same protective measures had been taken with his knees. Bert appeared to be a walking disaster zone.

"Leave him to me Mr Stilson. We won't make any mistake with *him*."

"Excellent. Take him down to stores, get him kitted out."

Davey was left to wonder about the inflection upon the word *him* as he was led off.

"Wiggy's not a bad sort of feller, so long as he's had a belly-full of booze he's friendly enough, his missus, now there's another matter, her face'd turn milk sour, she get's 'im going sometimes then 'e comes down a bit 'ard on us but most of the time this is not a bad place," said Bert as they walked into the storeroom.

With his brand new boiler suit rolled under his arm Davey walked past the guard's hut. The guard's furtive eyes set deep into his fleshy face looked suspiciously at Davey as he passed, but unable to prove anything. His fellow prisoners had disappeared, Davey skipped down the street in elation but giving the grids a wide berth.

Hooters and sirens were sounding as factories and warehouses signalled the ends of the day. The men lucky enough to have been in work joined the throngs of those who had waited hopefully but had not been fortunate. Davey was so buoyed up with his good luck he ran along the Dock Road, ignoring any opportunity for jumping a tram or hitching a lift on a cart.

"MUM! DAD! I've got a job. I'm going to be an engineer!" he shouted through the door of Number 99. A thumbs up to Paddy watching from across the street was enough for him to smile happily to himself as he settled back and waited for whatever the evening would bring.

CHAPTER 13

Ambush

An *engineer*. Now that's what I call sommat," said Paddy savouring the word.

"I'm going to be trained by someone and there's all kinds of machines and 'quipment down there, it's massive, I'm dead lucky," said Davey.

"Yeah lad, you sure are, there's many a man would give his right hand for what you've got. And it's all down to Fatty Fegan. Have yer told her, what did she say?"

Davey grimaced but smiled, "She give me a hug and a kiss."

But Paddy was off 'pollyticking', "Capitalists lad! they're the cause, every man has the right to work. Now if Winnie Churchill would get his act together and forget about gold standards none of this'd be 'appening. But I'll not hear a word said against him, he did the Royal Scots proud and got his hands dirty with the best of 'em."

"Why does everyone want gold so much Uncle Paddy?"

"Greed lad. Gold is money, money is power, power is what all the little men want to 'ave over the big men, an' I'm not talking *size* lad, do yer foller me drift?"

"Yeah, but why do they have to start killing for it? Why is it so important?"

"Yer a young 'un lad, so you've still got a lot to learn. In many a way yer old before yer time," he nodded to himself, "but in others yer've got a long ways to go. Take these Inkers, do you reckon them Spanish are over there for the good of their health?"

Davey shook his head.

"Course they ain't. Only one thing they're after lad. Gold. Look at this." He thumped a big book onto the bed, "Sent the old girl down the library, come back with that. Look at them, they're all in there, a whole nation lad, that's what we're talking 'ere, MILLIONS. All destroyed for lumps of flippin' metal. It ain't right lad it just ain't right."

"Do they all get destroyed. Is that what the book says?" asked Davey.

"Those Inkers were so busy fighting each other or using clubs against cannons. Sooner or later they 'ad to lose."

"Should we tell someone about what we've seen Uncle Paddy. I mean it's important isn't it?"

"You start telling anyone about this lot and they'll lock yer up and throw away the key. The funny farm's the only place you'd be goin' if yer breathe a word of it lad. Promise me you'll not do anything like that, I'd never be able to live with meself if yer got into trouble," said Paddy looking very worried.

Davey laughed, "Suppose you're right Uncle Paddy. Does sound kind of crazy doesn't it. We're looking in a mirror so we can help someone who's been dead for hundreds of years, but it's weird isn't it. I wish I could understand what it's all about. What's going to happen to the girl and her sister when they get back to the city?"

"I've been puzzling it out all day lad, there's more pieces to this than a flamin' jigsaw. There's only one way to find out, stick yer 'elmet on and let's get on with it." Paddy's face was beginning to light up.

"The Shaman saw me last night in the mirror Uncle Paddy. Do you think he knows we're watching? I was chased today by a load of rats maybe he had something to do with it."

Paddy chewed his lip, "I wouldn't put anything past that feller, anyone that can go round turning themselves into a snake has got to be a slippery customer," he prodded Davey, "do you get it lad?"

Davey forced a smile, the joke did nothing to remove his fears.

"Come on lad, it's under the bed. Remember we're doing this for the girl - not for George and flippin' England." Still not feeling sure that he was doing the right thing Davey gave in to Paddy's insistence, he put the helmet on and looked into the mirror.

"*It's Lord Axa and his men,*" he said still uncertain.

Through the depths of the jungle moved a file of nine men. Clad in their jaguar skins, faces painted in startling colours, carrying only war-clubs the warriors looked quite terrifying. Feathers of the eagle and condor swayed menacingly in the wind of their passage.

"Do yer stuff and 'ave a look round, let's see what they're up to this time!" Paddy was almost bouncing up and down on the bed in excitement.

Up out of the jungle their view rose, Davey looked all around, far to the left of the Incas position the great river arced in a silver ribbon. They swept over to it and, as Paddy guessed, beneath them they saw the column of Spaniards working its way along the bank. They had travelled a good distance, the river was beginning to narrow. In places the column was pressed close to the waters edge either by the jungle or by great rock columns. A jaguar was spotted slinking across one of the rock columns stalking strange monkeys which had staring eyes and striped tails.

"That reminds me of that tattooed man Uncle Paddy."

"What lad? The monkey?"

"No the big cat. The one on that man was a tiger, they come from India don't they?"

"Yer not wrong, yer right."

"Well maybe he'd been to India or come from there? Those signs the Shaman was scared of were foreign looking."

"Don't prove nothin' lad the demon barber of Steble Street would carve them things into yer for a few shillings."

"Just thought I'd mention it," Davey said sounding disappointed that his idea hadn't received much consideration.

Paddy detected the tone in his voice, "Get a grip lad, yer doin' great, look what's happening here!"

Under orders from the commander to ensure that the flanks of the column were protected Francesco assigned ten musketeers to the task, they peeled off from the main body and entered the jungle. Within its gloomy silence the men primed their muskets which had been dampened by spray rising from the river. They peered intently into the surrounding vegetation. All sound from the river was soaked up in the jungle's vast expanse, the men listened hard for the faintest movement.

Davey returned to the warriors. They followed the line of least resistance, skirting round obstacles in their path, sometimes seeming to almost double back upon themselves rather than waste valuable energy in climbing over a rough hillock or in having to hack their way through a dense thicket. The sun was their only means of positioning but they scarcely glanced at it as they glided silently between the ancient trees.

"MOVE YOURSELF!" shouted a warrior full into the old man's face as yet again he slipped and slowed their progress. Manco had the most hatred in him, "Murderer and dog!" he yelled jerking hard on the rope which tied the old man's wrists. The old man fell down catching the side of his head against a tree trunk. Manco raised his club and aimed a vicious blow which would have finished him but Lord Axa ran in and punched the warrior on the shoulder. Knocked off aim, the club buried itself into the ground.

"Do not bring harm to him!" Axa ordered. "Kabah stay and guard this man, the enemy are near."

Abandoning their fearful costumes the warriors slipped away through the trees, they travelled for some time before halting at a small stream which sliced through the jungle floor before running on to plunge into the river chasm. From the banks of the stream they scooped out thick handfuls of mud and smeared their bodies from head to toe until only the whites of their eyes showed. After rolling in the leaf litter they became so perfectly camouflaged as to be practically invisible.

No words were exchanged as Axa positioned each man across the trail that the musketeers must take, he examined their places of concealment from different angles then lay down amongst them.

The snapping of light twigs announced the proximity of the musketeers. Not until Lord Axa gave his battle-cry did the warriors leap to their feet, the nerve of the troops was shattered as the ground around them suddenly became alive and the air was filled with war cries.

"Over here!" "FIRE!" a few shots were loosed wildly into the air. "Keep close order!" "RETREAT!" confusion and panic reigned as the warriors swung their great war-clubs. Only two men escaped to run shrieking in fear but warriors tore swiftly after them clubbing them to the ground.

All eyes in the column were turned towards the forest. "Detail a squad in support!" ordered the commander to the sergeant. Men drew swords and ran into the trees lashing out at branches which impeded their progress. The animals in the column, already made nervous by the narrowing of the bank, were startled. "Hold him fast!"

yelled an officer as a mule lost its footing and threatened to slip down into the racing waters. The animal screamed as its hooves scrabbled for purchase on the edge of the precipice. "Heave it up or let the beast go!" the officer yelled to the muleteers who struggled to preserve its life.

"It is laden with gifts from the Incas, Sir!" shouted a soldier above the roar of the cascade.

The officer did not hesitate but drew his sword and slashed through its harness. "There be plenty more were that came from," he shouted as it fell. The mule howled in terror before it sank deep, threshing wildly as it tried to free itself from the weight of the load.

The column remained on alert until long after the troops had returned carrying the broken muskets of their comrades. They dropped the weapons at the feet of the commander. "It seems like we shall have to play a game of tag-and-run until we leave this jungle behind," he remarked coolly to Francesco.

Francesco nodded in agreement, "The tactics will cause us disruption."

"Check out the Inkers lad, I reckon there's no way this Axa feller's goin' to let these Spanish figure out his game plan."

Far ahead of the column the river bank met and merged with a rocky ledge, it climbed, ever steeper, upwards into the foothills of the mountains. Along the ledge the warriors trotted. Far beneath them the river bellowed as it complained at being forced between the hard and resistant rocks. Although slowed by the old man they had travelled fast. As they climbed the jungle had given way to forest, still higher and the forest thinned. Finally it became isolated copses of trees which clung precariously to the gorges and chasms carved by the river as it battered its way to the sea. By the late afternoon they reached a point where the rock ledge narrowed to the width of a spear throw then climbed crazily upwards before dog-legging back to a more level course.

"It is at this spot that we must seek to stop them," said Axa. "A strong defence will prevent their passing."

Another warrior spoke, "My Lord, with our clubs we will hold this pass against any force, nothing will defeat us!" he yelled waving his club in the air.

Topac spoke, "My Lord we cannot withstand the sticks of thunder, they will kill from a greater distance than a spear can be thrown."

Axa realised he was right. He pursed his lips trying to find a means of overcoming the difficulty.

The warriors looked frightful, they had looked fierce before but now with their painted faces and bodies smeared in mud and caked with leaves they seemed more like demons. He told his warriors, "We cannot defeat these men unless we suffer great losses, we must fight with cunning and guile, up there lies our answer." He pointed a powerful arm vertically upwards at the cliff face which soared high above.

"Told yer lad, this lot are miles ahead of the Spanish, they'll be having all kinds of problems back there."

"Should I take a look Uncle Paddy?"

"Hey lad yer doin' a grand job, you're the man for it. Don't be asking me what to do I'm just a pawn in this game. Go where yer want, do what yer want, I'm just along for the ride. If I can 'elp I will but don't foller me, I'm lost!" he laughed.

The column was delayed as much by its detailed preparations for defence as it perhaps would have been if it had actually been attacked. "Triangles" of men were deployed in sections which could cover each other should any section be attacked. Each triangle consisted of a pikeman, a swordsman and a musketeer so that every eventuality could be covered. It was good soldiery and brought words of praise from Paddy.

When finally the column left the last thin trees behind the whole force breathed a sigh of relief.

"I believe that we should carry out the wishes of Father Salamanga and finish our questioning of the Inca captive," said the commander, "it will help to divert the attention of the men from the loss of their fellows if we learn more about this *golden city* he has spoken of."

"Bring up the captive!" ordered the sergeant-at-arms.

Vargas and Ricardo walked to the head of the column half-carrying their weakened prisoner, the priest followed, his hands occupied with rosary beads.

Bonampak was flung to the ground at the feet of the commander.

"Ask him how many of those carts could be filled from the gold in his city," said Francesco to Carlos.

Bonampak made no sound.

"So you be not for talking now, eh!" said Vargas. He waved his knife in front of Bonampak's face. The fear in Bonampak's eyes was plain to see but he remained silent.

A tree which clung to the chasm face above the river was pointed to by Ricardo. Its roots had welded themselves to the rock thereby preventing itself from hurtling down into the surging waters below. A rope was

brought and flung over a branch, willing hands fastened the rope round Bonampak's ankles, then with a heave over he went. The men on the bank howled as others pulled and jerked on the rope sending Bonampak swinging like a pendulum in ever increasing arcs. When his head was only inches above the mill-race Ricardo told the men on the rope to let go. Bonampak splashed down, the current was allowed to drag him deep before the rope was taken up and he was retrieved, coughing and choking.

Men jeered, "Bet he'd like to talk now!" "Look at his face," "He's swallowed half the river!"

The nobleman was high-born. His anger flared inside him like a rage of fire. Better to die than to suffer such humiliation, he began jerking fiercely, the branch of the tree started to creak and bend.

"Haul him back in," ordered the sergeant. The men began pulling but the captive was determined to escape them even if such escape might mean his death. He jerked even more furiously, his ankles began to slip from between the thick strands of rope. Vargas swiftly sliced through the rope, with ankles still bound Bonampak plummeted downwards. They watched him struggling in the whirling waters as he was whipped along in the current.

"No matter," said the commander, "we'd learnt enough from him."

Father Salamanga made the sign of the cross towards the still struggling body.

The column continued; baggage was picked up, weapons and military accoutrements were shouldered, mules were whipped into line, horses were urged to take up the strain and they began the long struggle upwards.

"What in Mary's name is that!"

"It's someone at the door Uncle Paddy! You don't think...?"

Paddy listened, they heard the shout, "Open the door in the name of the law!"

"Naw lad, it's just some flippin' poet. Eh up! It's the coppers, they've come about that Queerk feller. Quick lad, in this cupboard get the gun, hide it!"

Davey scrambled round in the cupboard and found the rifle. "Where can I hide it?"

A loud knock came on the bedroom door. "Make yerself flippin' invisible, it's me only chance!"

"We're coming in!" came the cry from outside. Two policemen walked into the bedroom. "Evenin' sir," said the policeman whose three stripes indicated that he was a sergeant.

"Evenin' occifer," said Paddy looking very suspicious.

Davey stood alongside the mirror with the rifle behind his back, his eyes were firmly shut as he willed himself not to be seen.

"They've come about a shootin'," cried Mrs Murtagh from the landing, the size of the policemen prevented her from entering the room, "They say someone was shot round 'ere the other day!"

Paddy had adopted an angelic expression, "Well I never, what's this street comin' to?"

"Do you know anything about it Sir?" the sergeant looked out of the window, "From up 'ere you've got a pretty good view of what's happening."

"Haven't a clue what yer goin' on about. Who was shot then?"

"A Mr Quirk. Teacher up at Wellington Road. Took a slug in the jacksy."

Paddy tutted.

"You haven't any air-weapons on the premises have you Sir?"

Paddy gasped and gulped, "No occifer, I'm not fit enough to get out me bed. That right Mum?" he called hoping for support.

"Well not really Paddy, yer up and down these stairs quick as yer like when it suits yer." She mouthed to the policeman at the back, "*Waterworks yer know.*"

"Mind if we have a look round Sir, just to satisfy ourselves, you know, eliminate you from our enquiries?"

"No," gasped Paddy.

Mrs Murtagh hurried downstairs and stuffed a towel into her mouth. Her body racked back and forth as she tried to control her hysterical laughter.

The policemen made a thorough search of the room. Davey squinted through his eyes and was amazed to find the policemen had not noticed him. He kept on willing himself to remain invisible for what seemed ages.

"Thank you for your time Sir," said the sergeant. "Make a note," he turned to the constable, "checked Paddy Murtagh's place - all clear." The constable scribbled in his notebook.

The sergeant turned back to Paddy as they were leaving, "'evenin' Sir."

"'evenin' occifer." Paddy could barely speak.

As soon as the men had left the room and descended the stairs Davey started to relax but Paddy was still sat rigid.

"You alright Uncle Pad?"

"Flippin' 'eck, that was a close one, I was nearly in the Black Maria there lad."

"They didn't see me Uncle Paddy! Could you see me? I must have been invisible!"

"Soon as they go, get rid of that gun." Paddy was beginning to gasp for air.

Downstairs the policemen were talking in low voices to Mrs Murtagh who had just about composed herself.

"Didn't take much to that Quirk feller meself," said the sergeant.

"Deserved shootin' if you ask me," said the constable, "me brother lives next to him, them Quirk's make his life a misery, always at it like cat and dog they are."

Mrs Murtagh passed them a hot cup of tea. "You've done a fine turn with my Paddy, he won't be plannin' on shootin' anyone else in a hurry."

"Did you see his face when I opened the cupboard door!" said the sergeant. They stood restraining themselves from laughing.

"And what about that lad, what on earth was he doin' standing there like a flippin' hat-stand? Didn't he think we could see him or something?" laughed the constable.

"Playin' war I reckon, he had a helmet on," joked the sergeant.

"Thanks for leaving him alone, he's a lovely boy, God knows what 'e sees in my Paddy."

"Always happy to oblige Mrs M," said the sergeant. They swilled their drinks down.

"There they go, coast's clear lad, go and chuck the thing in the canal!"

Before he was able to leave the room Mrs Murtagh put her head round the door, "Well fancy that, a shootin' in Copperfield Street, who'd have thought...You alright lovey?" she asked Davey.

"Fine Mrs M," he coughed.

As soon as she had closed her bedroom door Davey crept downstairs, wearing the helmet so that nobody would be able to see him. Not being able to bear the thought of throwing the weapon away he tore round behind his house and specked it behind the outhouse.

"Thank Christ for that!" said Paddy upon his return, "Come on lad, get back to them Spanish, I need sommat to take me mind off what's 'appened. Mind you it were worth it to see that Quirk's face!"

Towards the day's end the mountains had began to close in upon the column, the river had dropped so far below that it was but a strip of pearl flowing rapidly through the deep gorge it had carved. Ribs of exposed rock layers rippled far above the ledge formed by one of the rock layers which allowed the column to thread its way along. The surrounding mountains caused nightfall to come early, guards were placed at the head and foot of their position. Cliff and chasm were natural defences to the flanks.

The officers sat around a camp fire over which a deer roasted on a spit, the fire flared as fat fed the flames. In the ruddy light the commander was holding court.

"It is my belief that this campaign will go down in the annals of history, thus far we have made excellent progress." He stared at his subordinates as if daring them to criticise.

"It has perhaps been a little too easy," answered a junior officer named Domingo who was noted for his stupidity if not his bravery, "the men were upset today by the courage of the Inca, it has been said we will encounter tough opposition."

The commander ridiculed him, "That is if they have the brains to realise that we are not their gods," he laughed and the others joined in with him, "if you are a god Domingo then God help all of" his voice trailed off as Father Salamanga approached, "Father I was just saying how well our mission seems to be going to convert these heathens to the true faith."

"Ah yes, my son, the *one* true faith, I should add," replied the priest, he was about to say more when a distant rumble was heard and felt, as the rocks they were sitting on trembled.

"What was that, was it the voice of God, Father?" asked Joaquim.

"Calm yourself my son and rest your superstitions, when the Lord speaks there is no doubt it is His voice." The priest gazed piously towards the heavens.

"It was a rock-fall," said Carlos, "such are common occurrences in the Pyrenees where I was raised."

"Carlos, take a few men and investigate," ordered Francesco, immediately giving him cause to regret volunteering his opinion.

Davey leant nearer to the mirror, they witnessed Carlos returning, it was well into the night.

"Clever lad, yer getting the knack of this," Paddy praised him.

"The ledge is destroyed, there does not seem to be any way round but I will check out all possibilities at first light."

"Very well, thank you Carlos, now let us rest gentlemen," ordered the commander.

"What's 'appened up there then?" asked Paddy, "tell yer what lad, it's up to you, but how's about whipping up there and shifting things back a ways so we can see what happened. We might have missed sommat."

Davey did as he was asked.

"The warriors have climbed that massive cliff Uncle Paddy!"

"How on earth did they get up that? Them fellers must 'ave sprouted wings."

High on the cliff top the dying rays of the sun illuminated the warriors position.

Labnah and another man were pleading with Axa.

"But my Lord, this rock-fall could be used to kill many of the enemy."

"It is more important to delay these men and give Hotchas time, the warriors in Sit-Nalta must be prepared and ready to fight, we cannot depend upon the rock-fall to hit the invaders. If we make a mistake then they will pass onwards," replied Axa.

Far below the ledge stood out like a hair's breadth from the sheer wall of the cliff face. Their leader had spoken, the men followed his example. The slopes at the top of the cliff face were littered with loose boulders and stones. The warriors began hurling boulder after boulder onto these scree slopes, eventually the added weight proved too much and the whole mass of debris began to slide, slowly at first but then ever quicker until with a loud screech it sheared off the slope and dropped with great force over the cliff. After the cloud of dust had cleared the warriors were able to see that a large section of the pathway had been torn away.

"We have done it!" they praised each other. "Nobody will pass. The city is saved!"

"Sit-Nalta will never be safe, not while these men live," said Axa. "they will not let this obstacle stand in their way."

"How my Lord?" asked a warrior, "there is no other way up to the city in this valley, their forces will never climb as we have and if they retreat they will be too late to reach the city before the winter snows set in."

"If that is what it takes that is what they will do," said Axa, "they have set their minds on it, it will not matter whether it is this year or next. We must be ready for them."

The warriors realised the truth of his words.

"Now we must journey to Sit-Nalta," he turned to Topac, "go back with Manco, watch these dogs and learn all that you can, do not put yourselves at risk, your information is worth much to me."

Topac and Manco trotted away as the small group continued towards Sit-Nalta pulling the old man along behind them.

"I want to know what's happening with the girl while these warriors have been fighting the Spaniards, has she gone back to the city?" asked Davey.

"Problem is lad it's hard for yer to get away from the scenes we're seeing, it's as if yer tied to them, we can't just get away from them and go wherever we want."

"I think we can Uncle Paddy, I'm starting to get the hang of this now. I reckon that this helmet can do far more than we reckon. Remember how you got me to think about the Shaman, next thing we found him? and how I wanted to see inside the palace next thing we was in there?"

"Yeah, I see what yer getting at."

"There's another thing I've just thought of, when I was chased by the dog, I wanted to run fast and I ran so fast it could hardly catch me."

"It's flippin' incredible lad, yer could wear this on yer 'ead and play football for Liverpool, there's no-one could tackle yer! What am I saying, there's no-one could even see yer!"

"Yeah, and if we was playing in the dark I'd be the only one could see the ball!"

They both laughed then Davey stared back at the mirror and concentrated, their view swept rapidly across the mountains and the sun arced back through the sky.

CHAPTER 14

Seeking-Out Ceremony

The dying rays of the sun reflected pink upon the clouds as the children ended their descent and reached the plain. High above their heads the strong winds of the night tore off shreds from the clouds pink mass and hurled them towards black mountains.

"They're they are lad, yer've done it."

"What's over there Uncle Paddy? Those men are heading towards them!"

"Chacuti, look, I see warriors running towards us from afar," said Panqui, "Is it father? Are they friendly or do they wish to bring harm to us?"

"We must be brave as father has taught us."

The warriors moved at a rapid pace. The children could never hope to avoid them, even in the twilight they seemed to know exactly where the children were and quickly closed the distance.

Chacuti recognised the foremost of the men, "It is Aquila!" she exclaimed.

Panqui cried, "We are done for Chacuti. He is father's sworn enemy." She lay down in a heap as all the strength left her body. Even as Chacuti went to her sister's aid the men reached them.

Aquila seized Panqui by the hair and jerked her to her feet. "Traitorous dogs! You will pay for the death of the king's messenger!"

The quipu was snatched from Chacuti's grasp. "Aquila! The elders were right, the runner is dead," shouted the man, waving the quipu in the air as proof.

Cords were fastened tightly around the children's wrists, with kicks and blows to hurry them, they were dragged back to the city.

Through a very narrow entrance between the massive stone blocks of its defensive walls the group entered Sit-Nalta. The entrance was deliberately narrow so as to permit only one man to pass at a time. By the time the children passed through Aquila was no longer in sight. They were marched along next to the city walls until they reached the grand avenue, there they were forced to turn off towards the central square, ahead of them, massive block upon massive block, towered the temple.

People stared as they passed; some they recognised but not even warriors were prepared to help, they stood in stony silence watching them being kicked and shoved.

When they reached the temple its base was followed until they came to a double doorway which was covered in gold leaf and overlaid with stones of jade and obsidian, it reflected the burning lights magnificently. A warrior and several elders waited.

Chacuti begged one of the elders, "Please Uncle Popacata tell them we have not done anything."

"He was one of the elders in the temple with the Shaman and the tattooed man, maybe he's the one the skulls said was against them!" said Davey.

"If he isn't then them poor kids could do without him as an uncle."

Davey smiled at his uncle.

Popacata was powerless to do anything and could only watch as Aquila rejoined the warriors and handed their prisoners over to the temple guards. A huge crossbar was lifted from the heavy doors and, assisted by guards pushing from inside, the guards pulled the doors open. The children were quickly led in. The doors closed with a dull thud and the crossbar was replaced, trapping them in the temple's interior.

Outside Aquila brandished a quipu, "See, these dogs caused the death of Hotchas, he brought good tidings. It is here, plain to see. The gods are coming bringing a golden age!" he waved the quipu and tossed it to Popacata who examined it. After much frowning he made his excuses and hurried off.

"Should I go with him or stay with the kids?"

"Yer playing a blinder lad, it's up to you."

Within the temple the children were forced down corridors and passageways until they arrived at a number of heavy wooden doors set into the stone walls. One of these doors was opened and they were thrown inside into a small cell containing only rotting straw. The door was slammed shut.

"Panqui" whispered Chacuti in the darkness, "are you alright?"

"Cuti, are we going to die?" cried Panqui.

"I am sorry qui-qui, it is my fault, we should have done as mother said and stayed on the mountain."

"Can we not have just a little light do you think?" begged Panqui, "surely a little light will be allowed us?"

Chacuti could hear the fear in her sisters voice, "Do not be afraid," she said quietly, "Father will hear of this and punish the men who have harmed us."

"She's brave isn't she Uncle Paddy."

Paddy nodded grimly.

"I'm going to find out what Popa what's-is-name was up to."

Popacata wasted no time in hurrying to his niece. She tried to run from the palace to her children's assistance.

"My babies! Those brutes will hurt them! I must go to them!" she screamed but the elder held her firmly.

"Calm yourself my dear, you will only make things worse, think how to help, think how Lord Axa would wish you to act."

Lady Axa made a great effort to regain control but she was panic-stricken. "Why did they return, why did they not stay on the mountain?"

"Something took place up there which caused them to return, I fear the hand of the Shaman was involved, the children are being held on the charges of causing the death of the runner Hotchas and trying to interfere with the return of the gods themselves."

"Why arrest them for crimes they could not have committed?"

"It is not so simple my child, the Shaman and the elders have *seen* the children in the smoking mirror. I have also witnessed this. It will serve the purpose of the Shaman to show that Lord Axa's children are enemies of the people."

A knock on the door froze them both into silence, they stood staring until in a shaking voice Lady Axa said, "Enter." They were relieved when an elderly slave lady came into the room.

"What is it Hunwa?"

She handed over a small bag. Lady Axa looked into it before pulling out a quipu.

"Look! It bears the..." she exclaimed before Popacata interrupted,

"Thank you Hunwa, it would be best if you left," he said dismissing her.

"...it bears the seal of my husband!" finished Lady Axa.

Popacata looked, "It is Axa's seal," he confirmed, taking hold of the quipu. "It tells of slaughter... death... and murder! Look my dear it is all here. It tells the warriors to be prepared to fight." He continued in a whisper, "Axa would never say these things unless he was absolutely certain. It is clear now, the Shaman will welcome these evil killers of women and children."

"How can we save my babies?" asked his niece wringing her hands in despair.

Popacata sat thinking for a few moments before he replied.

"The elders meet tonight, I will try to delay matters before Axa's return"

"Be careful Uncle," pleaded Lady Axa, "this is to be the final battle, I can feel it within me, nothing will remain as it was."

She sat waiting for his return upon a carved chair on the balcony, the bulk of the temple overshadowed her, the chill night breezes did little to cool her fevered brow as the thoughts and fears within her mind burnt their way out.

"Whip it along eh lad."

A crescent moon had crossed half the heavens before Lady Axa recognised the stooping walk of Popacata as he crossed the main square, returning to the palace.

The manner in which he approached Lady Axa brought the question to her lips, "All is not well?"

Popacata seemed to visibly grimace, "The elders are weak fools, they will not dare to speak against the Shaman."

"Then all is lost," said Lady Axa tearfully.

"While Axa lives there is hope," said Popacata, "oh, would that Bonampak were here, his brother gave me his full support, he told me that the Shaman sent Bonampak away weeks ago to make ready for the return of these 'gods'. The time has come my dear. The Shaman has knowledge we do not have."

They stood together under the faint light from the moon. Popacata seemed to remember something and began to speak but stopped himself.

"What is it? there is more. Tell me Uncle, I must know!" insisted Lady Axa.

"The brother of Bonampak is a clever man, before we parted he warned me of another danger."

"Tell me!"

"My dear, you sent the children away to avoid it, the day of the sacrifice of the child is upon us."

The realisation hit Lady Axa, "I must go to them, they must allow the wife of a noble lord to see her children," panic had gripped her.

Popacata held her by the shoulders, "Stay! let us think on this, we have time, come, you cannot help them in any other way. Bonampak's brother has told me of a possibility, if it happens it may give us our chance to rescue the children." He bent nearer to Lady Axa. "The Shaman may use the Seeking-Out Ceremony to find one of the children, it would prove to the people that Axa's children are evil and act against the gods."

"But Uncle how can this help us?" asked Lady Axa.

"The children will have to be freed by the Shaman if he is to seek them out. If we can get to them during that time then they will have a chance, here is what we must do..." He put his mouth next to her ear.

"This is turnin' nasty lad. I don't like the sound of this."

"Maybe this was how the White Lady died Uncle Paddy. This Shaman gets her. We've got to free her before it's too late!"

It was black inside the children's cell.

"What's the squeaking sound?"

"Must be rats," answered Davey shivering with the memory of the day.

"Do not be afraid little Chibcha," said Panqui. She hugged her pet to herself, "father will come and rescue us, then we will all live together as a happy family. Won't we Chacuti, tell me that is how it is going to be."

"It's the guinea-pig," said Davey relieved.

Chacuti did not answer, despair had gripped her.

"Uncle Paddy, I've just had a thought..."

"Careful lad!"

"No listen, the Shaman saw me in that mirror, if we could get the girls to look into it maybe they'd see us and we could help them!"

"It's worth a try lad but where was the thing? This place is a flippin' maze an' a half."

"It was in that chamber shaped like a snake, if I wanted to go to it then we should be able to get there."

"It won't help lad 'cos yer've still got to somehow get the lassies to go there, an' if you didn't know how you got there, then yer wouldn't know how to lead them back to it. And even if yer could get there how would yer get them to go there. Flippin' eck this is doin' me 'ead in! Do you understand me or am I just talkin' a load of garbage?"

"No I'm with you Uncle Paddy, get your pen and paper and write down the path we take."

Paddy leant across and took up his chessboard and notepaper.

Their view moved outside the door of the children's cell.

"Jesus H Christ!" exclaimed Paddy.

The Shaman's face filled the mirror.

Davey ducked down beneath the dresser, the image of the Shaman rapidly began to fade.

"'ang on a mo', we're gettin' this wrong. 'e can't see us, the evil swines gone for the lassies. Get yerself back up 'ere."

"Uncle Paddy," said Davey still staring down at the floor.

"Yes lad."

"There's all these shapes and things down here, they look like buttons or dials."

Paddy leant forward. "There's nowt there lad but the oilcloth, there's no buttons on it and no shapes. Check 'em out, yer could be finding out about sommat else."

Davey placed his hand upon the shapes, nothing happened.

"No, can't feel them, I can just see them."

"'ave a look round the rest of the room lad, see if there 'owt else about."

"There's shapes everywhere and funny panels... when I look at them... Yeah they move towards me. It's weird. Wow! Look at that."

"What lad!"

"Over by the cupboard there's a sort of stand, there's all kinds of funny things on it. I don't know what all this is, it's stuff I've never seen before."

"This is all getting weirder and weirder," said Paddy. He coughed a deep thick throaty cough.

The cough started him off and he motioned Davey to leave the room. Davey pushed the helmet under the bed then went out to the landing and waited, feeling terribly guilty as he listened.

Mrs Murtagh's ears seemed tuned to the sound, her door creaked open and she appeared in a padded nightgown, her hair wrapped in a net; in one hand she carried a candle, in the other a huge bottle of foul coloured medicine and a huge spoon.

"Alright lovey leave 'im to me. He needs a clear-out." She knocked on the door, "Everything alright Paddy," and went in. After a few minutes the coughing subsided and Mrs Murtagh re-appeared carrying a bucket. "Shan't be a minute lovey."

She made her way down the stairs, the candle lit up the tight stairwell as she descended. Davey heard the back door go as she made her way out to the lavatory then the outside tap as the bucket was swilled.

Inside the bedroom Paddy was wheezing deeply.

The light from the candle preceded Mrs Murtagh's return, "Shan't be a minute lovey." She went into the room and placed the bucket by the side of the bed, "He'll be alright now." She returned to her room seemingly still asleep.

"You alright Uncle Paddy?" asked Davey uncertainly.

"Aye lad," said Paddy in a sad voice, "get yerself in 'ere, there's work to be done."

Davey sat upon the bed.

"Sorry about that me lad. Flippin' gas, yer know."

Davey nodded. He knew.

"It's a strange old world lad, here's me an' yer old feller, fought for King and Country and what do we get. Sweet Fanny Adam. Left to get on with it we are. Purely a question of economics and money, see we're getting back to gold again. Makes the world go round lad."

Davey was more than happy to sit and listen to Paddy, his throat did not have that rumbling quality to it which had preceded his 'clear-out'. But even so he felt guilty that the stress and excitement of the mirror had caused the problem.

"The aristocracy see, they're livin' in a diffrent world to us, first sneeze and a snuffle then the doc's called in. I don't know lad, me own lungs have probably had it but yer old feller, now there's a diffrent story, given the right treatment 'e ought to make a recovery. A few measly quid, that's all we're talking 'ere!" Paddy had lost his temper and Davey was glad, it was either that or the tears which had arisen in his eyes would have flowed. "I tell yer lad that Butcher Haig's got a lot to answer for when 'e ends up standin' at the Pearly Gates. They were all good lads, they'll be there, bringin' 'im to account. What can 'e say, "stern endeavour", *stern endeavour* my Aunt Fanny!"

"Paddeee!" called Mrs Murtagh, "get yerself to sleep now, yer keeping the lad awake, 'e's got work tomorrer."

Paddy realised he was shouting. "Sorry lad, got a bit carried away with meself, she's right. Yer'd better get yer 'ead down now, yer've a long day ahead."

"I don't feel a bit tired Uncle Paddy, I don't know why, I just don't. I'll be okay, honest I will, the white lady's depending on us."

"You sure yer'll be alright lad, I mean yer was up all last night as well yer know."

"I know, it's strange but I actually feel more awake than normal."

Paddy chewed his lip. "Where was we? Oh yeah. The Shyman. I don't reckon 'e could see yer. Tell you what stick the pickle* on an' we'll check him out. If he's watching us get ready to take it off."

**pickelhauber* - German helmet with a spike on the top. Mostly used for dress, very few were issued in the trenches.

"What about the things I saw here, in the room?" Davey reminded him.

"Oh yeah, forgot 'bout them," Paddy grinned. "Tell yer what lad, leave that for now, the main thing is that we find out how to help the girl. Yer couldn't touch yer saw so I don't reckon it's goin' to help matters much but what do you think, it's up to you?"

"I think you're right Uncle Paddy. I'd just like to know what all those things were, it's as if the more I wear the helmet the more I'm finding out."

"Stick it on yer nod lad."

The Shaman's face again filled the mirror.

"Has he seen us Uncle Paddy!"

They waited anxious moments but drew breath again when they watched the Shaman drew back a wooden slat which was used to bar the door. "No he can't see us. Go on with yer!" Paddy jeered as the Shaman heaved open the door.

The slight chink of light which filtered into the cell from around the heavy door gradually grew larger. "Panqui!" whispered Chacuti grasping onto her sister. "Is it father?"

The light slowly grew into a faint strip. They cuddled to each other. The light grew as the door opened to reveal a figure standing, carrying a flaming brand.

"Father is it you," begged Panqui, trying desperately to make out who stood there. When their eyes grew accustomed to the flaring light both children screamed.

The Shaman stood staring at them. "It is time!" he barked then strode into the cell. He grasped the children roughly and jerked them to their feet, out through the door he dragged them.

"What's 'e meaning, it's time?" asked Paddy. "Time for what? A cup of tea?"

"It's that sacrifice Popacata was talking about!"

Davey leant back and their view moved outside the temple, the temple square was thronged with crowds, drums thumped out the call.

"I'll try to find Lady Axa," said Davey and swept through the palace but it was bare of people. Two warriors stood guard ensuring that everyone attended the ceremony.

"Get back to the kids lad!"

The two children were being led by guards. The temple doors opened and they were thrust out into the main square. They stood blinking for some minutes before their eyes could withstand the glare.

"We're free Cuti! They've let us go!" cried Panqui.

"Come let us find Lady Axa!" called Chacuti.

They ran anxiously back and forth crying out for their mother or shouting out to people they recognised. "Help us! Have you seen Lady Axa, do you know where our mother is?"

Everyone was in too much of a hurry to pay them any attention. As the crowd began to form in the square and along the main avenue Chacuti became trapped in a press of bodies, her hand was torn from her sisters, her feet were lifted from the floor and she was swept away by the crowd which acted like a herd of frightened alpacas, ranging this way and that as the fear drove it.

Panqui was more fortunate, she skirted round the edge of the crowd screaming. Lady Axa heard her and ran to her, forcing her way through men, women and children. "Where's Chacuti? Where is she?" her mother shrieked but Panqui was unable to tell her. "There is little time child." She took a razor sharp slip of obsidian glass and sliced away at her daughter's hair, soon little remained of it but a tufted and bare scalp, from within her jacket Lady Axa drew a colourful poncho, she covered Panqui with it. "Stay where I can see you child but do not come close to me," she hissed into her daughter's ear.

From the steps of the temple a conch was blown, its sound echoed around the square, when the last echo had all but died the bang of heavy drums announced the procession.

Temple helpers carrying great clubs upon their shoulders led the way, behind them followed the costumed Gods; Huitzilapochtli, Tlaloc and Quetzalcoatl, they were dressed in the finest cloth and adorned with feathers from the rarest of birds. The Gods carried the sacred ball which would be used after the ceremony in the divine ball-game, behind the Gods followed the dancing girls, each girl held onto a ceremonial gown which the chosen victim would wear.

The Shaman followed.

A great space was left around him.

Louder and louder beat the drums, they beat incessantly until they reached a crescendo, horns then blared out contrasting harshly with the silence which followed as the Shaman began his grim task.

He passed from one group of people to the next. His body was caked in soot, dirt and dried blood. The whites of his eyes glared out from the darkness surrounding them.

Nobody dared to move or even to look in his direction. To catch his eye might be enough to attract attention. The people stood still as stone.

Panqui shivered in fear as he passed, his shadow fell upon her but her eyes remained fixed upon her mother who held herself proud and erect staring at the staggered blocks of the temple which rose like huge steps to the altar at its top.

Chacuti stood alone.

The people around her would not allow her to move amongst them, to conceal herself. She was pushed away. Like a wild beast scenting for its prey the Shaman sniffed the air, four sinewy snakes wrapped around his waist hissed and spat as they swayed to an invisible beat, feathers tied tightly behind the head of each snake revealed curving white fangs, the poison sacs swelled so large that they dripped pure pearls of death.

On he came.

Chacuti stood still, the fear surged amongst the people, they felt it, he was closing in, his voice hissed with the sacred words, he had his victim scented. It would not be long now.

The Shaman gave his helpers a secret sign; jaguar skins covered their bodies and heads, cruel eyes looked through empty sockets, teeth and claws studded their heavy clubs. They moved to take up positions as the Shaman began to circle in towards his victim.

Chacuti realised that she was within the slowly turning, ever tightening circles.

"Stay calm, stay calm," she whispered to herself as the Shaman began the dance of the feathered serpent.

The only sounds were that of his bare feet slapping the earth and that made by his golden rattle as the sacred bones within it shook to the movements of the dance.

The dance grew wilder and wilder, people parted like a wave as he neared them, suddenly he halted, like a snake his hand darted in towards a group of people, they jumped back in fear. Chacuti was found! The rattle was still, the dance was done, his blackened nostrils flared back as they drew in the victims scent. His crooked finger pointed at Chacuti.

The Shaman jerked his gold rattle upwards to signal to his helpers that his task was complete and that they should now perform their part in the grisly act.

"Can't we do anything to help!" gasped Davey.

"Check out her mother lad!"

Lady Axa was unable to see what had happened but her quiet words told of her anguish, "He has my child." She composed herself then ordered Panqui, "Go to the palace." Without question Panqui did as she was told.

Helpers surrounded the six girls who began to lead the way back to the temple, between them they led Chacuti clothed in the ceremonial gown, as they walked the girls sang;

Is it true that we have come to live upon the earth?

Are we to live on earth forever?

Only a fleeting moment here!

Even the precious stones crumble,

Even gold cracks and breaks,

Even the shining feathers are torn

Are we to live on earth forever?

Only a fleeting moment here!"

Lady Axa moved slowly through the mass of people then waited until the procession passed near to her. Screaming at the top of her lungs she jumped onto the back of one of the helpers. Her hands went up behind his jaguar mask, her long nails dug deep into his soft flesh.

"Run child! RUN!" she screamed but a helper grasped Chacuti's thin wrist, another grabbed Lady Axa around the waist and threw her forcefully to the ground, a heavy club ended her fight. The woman screamed in the agony of despair as the procession continued with its prize towards the temple.

Powerless to do anything she returned to the palace. Panqui waited for her, the look in her mother's eyes gave her the answer to her questions. They sat down together as if staring into the far distance but their gaze was hemmed in by the walls which surrounded them. Panqui was crying so the woman cuddled her to her breast.

"Do not cry my child, Lord Axa will never let any harm come to her," she said hopefully.

Popacata entered the room, he brought words which seemed to confirm her slender hope. The elder whispered, "Lord Axa is near. Even as we speak he is entering the city. Look! See how the people run to him!" they crossed to the balcony, it was as he said, people ran from all corners to greet the returning hero.

"Mother, let us go to him," begged Panqui, "he will get Chacuti back for us, won't he?"

Popacata counselled that they remained where they were.

"Axa will return to you shortly, I have spoken to many warriors who say they are faithful to him, he may decide the time to act is now. It is best that you stay away from any danger."

"But Uncle we need to tell him what has happened," insisted Lady Axa.

"He will have been told by many people, many times already. Stay," urged the elder, "I will try to get to him."

As he hurried from the room they gazed out at a throng of people following behind Axa and his warriors, Panqui's young eyes were the first to pick out their prisoner.

"The man is of white skin, Mother is he one of the Gods?" she asked.

They watched as the captive was led up to the temple.

"It's the old man Uncle Paddy!"
"See what 'appens lad."

"We must confront the Shaman now," Lord Axa told his men, "once my child is slain nobody will dare stand with us, summon any warriors who are prepared to join us, tell them the time is come, we must fight or perish." Warriors began darting off to round up their comrades, men who would stand and die with them.

At the temple a large band of guards waited. Aquila stood at their head.

"What do you bring as tribute?" asked Aquila of Lord Axa.

"I bring this man," said Axa. The old man was thrown forward.

Aquila shouted so that all could hear.

"This is no man, this is more than a man, the Shaman has spoken. Untie him immediately and hand him over to us."

Some of the guards began to move forwards to take the prisoner by force.

"Stay where you are," ordered Axa, the tone in his voice and look in his eye commanded them to obey, "this man is no more a god than you or I, look at him."

The old man was forced to his knees by a warrior.

"Stand with us, you men, we have seen the handiwork of these so-called gods, they kill the unborn child, the suckling babe, the weak and old. They bring only death to the Inca. Stand with us and help us to defeat these murderers," said Lord Axa.

Aquila answered, "You have spoken treason, you have dishonoured the gods. Give yourself over to us, we must hand you to the Shaman of the Incas."

The elders began to assemble, they stood between the guards and the men at Lord Axa's side. Their presence was needed, at any moment a bloodbath could begin. Men began to pick the spot at which they would unleash their strength and power.

"You have Lord Axa's child," shouted one brave warrior, "return her to us."

Another shouted, "We mean you no harm, do what is right and fetch the girl."

The aggression increased, soon one of the younger, hot-headed men would burst into a frenzy and begin the combat. The guards were greatly outnumbered but their fighting qualities were such that the contest would be a bloody one.

One of the elders climbed up onto the first block of stone at the temple's base and shouted out, "Listen to your elders, for we have *seen* the Gods. The Shaman has shown us they are returned, believe in the prophecies of old for they have come true, a golden age is upon us."

The warriors paused and listened, more elders sensed their opportunity, they climbed onto the temple's base and added their voices, "We have seen the Gods. They are returned, go home, the Law cannot be broken."

The warriors had begun to accept that they should not fight but Aquila insisted, "Lord Axa must hand himself over to us." The idea of their leader having to give himself up infuriated those loyal to him. Popacata reached Lord Axa's side, he spoke quickly, "They have Chacuti my Lord. Hotchas was killed by foul means, this dog Aquila is a liar and needs to be destroyed, many of the warriors are with you. Ignore these silly old men, they are but mouths through which the Shaman speaks. Attack now before it is too late."

Axa could see that it was now or never, at his first movement the situation would explode.

With a burst of light the Shaman appeared in their midst, he called out in strange tongues, "Hulacamniou, oirwerackan serlvousakafy dertaraerd blaadrasnaxan....." His appearance startled the warriors, only Lord Axa remained steady, however his order to attack never came.

"Arcaondt ourdist canconwsoe viedrifsoos soudlafea!" the old man cried out.

The sound their voices made was not language but it froze the bravest hearts, the sound was unearthly. Their tongues rolled round in their mouths as if out of control, their lips did not form the shapes of the words which came from them.

A curve of reddish light began to grow from the Shaman, it extended upwards glowing slightly as it grew. The warriors stood back in fear, all thoughts of fighting were forgotten as another beam of light raised itself from the old man. Elders, guards and warriors watched in fear as they witnessed the two beams of light arch towards each other, meet and link together like a red-rainbow.

"He bears the mark, bring him!" said the Shaman

The conflict was ended. Warriors relaxed, unused adrenalin caused their legs to shake. The guards released the old man from his bonds and led him into the temple. The warriors began walking slowly away, they did not want any part of the unearthly act they had witnessed, men could be killed, devils could not.

Lord Axa and his loyal warriors were left with the elders, Aquila realised the positions were reversed, his men now had superiority on their side.

"I would ask you once again *Lord Axa* (he said the name sarcastically) to hand yourself over to the Law."

Popacata whispered, "Go Axa, we shall cover your escape."

"They have Chacuti, I would only be placing Lady Axa and Panqui into their hands, I must do as they bid."

He walked bravely forwards telling his men not to take any action. The guards seized him fiercely, whipping the same cords that had been used to bind the old man around his wrists, a short spear was forced through the hook of each elbow and behind his back. A warrior took hold of each end of the spear as they led him into captivity.

Through a maze of corridors and passageways they forced the noble lord, he was roughly manhandled, at one point the guards slammed him into a wall knocking the breath from his body, "You have challenged our authority," snarled a guard as he ripped Axa's splendid war costume from his back, spinning him to the floor. "Get up dog!" the men kicked him to his feet.

When he rose Axa twisted violently to one side, smashing the butt end of the spear which pinned his arms into a guard's jaw, the man fell pole-axed, he started to run but another guard's club caught him a glancing blow and sent him into unconsciousness.

"They're stickin' him in with his daughter. Look at the poor wee thing. D' yer reckon we should speed all this through lad so we can find out what 'appens?"

"What if we miss something important Uncle Paddy?"

"You just come right back 'ere again and foller it through."

Davey moved closer to the mirror, nothing seemed to alter.

"No. It's still dark in there."

"Yeah but two weeks could 'ave passed an' in the dark we wouldn't know it. Eh up lad the chief's waking up."

Within moments of regaining consciousness Lord Axa was fully aware of his situation, his heart soared when he heard a child's voice.

"Father, father, is it you?"

"I am here my child," he replied, "do not fear all will be well."

Chacuti moved across the floor and lay against him, he put his great arms around her. "How long have you been here child?" he asked.

"I am not sure, it is a long time," she replied, "they have said I am to be sacrificed father, I am to walk the walk of death," she cried, "Now the Shaman will kill you also."

"Calm yourself daughter, take control, no child of mine can be beaten by these scum. We shall survive this place, we shall live!"

He sat with her, cuddling her, letting her feel the strength in his arms and the reassurance that his strength gave her. His anger was immense. He would kill the Shaman and all these dogs, they would suffer for what they had done to his child.

"'ave another go lad, these poor sods ain't goin' anywhere."

Again Davey moved closer to the mirror.

When a guard pushed a watery mixture of vegetables through a gap beneath the door, Axa's spirit was beginning to bend, he could feel it giving way but knew deep within him that it would never break.

"What is going to happen to us?" he asked the guard.

"Oh so the noble lord begins to feel afraid," laughed the guard, he closed the door.

Axa decided he would never show any weakness again. They would suffer in silence and if needs be go to their deaths in silence. He knew that he would never allow Chacuti to feel the terror of the sacrifice - he would end her life swiftly when the time came. She was such a beautiful child, her long hair was in his face as she remained on his lap for hours on end. They talked of things they had done together as a family, how Panqui had jumped when he had caught a fish and thrown it to her, how beautiful her mother was. He told her tales of warriors of old and of the legend of the gods.

"Did they really live and work with our ancestors father?" asked the child.

"Many of the things you see in this city could not have been built by men, many of the things we know could not otherwise be known to us."

"The people said they saw a light in the sky, was it the gods returning?" she asked.

"A long time ago our ancestors travelled with the gods through the skies, they visited the stars, it is said that their ships were as bright as the stars they travelled to."

"The Shaman," she shuddered when she said his name, "says the gods are returned. Are they father?"

"Strange men have come to the land of the Inca but they are not gods," he stated, angered by the memories of murder and destruction. His voice betrayed his thoughts, Chacuti became agitated and fearful, "Hush now, it must be night-time, sleep, sleep," he soothed her and stroked her hair then felt her slight body go limp against his own. He sat still and silent staring into the darkness.

"Leave them here lad, they're not goin' anywhere. Get us back to the Shyman, he's the reason everything 'appens around 'ere."

"Uncle Paddy, if he manages to... you know, get hold of me or something, will you pull the helmet off for me."

"Go on with yer, yer daft. 'e's not getting out of that mirror."

Within the chamber of the snake stood the Shaman and the old man. The Shaman knelt before the polished stone, gazing into its depths, seeking the future. The old man was astonished as the mists cleared and a landscape of stunted, blasted trees was revealed. The trees were smashed and splintered, no leaves remained on their broken branches.

"What is this?" inquired the old man. The Shaman was silent. This was new to him.

"That's Hill 17 over there lad! That's where me an' yer old feller were carted off!"

The picture grew clearer, deep cuts, holes and trenches scarred the landscape. A massive explosion which blew the already deformed ground high into the air burst through the mist. Men were running wildly over the battered ground, above their heads bursts of smoke and flame splattered the sky. They saw the men drop like wheat mown with a scythe.

"I ask you, what is this!" shouted the old man.

The Shaman could not answer. He did not know.

An image of a man's face crept into the stone, his head was shaven but it was his eyes which shocked the old man. The eyes were furious, they looked round, frantically searching. The man was screaming, he was trapped in stone. The Shaman hurriedly put down the mirror and crawled along the body of the snake away from the chamber.

The old man continued to stare at the stone but the image was fading, he witnessed carvings of strange animals upon the man's body and glimpsed the symbols upon the man's palms as he disappeared. As the old man turned to follow the Shaman the mirror was filled with the face of a boy, the eyes of the boy were clearly upon him. The old man and boy studied each other, staring into each other's eyes.

"Who are you?" asked the old man.

"I'm Davey," answered the boy.

"Come!" shouted the Shaman.

The old man moved away still staring into the depths of the mirror, he heard Paddy's voice, *"There's a young lassie trapped in that hell-hole, help..."*

"He heard us!"

"'e' heard us!"

"He knows we're here!"

"Foller 'im lad!"

CHAPTER 15

Helmet of Power

Side by side lay the old man and the Shaman, the old man's body was in convulsions, jerking and retching as it fought to eject the poison which tore through cells and tissues seeking control over him. It was a battle which he could not hope to win, suddenly his whole body stiffened and he lay still. The Shaman was already in such a state, his body had long ago learnt the futility of trying to combat the effects of the venom.

Onto the head of the old man was placed the helmet of power. Onto the head of the Shaman was placed the helmet sent by Bonampak, ambassador to the gods.

The assistant knew that something was wrong, the body of the Shaman began to quiver and twitch indicating to him that his master remained within its confines. A stream of heavy mucus poured from his mouth. From within the Shaman also knew what was happening but had no control, he was unable to leave his body to travel the astral winds to wherever his thoughts desired.

"There's the old man lad, look, it's 'im as a ghost, like the Shaman was, stick with 'im."

The old man floated within the cell looking down upon the scene beneath him. His mind was no longer confused, he was able to think clearly and to see clearly, it was as if a layer of mire had been expelled from his mind's eye. As he hovered spirit-like watching the agonies of the Shaman his thoughts began to piece together what had happened, the realisation dawned slowly upon him but the horror of his surroundings left him in no doubt. Within the cell were the vilest objects and trophies, on the floor his body lay with its head encased in a strangely shaped helmet. He understood, and as his eyes focused on the body of the Shaman alongside that of his own he knew that he was in the presence of pure evil.

A grating voice spoke from out of the darkness, the old man glided towards the sound and was shocked to observe that it came from a crystal skull, "We have waited long for this time," said the skull, "soon we shall rule the Earth like our forefathers."

In panic the old man wished himself a thousand leagues away from the horrors around him. He felt himself tearing along through another dimension, it seemed as though the air and stones around him had broken apart into tiny pieces, each small piece remained in position but his 'body' was able to move through the gaps between the pieces. He shot out, high into the sky, high into the surrounding mountains, there he slowed and looked back down upon the city. His eyes took in the temple which he knew he had just left, they took in the beautiful buildings which surrounded it. It was morning, it was light, he did not want to go back into the darkness.

He thought of Jésus and was immediately there at the site of his body, the bones almost picked clean of flesh by the beasts of the air.

"What has happened to you my friend! What have they done to you?" he cried.

He swept along the trail left by the heavy cannon and hooves of the column, he soared over gorges, over cliffs and mountains, his speed of movement blurred the surroundings of the vast landscape. Above the clouds he floated, their soft, bumpy texture resembled the backs of fleecy sheep so much that he felt he could hold out a hand and stroke them; he turned full circle and could see the earth curving away in every direction, the red-tinge of the rising sun glowered all around the horizon contrasting against the deep blue of the sky.

The old man thought of the column and was there: with painstaking care it was crossing a latticework of logs which clung precariously to a cliff face above a raging river, men carried parts from dismantled cannon, piece by piece, over the perilous structure. The cataract below roared in their ears.

"Hey Alvarez!" he shouted at the guard who had wakened him so forcefully from his sleep, the man did not hear him but the hound which trotted at his side sensed his presence, it barked ferociously at the air, "Quiet!" ordered Alvarez.

He floated over the flimsy construction and watched as men he knew moved through him.

"It is I! Do you not know me?" he shouted but soon learnt that it was a waste of time.

"Am I dead?" he asked of the men who passed but none saw him. Only the dogs knew he was there, whenever he approached the bubbles of consciousness which surrounded them the animals barked furiously.

The old man floated above the scene beneath him, higher and higher he rose until he became level with the top of the cliff-face.

"Look, on top of the cliff, over there," said Davey, "it's the warriors left by Lord Axa."

They lay on their bellies spying down upon the column. The old man also saw the warriors and moved across to them.

"he's seen them, he's goin' to have a look at 'em."

"Who are you! Can you not see me?" cried the old man as he hovered immediately in front of the warriors in mid-air.

The warriors stared straight through him. "Surely these men are not of this world," said Topac.

"Come, let us take heavy stones and hurl them down upon their heads!" said Manco moving back from the cliff and getting to his feet.

"We have Lord Axa's orders. We watch!" insisted Topac. Seeing that Manco would not give in and return to his position he also retreated from the cliff and stood up, "Let us survey their camp."

"The old man's following them lad. They'll lead him to the Spanish camp!"

Manco trailed Topac at a distance until they reached a ridge which they led them to another vantage point, from there Topac pointed out the commander who was conspicuous in his polished armour and from the number of men guarding him.

"He is the man who leads these murderers," said Topac.

"Let us watch him close," said Manco, "for without him they are a headless snake."

The old man soared downwards to the commander. The commander was addressing a group of officers.

"I am back Sire!" shouted the old man.

"The poor feller can't handle it can 'e lad. Mind you I don't reckon I'd take too kindly to floatin' round like a flippin' ghost meself."

"Not since the Romans has such a feat of military engineering been accomplished," boasted the commander to his audience, "history shall be the judge of our success." As he spoke work was taking place all around him; scrap armour was placed into earth-kilns and smelted down. Skilled smiths hammered and drew the molten metal into the long spikes which would be needed to fix a wooden plate to the cliff. The wooden plate would carry a roadway and assist in holding the construction to the vertical face. The sound of trees being hacked down and cut into workable sections of logs filled the air, to one side of the clearing a hunting party returned from the forest bearing a strange long-nosed pig which was so heavy it took four men to carry. The men had tied the animals hooves together and had slung it to the underside of a pole.

"In the name of God what is it Sergeant?" joked one of the officers, "Have you found your mother?"

"God rest her soul Sir!" barked the sergeant at arms, "but she were never so pretty as this dame."

Father Salamanga gave his polite cough which indicated he was about to bring the man to task, "You forget to observe the commandment Sergeant, 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain'".

"I am sorry Father," said the sergeant. The smile had left his face.

"I shall devise a penance for you my son." The priest put his hand upon his hairy chin whilst he thought of an appropriate punishment but the old man shouted to him.

"Good Father! It is I. Do you not recognise me!"

Father Salamanga raised his head from his hand and looked from side-to-side.

"Has he heard 'im lad?" exclaimed Paddy.

The priest was interrupted by the commander who did not wish his sergeant to be taken from his duties, "Come good father, join us in seeing how work progresses."

With a slightly bewildered look upon his face the priest accepted the invitation.

The old man continued to follow the priest, crying out, but the commander and Francesco were occupying his full attention. They walked along the rock-ledge towards the framework, ahead of them men and horses were hauling logs. The logs needed a horse chained at their rear to prevent them rolling over into the chasm and taking men and horses with them.

"How the heck did them lot manage to build something like that! Even with cranes and hoists we'd never 'ave managed that in a month of Sundays."

Logs were being split, a metal spike was hammered into them near each end, the spikes were then re-positioned while men with levers forced the straining timbers to part; with a wrenching, tearing sound the timbers separated. Sometimes the energy released was so violent that the halves bounced upwards or to one side forcing men to jump back to avoid being injured. Carpenters cut the rough halves to length, they shaped them with hand axes and drilled holes ready for fixing them into place.

Like spiders, men dangled at the end of strand-like ropes high above the icy waters, to reach their positions they needed to run along the cliff face then swing perilously through the air their hands and feet clawing for purchase, then like insects they crawled over a flimsy framework of logs to bind sections together with rope and hemp.

"Eh up, he's havin' a problem!" said Paddy pointing to a man who had got into difficulties fastening one such section.

"Pass a line!" yelled the man. As his grip weakened upon the rope to which he clung he screamed, "Hurry!" The old man walked over the framework and attempted to take hold of the man by the shoulders but his hands passed straight through the body.

"The old guy's tryin' to 'elp 'im!"

A would-be rescuer edged along the skeleton structure, "Steady yourself!" he urged.

He took a length of rope from his shoulder then by stretching forwards swung a rope towards the man below him.

"Curse you Drago!" yelled the man as the line fell short.

The old man dropped from the beam, he tried to take hold of the rope end but it swung through his hand.

A second swing was grasped by the man but his fingers had lost all their strength, slowly they began to give way.

"BITE THE LINE!" shouted Drago. He bit into the rope, his jaw was almost pulled from his face and his neck muscles were twisted but he had given his hands enough time to recover.

Paddy and Davey watched as the old man walked over the top of the precarious structure, stepped off, then floated to where the commander stood watching the drama with Francesco. Along with the other men they cheered Drago's rescue. The commander turned to Francesco, "An untimely interruption, get the men back to work." Francesco shouted the necessary orders.

The commander questioned the man in charge, "How many more days Ortéga?"

Ortéga looked up from positioning a plumb-bob in line with two vertical poles.

"A man can cross by the end of today, it shall take horse tomorrow. See, already the footway is being prepared."

Men in rope cradles hung beneath the framework hammering holes into the rock using star-shaped chisels, a tight-fitting length of stick was inserted into the hole, through the timbers and into the sticks they hammered the spikes. Each spike forced the stick to widen into its hole fastening the timber to the rock. On top of the timber two men were fixing short, square lengths forming a rough footway.

"Flippin' amazing, not a machine between them! Food for thought for yer there Davey boy when yer in Stilsons. I've never seen anything like it."

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME!"

"It's the old man!"

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME!" The old man yelled into nothingness and leapt into the air in his fear. He soared above the framework, diving and shouting into the ether, several times he swept down low above the river then ascended rapidly. On one such descent he continued down into the river's depths, the powerful current could be seen ripping and swirling past him.

"Flippin' 'eck this is incredible!"

"I wish I could have a go at that Uncle Paddy!"

The old man rose, he continued his ascent far into the sky. A bright light far above attracted him. Rapidly he rose up towards it.

"What the heck....that's not that Zeppelin again is it Davey?"

"I can't tell Uncle Paddy, it's so high up. I'll go up and....no, look it's gone. The old man's going Uncle Paddy."

The old man was being pulled away from the light, back towards the temple wherein lay his body. With a great jerk he shot back inside the massive stone mass of the pyramid.

Davey was not quite quick enough to follow him.

"Get after him lad!" Paddy urged.

They saw him, floating through stone blocks and passageways, uncertain of where he was only knowing that his body wished him to return and was pulling him back to it.

A voice cried weakly in the darkness.
 "Have pity upon us."

"It's Shark-cutey!"

It was the voice of a child, the old man moved towards the sound until he reached its source.
 The terrified child was trapped in a small cell. She sat upon the lap of a man who was fastened to a wall.

"Help her!"
"Do sommat!"

The old man stared, "I know this man, he protected me from harm. Fear not child, I shall help you," he said but Chacuti and Lord Axa were unaware of his presence.

"That's what we wanted to hear!"

His body continued to pull him fiercely back to its confines.
 The Shaman waited for him.

"You are returned and we await you," said the Shaman, staring directly at the spirit which hovered before him. The old man looked down at where his body lay. He knew he had to get back into it quickly or else he would never return but he did not know what to do. He felt panic rising within him.

The skulls and Shaman started to make a strange sound. Up and down went the sound, he had heard this before but could not remember where, it allowed him to focus his mind. The sound rose and fell, each time it fell he was able to drop a little lower, soon his feet hung on the bodies mid-section and began to pull the rest of the spirit downwards. His arms slotted into those of the body, with a wrench his head re-entered. The body shook, vomited and retched as the return of the spirit allowed it to feel the damage done to it by the venom.

"It is the time of which our forefathers have long told," said the Shaman.

He motioned for the old man to sit next to him on a stone bench.

A skull rasped, "Your power is great, we are your servants, yours to command."

The skulls sang of the time they had waited and the sacrifices which had been made to preserve themselves until the day came when the gods returned.

"Our forefathers worshipped you, you gave them insight. They worked for you and with you to build this mighty empire. Their reward was to travel to the distant parts of the universe and to rule the Earth."

"We have safeguarded the helmet of power, without it all this would not have been possible."

The skulls chanted a deep resonant sound which caused the lingering effects of the poison to take hold of the old man once more. He felt he was being transported as images moved within his mind.

"I'm seeing what he's thinking Uncle Paddy! Can you see it!"
"Aye lad, it's all there, plain as the nose on me old girl's face."

The depths of space were shown; stars revealed the glory of the planets which encircled them. The old man was at the centre watching as the images flashed before him. The pain of the venom caused him to scream in agony.

"Aaagh! Release me from this grip, I cannot take anymore."

But the images continued, a strange craft tore from the sky, hurtling through ancient forests, it lay broken and twisted as unearthly beings struggled from its wreckage.

"The dragon of the sky brought the gods to teach the chosen ones," said one of the skulls. "We are those chosen ones, the Earth awaits our rule."

The old man felt a wave of darkness beginning to engulf him, he tried to fight it but could not, his mind passed into unconsciousness to escape the ravages of the poison. The darkness was complete, not even the faintest spark of light illumined it, he lay as if in death.

"What's 'appened to 'im, is 'e dead?"
 "No, he's close to it but he's not dead."

"Well he's no use to anybody now, silly old duffer, he needs to sort 'imself out sharpish if he's goin' to help the girl. Tell yer what lad there's so much 'appenin' how's about takin' the 'elmet off and having a natter so we can sort out the best plan of attack. I mean there's no clock runnin' on us. Yer can just stick it on again an' we'll carry on from where we left off."

Davey took off the helmet. "You're right Uncle Paddy. Write it all down then we can see what we're doing. The girl told me that I'd have to find out what was going on before I could help her, I'm beginning to see what she meant."

"Talking of clocks running on us lad, did I ever tell yer the one about Steinitz and Morphy?"

"No," said Davey turning away and groaning at the thought of hearing the same story all over again.

"Sat there the two of them were, world chess championship 1913. Sat there without movin' for 11 hours then Steinitz gives the nod to Morphy as though to say, 'make yer move' and this Morphy boyo just says, 'I thought it were your turn!'"

Paddy laughed as he always did whenever he told the tale. Davey joined in as he always did whenever Paddy told it to him.

"See lad, that's one reason why they introduced clocks to the game. But we're alright, there's none in this. Mind you people don't get killed playin' chess...though I've had the odd game when I could 'appily throttle somebody."

"Do you mean we could be in danger Uncle Paddy?" asked Davey fearfully.

Paddy laughed, "Sorry lad, didn't mean to yet yer goin'. Naw, just a figure of speech, nothing can touch us 'ere."

Davey seemed reassured, he picked up the notepaper from where it had fallen and passed it to Paddy.

"Right lad, tell me where all the pieces are, then we'll try and see what their next moves are likely to be. This Shaman he's the danger man, he's the one we're goin' to have to pay particlar 'tention to."

As Davey spoke Paddy made notes, reading out what he was writing as he scrawled:

- 1 *Shaman and the old man have got their heads together (but the old man wants to help the girl).*
- 2 *Lord Axa and his kid (Shark-cutey) are in a cell in the temple. (Things aren't looking good for them).*
- 3 *Uncle Poppy and Axa's missus are in the palace. (They seem safe enough for now).*

"What about Topac and Manco, Uncle Paddy, do we need to bother with them?"

"Yeah, maybe, they're still spyin' aren't they."

4 *Toe-peg and Manko - spying.*

"'owt else?"

"The Spaniards are on their way to Sit-Nalta.

Oh yeah, that's right, number five...

5 *Spanish are back on the road again heading for Sit 'n' Alter.*

"'owt else. No yer right, that's the lot - for now. It's a pity we couldn't put the chess pieces on the board and name 'em after them, but it's clearer now what's 'appenin'. First thing strikes me lad is that everyone's headin' for the city. That's where the games goin' to be played for keeps, I'm gettin' a strong feelin' on this one, me old lady'd be proud of me," he grinned.

Davey also grinned, not many people could smile while they held a pencil lengthways between their nose and upper lip but Paddy had the advantage of the Murtagh nose.

"You're right Uncle Paddy, the runner Hotchas was heading there as well. Everyone's been playing for position, now they're going to start taking each other off the board. I've just thought of something, you know how you taught me to make a sacrifice of one of my men so that I could launch an attack?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe because the Shaman keeps taking the sacrifices he'll end up getting beat. Maybe that man who was stuck in the stone will really kill the Shaman."

"Yeah, I was forgetting about that feller, them tatt's were sommat that's for sure. I'd better stick him down on the list."

6 *Man in stone, covered in tattoo's - has had a go at the Shaman*

"Right, let's get down to it, we'll go through the positions one by one then decide 'ow we're goin' to play it."

"Hang on a minute, we've left out talking to the old man."

"Possibly the most important one of the lot that one lad,

7 *We've spoken with the old man.*

but until he wakes up there ain't much point worrying about him. I reckon he'll be out the game for a good while yet. Tell yer what shift things along a bit and see what happens when he comes round. Wait a minute! Why stop it there lad. I mean if yer was 'aving a game of chess and yer'd already seen the position in the end-game it would give yer a certain advantage wouldn't it, if yer foller me drift."

"You're right Uncle Paddy. We wouldn't need to worry what was going to happen if we already knew. Should I try it?"

"Let's keep it tidy lad, sort out Toe-peg an' his mate first."

"'Ship-shape and Bristol fashion' Uncle Paddy?"

Paddy laughed, "I'll tell Hughie yer said that."

Davey started to replace his helmet but Paddy said, "hang on these are moves we're plannin', let's write them on this piece under **MOVES**."

Check out Toe-peg and Manko.

Try to go to the end-game.

"'owt else?"

Davey shook his head.

"Go for it lad!"

"Soon they shall cross," said Topac sadly, "Sit-Nalta must be know of this. Lord Axa must be informed."

"What did I say lad. See, they're headin' for Sit 'n' Alter as well as the rest of 'em."

"Let us first strike a blow," said Manco, "they shall never catch us!"

"We have seen them, we have learnt much," said Topac, "perhaps something in what we have seen will allow Lord Axa to lead us to victory, it is better that the invaders do not know we understand their ways."

The warriors loped into the trot that fighting men could maintain all day without effort, they retreated back from the canyon, leaving the high river cliffs behind them until soon they were far into the mountains. They travelled by day and by night following ancient trails which hugged the huge bulks of the towering peaks gaining height gradually but surely. When they reached the top of the mountain range they were within two days travel of their destination. There was little in the way of vegetation from which they could seek nourishment, the two men chewed leaves which they took from the pouches at their sides, the leaves gave them energy and made them forget their hunger. Ahead of them heavy black clouds announced the first of the winter storms, to one side the huge black mass of an extinct volcano pierced into the sky like a pyramid, water rushed down the steep sides as a deep lake unseen within its depths overflowed.

"Topac, ahead, over there!" said Manco pointing along the trail that they must follow.

In the distance moved a body of men, they showed as black dots against the dark background. "It cannot be the invaders, they must be from the city," said Manco.

They trotted on until the dots grew larger, "It is a party of elders and noblemen," said Topac whose younger eyes had more sharpness, "there are about fifteen in the lead group, behind them is the same number."

"Perhaps Lord Axa is one of them?"

"Find out who they are lad."

They raced across the valley floor then focused in upon the party. Davey looked towards the man who was leading them.

"It's that rat Aquila!"

"What's 'e up to now then?"

"May Inti shine upon you," Aquila greeted the warriors.

"And upon your spirits," replied Topac.

"To where do you travel?" asked Aquila.

"Sit-Nalta," replied Manco. The expression on his face showed his open distrust of Aquila.

"You are Lord Axa's men, are you not?" said Aquila.

Topac and Manco knew that something was wrong. Noblemen and elders never travelled this distance unless something warranted it, they were dressed in their finest clothes, slaves carried gifts.

"Do you go to meet the gods?" asked Topac, deciding that boldness was the best policy.

"Why, what do you know of such matters?" replied Aquila in such a tone that his guards half-raised their clubs. Topac's answer was to burst into a run, Manco followed closely behind.

"Hunt them down!" yelled Aquila.

"This Quilla feller's a nasty piece of work," said Paddy, "I'd have liked to met up with 'im down a dark alley on a dark night!"

Five guards gave chase. They hurtled in pursuit down a steep slope upon which boulders and large rocks were scattered. The rocks were covered in thin patches of ice, between them the ground was soft and muddy with water from the volcano. The men leapt from rock to rock to make quicker time but the effort quickly sapped the strength of all but the strongest legs and it was treacherous, one slip could be fatal. Manco's older legs slowly caused him to fall behind. He knew that if he ran any further he would be unable to fight when caught.

"Run on Topac," he urged, "I will stay and deal with these dogs!"

Topac turned to stay with his comrade but Manco swung his club at him, "RUN ON, I said."

"Yer man's a brave 'un. "

One of the pursuers sodden feet skidded over a boulder, he smashed his head against the side of a rock, the four remaining guards took more care and slowed their pace as they realised one of the warriors was no longer running.

"Oh, so you've given up, have you?" laughed a guard as they moved into position to surround their quarry.

"I'm getting a little old for chasing games," replied Manco, "I thought I would stay and greet you!"

He launched himself at the guard who was moving around, trying to get behind him. He swung a swiping blow against an undefended forearm, the razor sharp obsidian stones of his club made contact.

"The odds are improving," he joked with his attackers as the guard left the fray clutching his wound.

He had learnt a lot of fighting tricks in his time; he fought well but his age was telling against him; the chase, and the youth of the guards must combine to wear him down.

Two guards moved in upon him at the same time, Manco spun wildly round, warding off their blows, trying to deliver his own but the third man saw his opening, he ran in and with a mighty swing ended Manco's life.

Topac stood waving his club towards the guards, he yelled, "Manco shall be revenged! I, Topac, swear it!"

The guards answer was to group together and run towards him, Topac ran quickly away until he had placed enough distance between himself and his pursuers to be able to settle into a trot.

"That'll do lad, don't worry about Manky, he'd have been pleased with himself. Try the next move. Whip it all forwards."

Davey moved quickly towards the mirror following the path of Topac across hills and valleys, the sun made a complete revolution through the sky, night passed before it returned to the exact same spot. He carried on then suddenly drew back.

"Is that it lad, won't go no further?"

"No it's not that, I'm thinking it's not such a good idea to do this Uncle Paddy." He removed the helmet.

Paddy looked at him curiously, "Why's that, what's up lad?"

"I don't really know, it's like we're cheating, seeing something we shouldn't be seeing."

"Feelin's is important in a game. Hold it right there. Never go against yer instincts lad.

"It's more than just a feeling Uncle Paddy. I mean what if we can do something to help Chacuti then find that we've already seen something happen which we could have changed. If we've seen it happen then it can't be changed, can it? because it's already happened."

"Flamin' heck lad, yer doin' me head in. The worry is that I know what yer sayin'! Let's have a think on this for a minute, there must be some way of checkin' this out." He sat chewing his lip.

Davey went to say something but Paddy held up his hand, "Hold on lad, I've got it, just listen to this. Right. We go back to the old man in the mirror. If we can alter the stuff which we've already seen then we can stay with him and keep nattering away to 'im and tell him we're here and that we want to 'elp."

"Brilliant Uncle Paddy! But if we can't do that...?"

"Then we know that we can't change what we've already seen."

The old man was crawling from the chamber of the snake.

"That's it lad, well done. Right back just a touch more..."

"Who are you?" asked the old man exactly as he had the first time. When Davey tried to say something different than tell the old man his name the images in the mirror shook and sparkled, light and colour shimmered in their place.

"Well there's our answer Davey lad."

"What's stopped us talking to him again Uncle Paddy?"

"It's like chess lad. Who made up the rules? Nobody knows, but the rules are there and can't be broken. How come a knight has to go round jumping and side-steppin'? Nobody knows but it does."

Davey was still not quite satisfied, "Well how come we're playing this game, what if we just tipped over the board."

"Well that Davey lad is called resigning, what would that mean for the little princess stuck down in Carnatic?" then added. "It's up to you lad, like I says, it's your game."

"Maybe what I said I saw down there wasn't as real as I thought it was, maybe none of this is real."

"That's yer decision lad, I've told yer where I stand, 'Dead or alive it don't make no difference'."

"I'll have to go back there and speak with her Uncle Paddy, I need to know more."

"I reckon it'd be a good move in any case lad, the more we find out how to play this game the better. As me old girl says, 'Everything 'appens for a reason'. Think about it lad, how come it were your old feller that brought back that helmet, how come it's you that's seen the girl! It all fits too well, there's things goin' on here which'd confuse Albert flippin' Einstein. These things can't be figured out on a piece of paper (he waved his own notes around scornfully) what we're talking is life and death, flesh and blood, hearts and flippin' souls. Ruddy Hell I'll be readin' the flippin' sermon the way I'm goin' on!"

They both laughed. As on the previous evening once started they were off, they ended up holding their sides in agony and Paddy appeared to be heading towards another coughing fit.

"Pack it in you two!" screeched Mrs Murtagh. "Paddy! I won't tell you again! He's got work in the mornin'!"

Paddy gasped, "She's right lad, come on yer'd better get yer 'ead down, you'll never get up. 'ang on what time is it now?" He took his pocket watch from the dressing table, half-past flippin' three, blimey lad yer've only got two hours kip if yer lucky."

"I'm not tired Uncle Paddy, I reckon it's the helmet, it gives you energy not takes it away."

Paddy's eyebrow's lifted in surprise, "Well what yer wanna do?"

"I'll go back to that Carnatic house tomorrow after work. One way or the other we'll know for sure what's going on then."

"Right yer are lad, do us a favour and turn that flamin' lamp out."

"I didn't say I didn't want to do anymore now though," said Davey in a disappointed tone.

"GREAT!" exclaimed Paddy, "Let's get on with it."

"What move should we make?" asked Davey, "Should I go back to Topac?"

"'e's still yer man!"

CHAPTER 16

Sacrifice

"There he is Uncle Paddy, next to the wall!"

As Topac reached Sit-Nalta the night was closing in, hugging the shadows of the walls he froze rigid when a sentry walked on the ramparts above. Waiting until the sentry had passed he stealthily climbed up. Digging fingers and toes into the tiniest of irregularities in the surface of the great stones he ascended, exhausted he reached the top.

"Stand and be recognised!" challenged the sentry running towards him.

Topac dropped lightly to the ground inside. He ran swiftly away taking many turns and diversions to throw off any possible pursuit.

"he's heading to Lady Axa's place," said Paddy looking at a sketchy plan he had drawn of the city.

Topac scaled the palace wall and entered the chambers of Lady Axa. A hand across her mouth woke her. Sleep slowed her reaction nevertheless Topac barely had time to jump back, the swipe of her nails narrowly missed him.

"It is I Topac! Lord Axa's man!" he hissed.

"Topac! Are you alone?"

"I am alone, are you safe? Where is Lord Axa?"

"I am safe, for the moment. Wait while I send for Popacata."

She hurried to the door and spoke to her servant, Hunwa.

"Much has happened Topac, Lord Axa and our daughter have been taken, the Shaman has with him a strange old man, the people say that he is one of the gods, even warriors faithful to us will not act. All is lost."

In a voice that shook with anger Topac replied, "I was with my Lord Axa when we captured that old man, he is no god. The men who brought him to the land of the Inca are no gods, they are murderers!"

Popacata joined them. "Topac!" he embraced the tracker, "are you alone?"

"As you see," said Topac, "I was set by Lord Axa with Manco to watch the invaders..."

Popacata interrupted, "Where is Manco now?"

"Dead," answered Topac fiercely, "that dog Aquila's temple guards," he repeated his oath, "Manco will be avenged,"

"Tell me what you have learnt of these strangers that I may be better able to persuade the nobles and elders," said Popacata, "we have no time to waste, the child..."

"Murderers and thieves! they hunger for gold. From here to the great peaks their weapons roar and kill, great deer carry them with the speed of the wind, no obstacle can stop them. All this Manco and I saw."

"I do not wish to even think it," said Popacata, "but tell me, this I must know, is it possible that these strangers are gods?"

"Uncle! How can you even think such a thing?"

"My dear, what Topac says is *so* unbelievable, how can they merely be men? The hope of the people is that if the gods *are* returned then it will bring an end to the sacrifices of the Shamen. Perhaps good will come from this after all?"

Topac was aggressive in his reply, "I saw what they did to the villagers; men, women and children..." he looked at Lady Axa and held his tongue, "They are no gods, it is as Lord Axa said, 'gods do not bleed, gods do not die'. Expect no mercy!"

Popacata, like the good diplomat he was, never had a firm opinion about anything. He looked worried. He could not begin to think how to fight such men. "How many are they in number?" Topac answered that the warriors outnumbered the invaders fifty times over.

"Yes but the warriors will not fight, you can be sure of that Topac, that much is certain," Popacata gave voice to both their thoughts, "If only Axa were free..."

Lady Axa warned, "Topac, the guards who followed you will search the palace, go into hiding with the men from my husband's war party. Hurry, go now, rest and recover your strength."

"There is no time for rest, the guards shall soon return bringing the murderers into Sit-nalta, then the hand of the Shaman will descend like a plague upon our land."

Topac's words were spoken without emotion, Popacata knew them to be true. "Come Topac, I will take you to your comrades," he said leading Topac from the room.

"Well he got to Sit 'n' alter safely enough and we've seen what's happening with Axa's missus and Uncle Poppy - not a lot. But Toe-peg reckons it won't be long before the Spanish show up."

"I'll see how far away they are Uncle Paddy."

The column was proudly led by the Inca nobles and elders. A great conch was blown repeatedly announcing the return of the gods. Already people were beginning to line their route. Some fell to the ground, those that did not were struck down by the guards.

"That priest's having a natter, I don't like the look of him one little bit, get down and have a listen, he's another feller as got the potential to become a right idjit."

"What do you think Father?" asked Francesco of the priest gesturing towards the people, "are we not saviours to be welcomed by these savages with open arms?"

"My son, there is nothing I see which pleases me," replied the priest fingering his rosaries, "they are, as you say, savages. For them to say we are gods is sacrilege, I am not convinced that it is right to continue to mislead them."

"But if it leads to quicker conversion to the true faith then surely it cannot be so sinful Father?" asked Francesco.

"All sin provokes displeasure in the eyes of the Lord my son, however it is our holy duty to convert these ignorant people *and I do not think our task will be an easy one*," he added in such an ominous way that there was little doubt left as to his meaning.

"See what I mean lad, he's dodgy. Whip it along a bit, let's get to the meat."

The commander was addressing his officers who were gathered around his tent.

"We shall enter the city later today, the more we can impress these savages the better we will be able to act the part of their gods. It is their fate that our so-called *return* has been foretold, it is our destiny to make the most of their misguided beliefs. Tell the men their armour must shine like the shields of David."

Father Salamanga nodded in appreciation of the Biblical reference.

Men set to work grooming horses; polishing buckles, boots and halberds, thick mud caked onto the rims of the carriage wheels was scraped off, swords and armour plate were burnished until they shone. Squad leaders inspected their troops checking that nothing was out of place and that everything that could be polished gleamed.

The Inca nobles, guards and elders looked on in awe, only Aquila appeared to be aloof to what was taking place. Francesco watched him carefully he was not sure about him, no feeling escaped the leader of the guards eyes, they were blank and unfeeling. Finally he decided the man should be reported and with a hand upon the handle of his sword, walked under the Inca's gaze to the commander.

"Sire, I have been observing the Inca, the one named Aquila, he is surely a treacherous dog!"

"Couldn't have put it better meself lad, that feller'd put yer Mr Queerk to shame."

They both giggled with the memory of Mr Quirk's hasty departure.

The commander sat half-dressed whilst his servant fastened him into his clothes and armour, he merely laughed, dismissing the warning with a flurry of his hand. "There are far more important things at stake here than one solitary native," he gestured with the same hand towards the horizon, "consider Francesco, all this will soon be under my rule!" Suddenly aware that the priest had approached them he searched his face for any sign that his statement had been overheard but saw nothing to concern him, he hailed the priest, "Good Father, the Incas have already shown their evil ways to us, the city shall no doubt hold more unnatural horrors within its walls. I ask you to bear with me in these matters - whatever ungodly things we may find in there. But I make myself clear, it is my intention to win over these people by whatever means, by force of arms if it be necessary but I counsel that we should make use of their strange disposition towards us."

The priest considered the commanders request before replying.

"The Church must condemn evil wherever it arises but for the greater good whatever evil awaits us in that city shall remain unspoken of until we are able to place it firmly under the yoke of His Holy Father."

He crossed himself then walked away, the commander would not have been so happy if he had seen the priest's face harden as deep suspicion set into his features. His thoughts turned to their present military concerns. "Francesco, once we have gained entry into the city seek out its strengths and weaknesses, assign men to this task for it is of grave importance. It shall be but a matter of time until force becomes necessary, let us ready ourselves for such a time."

Aquila turned towards them as they spoke, he had such a look of natural cunning about him that Francesco again cautioned the commander.

"I feel we should be very careful what we say in front of that man, there is an air about him which I do not like."

The commander looked at Aquila and smiled, Francesco knew that smile for what it was, it was a smile which warned, "Be ready for your time will come."

Aquila merely returned the smile with one of his own.

Davey felt Paddy fidgeting next to him and took the hint. He arced the sun through the sky.

The city sparkled like a distant jewel, across the plain its walls reflected the sun's rays so brilliantly that soldiers cried out as they saw it, "El Dorado! the golden city!"

Francesco rode along next to Drago who was a man whom he could trust, "These people are not savages, this city outrivals Madrid and every other city in Spain."

"It is no wonder they regard us as their gods, we are men from another world. Yet this world is richer and far more beautiful than our own."

They passed through fertile fields which were bordered with large trees, their branches swept low over canals and waterways which fed crystal clear water to heavy crops. Seemingly delicate wooden bridges did not even tremble under the boots of troops of men. They did not see anybody in the outlying districts but as they neared the walls they heard a great cheering, the sound was so loud that it boomed out from the city and caused some of the men to lower their pikes.

"Seems like they are expecting us," smiled Francesco to the commander.

"They have no idea what they are welcoming," the commander smiled back.

The scale of the city could not be appreciated from the plain but as they neared it they realised its immense size, the walls alone outscaled anything that they had ever seen before.

Francesco was concerned, "This place is a fortress, it would cost us dearly to have to storm it. Order the men to load muskets and make ready, it could be a trap."

The Incas led them in through the widest portal which was only just wide enough to allow the cannon to pass through, even then their hubs scraped against the huge stone cubes which formed the entrance. The huge blocks which made up the walls keyed together so perfectly that even a knife could not be forced between them, Drago was impressed, "These people have skills I have not seen in the whole of Europe," he said to Francesco.

"This is too easy," said Enrique, "I do not like it, should we leave a rearguard here Commander?"

"Thank you for bringing the matter to my attention Enrique. Assign a detail to guard the entrance. Remain with them and hold this position."

The commander turned to Francesco, "We shall have to fight our way out if it comes to it."

They talked together briefly then Francesco ordered the column into close order.

"Let us show these savages what we are made of, they shall not be so ready to cross swords with us if they know our strength!"

They marched into the city, every rank and every file was militarily exact; along the grand avenue they paraded, numerous people lined their route cheering, waving and singing. Proud warriors stood, some held children seated upon their shoulders who clapped their little hands in joy. Beautiful girls in the barest of costumes danced before the soldiers, they carried woven baskets filled with petals from exotic plants. The girls threw the petals high into the air to settle at the feet of the Spaniards whose heavy boots trampled them into the dirt and released the delicate scents they stored.

"What do you think of those then Joaquim?" said Carlos to the man who marched alongside him.

For men who had been away from home for many months Joaquim's reply was to be expected. However even their attention could not remain upon the dancing girls for long, they were amazed by the splendour all around, bright, white buildings towered above them, gardens that seemed to cling to the sides of the buildings burst forth with plants and shrubs of amazing variety, Winter was approaching but the flowers displayed were magnificent.

From elaborate arched windows the Incas waved and cheered, the buildings continued to grow in splendour and grandeur, finally the avenue opened out into the main square, ahead of them loomed the temple. A great roar rose from the assembled thousands deafening their ears.

Every man was amazed by the sights they had witnessed but the sight and size of the temple staggered them.

"Father Salamanga! Is this not a pyramid such as one might see in Egypt?" shouted the commander to the priest above the roar.

"It is of similar ungodly appearance," replied the priest, "I do not like the look of the small edifice on its top."

As their mounts neared the huge structure the racks of skulls baking in the sun at the foot of the temples steps could clearly be seen. The priest was the first to make the discovery, he splashed them with holy water and blessed them, "Holy Father which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name." But he had given his promise to the commander and held his tongue.

Three times the column paraded around the square whilst the people looked on in awe.

"Have the men display our firepower Sergeant," ordered the commander.

The sergeant-at-arms issued the orders in his loudest voice. "We will give a small demonstration of our skill at arms. Make ready!"

A succession of orders caused different groups of men to slope arms, shoulder arms, and to demonstrate their drill. Pikemen assembled in a square then wheeled and unfolded into single file the sergeant calling out the pace. Behind them a squad of musketeers fired off a musket volley, sections of the crowd became a screaming rabble as lead balls whistled through the air above their heads. Amongst their numbers, wearing a heavy poncho and a large workers hat, Topac could not be recognised. He stood with Popacata.

"It is as you say Topac," said Popacata, "these invaders are superior to us in weaponry, their very skin seems to be hardened, are they not the gods themselves?" Topac did not reply but his grip tightened on the club which he held

concealed beneath his poncho. Popacata was soon to learn more, the high point of the demonstration was the firing of the cannon.

"Train the cannon on that thing over there," ordered the commander pointing to the edifice on top of the temple. Swiftly, horses wheeled the cannon into position, men rammed the charge into the barrel and rolled a heavy iron ball into its mouth. With a fiercesome roar the cannon discharged itself leaping back across the square, the gaze of the people left it and turned to the top of the temple as the iron ball exploded against the target, totally obliterating it. Stone fragments scattered amongst the onlookers, cutting into them and sending out the first wave of panic.

"RELOAD!"

The cannon roared again, the panic became flight, people were trampled underfoot as the crowd surged around seeking to escape. What moments before had been a happy, welcoming throng was now a milling mass of confusion.

"RELOAD!"

Suddenly the people froze still.

"What is it, why have they stopped?" asked one of the officers of another, his eyes followed the people's fixed look to find his answer. At the temple top, in the ruins of the edifice stood the Shaman. He stood in his full ceremonial robes, arms folded, with his obsidian knife clutched in his hand.

"Seems like this is some sort of leader, should we take him?" asked Francesco of the commander. "Perhaps he is this Shaman of whom we have heard so much," replied the commander, "Let us find out what he is about before we upset these fine fellows." He looked around at the guards who stood stoney-faced with their razor sharp clubs cradled lightly in their arms.

The Shaman cried out, "The Gods are returned, they are here to cleanse, to deliver. Witness their immense power. For long ages we have waited for this day, the prophecies of old are met. Give praise to the Gods! Honour their return!"

Someone in the crowd cheered, the cry was taken up until once more the people were cheering.

The Shaman raised an arm for silence, the people obeyed.

"STAND FIRM" yelled the sergeant-at-arms at a pikeman who turned his head to look towards the Shaman. The yell broke the spell which the Shaman's presence had woven.

"Fetch him down," ordered the commander.

Four pikemen ran to the temple, they crossed to where a wide stairway cut up to its top. Up this they ran until out of breath they continued at a walk, dragging the shafts of their heavy weapons behind them.

In stunned silence the people watched. They gasped when the leading man took hold of the Shaman and pulled him roughly round. "Come with us!" the man shouted.

The Shaman did not resist, he was forced down the steps at the end of a pike.

Warriors loyal to the Shaman were slowly raising their weapons. One of them was a little further advanced in his intentions, he slashed his club against the neck of one of the horses. Its rider fell heavily to the ground.

"Sergeant!" said Francesco calmly.

The sergeant nodded to a musketeer who lowered his weapon and pointed it at close range at the attacker. "Fire!" he was ordered.

The force of the shot lifted the man into the air before he fell flat onto his back at the feet of Aquila. Warriors moved to attack but the Shaman prevented them, he called, "It is the right of the gods to give life and to take it, the warriors have brought dishonour upon themselves." He shouted to the leader of the guards, "Aquila, select every tenth man that the gods might be appeased!"

In the silence that followed the buzzing of the flies that rapidly swarmed to the blood of horse and man could clearly be heard.

Nobody but Aquila moved, the Shaman had demanded the greatest sacrifice, many warriors would die.

Topac whispered to Popacata, "If the warriors who are chosen are not those who are loyal to Lord Axa this will be good for us!"

Popacata's old head saw through the Shaman's plan instantly, "It *will* be warriors loyal to Lord Axa who are chosen Topac. Go, re-join the war party in hiding!"

Topac ignore the elders plea.

The commander ordered his troops to remain at the ready. They watched as Aquila walked amongst the assembled crowd, placing his right hand upon the shoulder of every man chosen, slowly a group of warriors gathered in the square, it continued to grow larger as Aquila continued his task. Some of the warriors passed their children to their wives as the cold, hard hand of death touched them.

"That dog!" snarled Topac, "why do the warriors not fight, if they must die let them die as men!"

Popacata said simply, "They lack a leader."

The fury rose in Topac, as Aquila neared him he saw his chance. Popacata sensed him about to explode, "Calm yourself Topac!" he hissed but the young warrior threw aside his poncho revealing his war costume, his club was already striking as he screamed, "Die dog!"

Aquila was unbelievably quick, he dropped to one knee so that the blow whistled harmlessly through the air above his head. A quick roll on the floor and then back to his feet put him at a safe distance from his attacker.

"Oh so the tracker has chosen to show himself has he?" shouted Aquila. His men moved to help him but Aquila ordered them back, "This feeble fool is mine!"

"If they wish to kill each other so much the better," said the commander to Francesco who looked towards him for orders.

The crowd fell back from the two fighters creating a ring about them. The two men eyed each other looking for an opening. Aquila was the more heavily muscled but Topac had greater speed, Aquila had the most fighting experience but Topac had youth on his side, the outcome of the contest was inevitable. Aquila had learnt every movement an opponent could make a thousand times over, he had practiced and rehearsed until his club was an extension of his arm, he easily evaded Topac's first wild swing and his club sheared across the younger man's back. The blow was not enough to finish him but it rendered him incapable of fighting effectively. Aquila showed no mercy as he side-stepped Topac's final brave lunge and finished him off with a mighty swing.

Topac's resistance had no affect upon the warriors who huddled together in the square, the guards disarmed and surrounded them ensuring that there would be no repetition of Topac's action.

Soon all the tenth had been chosen. Popacata's fear had been realised, he looked on in despair.

"I feel that it would be better for Father Salamanga to continue with a tour of this city. Do you not agree Francesco?"

"Father I would regard it as an honour to accompany you on such a tour."

"Yes my son, let us learn more that we may the more easily offer the gospels of the Lord to these primitives." He plied his stick across the donkey's flanks and Francesco and several other riders followed.

The Shaman looked at the commander. The commander returned his stare, it was as if they were locked together in some form of combat but as the Shaman's pupils began to narrow vertically the commander was the first to give way. "Release him," he ordered the men who guarded the Shaman.

The Shaman selected two groups of four nobles who would have the honour to assist him, they followed him back up to the temple top.

"I desire to observe their primitive customs," said the commander. "Sergeant, nine men to form a bodyguard," preferring to have Carlos with him rather than the other officers he called, "Carlos I may need you to interpret, join me," then he rode his horse towards the base of the pyramid. Carlos spurred his horse to catch up. They both dismounted and walked after the Incas with the bodyguard of pikemen trotting to catch up.

The guards selected a group of fifty warriors and herded them so quickly up the temple steps that they soon overtook the commander's small group.

"Such a loss of good fighting material," commented the commander although not yet knowing exactly what their fate was to be. They watched as the guards landed their clubs freely upon any warrior who was slow to meet their demands.

As the Spaniards climbed higher the extent of the city revealed itself, several times they halted to point out further sights that they had not seen. Near the top they passed the warriors who were lined up, one man to each step. The commander gloated over the splendid views below.

"This is to be a mighty conquest," he said to Carlos, "we shall go down in history. Observe!"

He waved his arm outwards as if to encompass all they saw and to take in the mountains which towered at the edge of the plain, "It shall all be ours, you can be sure of that," he said talking as much to himself as to the man at his side.

"We know what's going to 'appen 'ere lad, let's get out of 'ere eh."

Even the battle hardened Spaniards were sickened as group by fifty group the warriors were driven up the temple steps, from the square below soldiers shouted, "Let us destroy these devils, they do not deserve our mercy!" but officers quelled them into silence.

The commander had seen enough, he descended with Carlos who dared to voice an opinion.

"Commander, ought we not to run this demon through? Surely he acts against all that is right." The commander smiled at his favourite, "On the contrary my dear Carlos, this 'demon' has decimated our opposition."

Carlos tried another tack, "But might he not urge his remaining warriors to attack us?"

"You do not need to worry about him Carlos, he has shown his loyalty to his gods."

As they returned to the square the people began to disperse and make their way back to their homes. Elders with numerous slaves bearing stretchers conveyed the Spaniards shoulder high across the square and down a wide

avenue. The procession passed beneath Lady Axa who, with Popacata and Panqui, stared out at the strange beings beneath them. Horrified Lady Axa cried out as the procession swung in through the great doors which formed the palace entrance.

"Uncle quickly! we must seal off our rooms, the Shaman has sent these dogs into our home!"

"This Shyman's one nasty feller Davey," said Paddy as they watched the Spaniards roam from room to room destroying and grabbing, fighting over expensive belongings and anything of value.

"I've had another idea Uncle Paddy!"

"Take it easy now lad. I've warned yer about them."

They both grinned.

"Go on, I'm hearin' what yer sayin'."

"What I'm thinking is maybe I can get inside this mirror. Go into their land, maybe that's how it is we can help the white lady?"

"If that works it could be dangerous for yer lad, I don't like the sound of it meself. If anything 'appens to you I'd never forgive meself."

"I'll be okay. I'm wearing the helmet. I'll just keep on saying to myself that I'm invisible then nobody will even see me."

"Remember that old man, when he was tryin' to get back into his body?"

"Yeah," said Davey.

"Well that Shyman could see 'im and he was invisible to everyone else."

"Oh yeah, I'd forgotten about that. But listen to this though Uncle Paddy. If we're looking at the past, I'm alive in the future so nobody could possibly harm me in those olden days."

"I don't know if it works like that lad, I mean there's rules in all this but rules were made to be broken...."

"I've got to try Uncle Paddy!"

Davey stood up and moved nearer to the mirror.

"Hang on lad! If you go in there I won't be able to see yer." But the look of determination on Davey's face caused him to give in. "Just five minutes then promise me you'll come back. Promise?"

"I promise Uncle Paddy, I'll just take a quick look round then I'll be straight back."

He leant forwards and pressed the top of the helmet against the mirror.

"Hold on lad, shift them things," said Paddy sweeping away hairbrushes, bottles and his cut-throat razor. "Hold on take this!" he tried to pass Davey the razor, "Yer might need it."

Davey was too intent upon what he was doing to hear him, he continued to press against the mirror, it rocked backwards as he placed his knee upon the dressing-table.

"Careful lad, yer goin' to smash it! Seven years bad luck yer know."

The hard surface of the glass did not soften, it did not give way to admit Davey, disappointedly he sat back down on the bed.

"Never mind lad, yer tried it. We'll figure sommat out to help the girl, don't you worry."

The gods were settling in to their new home. Shouts, yells and laughter burst through the thin walls into Lady Axa's apartments. They could hear slave girls screaming in terror as the gods chased them, the snarling of fierce dogs barked above the excitement and chaos.

Lady Axa spoke to her slave, "Hunwa, take Panqui to her room." Panqui held on to the heavy skirts of the old woman who had nursed her during childhood. As soon as they were out of earshot Lady Axa hissed, "The Shaman knows we are no longer a threat, he will soon destroy us, to have placed these men here can only foretell disaster."

Popacata did not answer, he crossed the room to the wall and turned one of the embellishments, a peep-hole was revealed. Popacata settled himself to observe and learn more of the invaders. It was dusk when he witnessed Francesco and Father Salamanga returning to their new quarters. The commander greeted them in tones of ecstasy, "Good Father and Francesco you are well returned, please follow me for I wish to know what you have witnessed."

As they passed out of Popacata's view Paddy urged Davey to follow them.

Francesco's spurs rattled as he strode in his heavy riding boots over the delicately patterned stone floor. In contrast the priest's sandals flapped their thin leather soles as with shoulders hunched, head bowed in permanent humility, he followed the men. The commander showed them in through a massively decorated door.

"Does not this room alone humiliate the Imperial Palace of Madrid?" he asked smiling, "but quickly now, tell me what you have seen."

"We have wondered and admired," said Francesco, "the wealth is enormous. Gold is a common metal. It is my belief that this land is the richest that God put on the Earth."

The ravenous look in the commander's eyes was plain to see. "It is all ours, they believe us to be their gods revisiting them. Nothing can stand in our way. Nothing!" he repeated in a state of rapture, overcome with greed.

Father Salamanga was concerned with what he was hearing, greed could overcome the purest of men and the commander was far from pure. "But let us not forget that the Mother Church must come before men and kings," he reminded the commander.

"But of course Father, of course," smiled the commander. The priest was not happy with the answer, yet again he had cause for concern.

The commander asked, "Is it not a confirmation of our faith Father that these heathens seek to destroy each other?"

"What is this you speak of?" questioned the priest raising an eyebrow.

The commander showed him towards a window, from it they looked at the long line of warriors standing in a thin line up the temple's steps.

"I shall retire into seclusion and pray for their souls," said Father Salamanga walking away.

"Maybe that feller's not as bad as we thought," offered Paddy, "whip it forwards lad, those Inkers have got no chance, they're all goin' to snuff it."

"I'll go slowly Uncle Paddy just in case something start's to happen."

For a day and night the slaughter continued.

It was to be under a setting sun that the Shaman finally raised his knife, crying out in animal tongues to the listening gods. Paddy and Davey also heard the cry and swept across the temple square, up the stepped pyramid and followed him as he descended into the depths of his stone hell.

CHAPTER 17

Judas Priest

The Shaman spoke with the crystal skulls, "The strength of the warriors has grown in us, their sacrifice has given us the power to establish the new order."

"The warriors were a threat," rasped a skull, "nobody must stand in the way of the gods."

"I am unsure of these new gods," said a skull, "the helmet so recently delivered to us has proved worthless."

Another skull replied harshly, "If the helmet has no power then these strangers are *not* the gods we seek."

The Shaman sat down upon a stone bench, the air around him seemed to crackle and split as though repelled by the great energy emanating from his foul being. He shouted, "I shall watch them and listen, we must know the truth of this!"

"It is of no matter Shaman," said a skull, "The gods *are* close, there is no doubt of that, we sense them. Their light has been seen, the old man who sleeps the sleep of death bears their mark."

The skull which had raised doubts was still not sure, "If we cannot control these strangers they may destroy us, their power is great. The mirror of life has shown the man encased in stone, his anger would have destroyed the Shaman if we had not acted. Our power was not enough to withstand the signs he bore."

"Was he a god? He was not one of these men," said the Shaman.

"It is of no consequence, fate can be altered, we shall work against this man in stone we shall turn his to our ways as we have turned the priest of these strangers."

"The priest is with us?" asked the Shaman.

"He shall come to you," grated a skull, "He is a weak man, ours to manipulate as we choose."

"The man in stone is a danger, he must be destroyed!" barked the Shaman.

"We shall use all our power to change his fate," said a number of skulls, together they rasped, "His scales shall be tipped, his balance destroyed!"

The Shaman stood up, he stared up into the roof of the cell, his eyes scanned towards the corners, probing into every recess. A skull started to speak. "Hash!" hissed the Shaman. His stare extended out beyond the confines of the cell, it penetrated the stone blocks of the temple.

"What is there?" whispered a skull.

The Shaman did not answer, his concentration projected his sight through the air, sweeping the clouds, searching, examining. His eyes narrowed as his search extended.

Davey's hands moved nearer towards his helmet.

"Steady there lad. Hold it steady, we'll soon tell if this witch can find us without his looking glass."

"Someone gazes upon us. We are being watched," snarled the Shaman, "perhaps the boy in the mirror is out there!"

"We shall combine and unite, our energies will seek out the intruder," hissed the skulls.

"Be sure that we shall find them out!" rasped the Shaman.

"He's onto us Uncle Paddy," said Davey as a shiver ran down his back.

"Look's that way lad but don't panic, he's the feller who get's it in the end. We've seen the stone-man."

"Yeah, but they reckon they can change that from happening. They're going to upset his balance or something."

"Well that's another thing for us to look at lad. Maybe we can do something to stop them changing thing's. Let's not hang about here though. This lot are a little too touchy for my liking. It must be like when someone's starin' at yer and you can feel it."

"Should I check on how Axa and his daughter are?" asked Davey, "or try to speak to the old man again? he might have woken up now."

"Check the old man, he's the only one who know's we're around."

The old man lay still. The faint light from a flaring torch did not reveal even the faintest sign of breathing to indicate that he was still alive. Paddy shook his head slowly from side to side making a hissing sound as he drew air in between his teeth, "Let's get the hell out of this temple eh lad, it's giving me the creeps."

Davey did not need any encouragement, "I'll go to the palace."

"Thank God for that, I was getting the eeby-jeeby's. What's goin' on 'ere then? That's Uncle Poppy ain't it?"

The elder was crouching down, he was peering intently through the wall.

"He's got one of them blow-pipes the warriors had Uncle Paddy."

"Handy, he can take pot-shots at 'em, they won't know what's hit 'em. Have a look see what he's looking at."

Their view moved through the wall.

These fellers 'ave got it good. Look at them all. Rub-a-dub-dub! At least they're clean."

Beautiful servant girls poured heated waters into a great bath and added fragrant oils. The junior officers wallowed drunkenly in the water singing coarse, rough military songs. Some had drunk their fill and had to be helped out to empty their churning stomachs. There was a lot of horseplay and laughter, Joaquim was ducked by Enrique as an Inca nobleman entered the room. The nobleman walked backwards that he might not look upon their godly faces. When Joaquim came up gasping for air the Inca informed them, "My masters, much gold has arrived from beyond the mountains."

"Told yer they wouldn't waste any time in getting their hands on it lad."

"Come!" laughed the men, "Let us see what they have brought their gods this time!"

As they crawled from the water, flopping about in their weak, drunken state a servant girl saw her chance to slip away. "No you don't you little beauty!" shouted two of the officers, they chased her, picked her up and threw her shrieking into the pool.

Enrique's servant was distracted by the scream and dropped his master's sword to the floor, the clatter of its landing was quiet compared to the sound of the slap which Enrique landed across the servant's face. "Idiot, pick it up!"

"Spare me. Forgive me!" cried the servant who fell to the floor and began kissing the god's feet. Everyone's attention was upon him, nobody noticed a spider scuttle from a crack in the wall, it quickly disappeared into the bundle of Enrique's piled up clothes.

"Look Uncle Paddy, he's stuck the tip of his blowpipe through the wall!"

"Go on, give it a blast!" Paddy urged.

They watched as Popacata withdrew the weapon.

"e must reckon that spider's goin' to do the job for 'im, if it's as vicious as it looks he's got no worries on that score lad."

They followed the men who were joined by the senior officers as they made their way to the treasure room.

"At ease," ordered the sergeant-at-arms to the two pikemen who guarded the entrance. The commander, Francesco and the junior officers entered followed by Father Salamanga.

"There is more wealth here than any King or Queen in the Old World could dream of," said Carlos. Enrique answered, "This is surely the 'City of Gold' and we have taken it without a fight," his thin pink skin was still flushed from the hot water, his attitude was boastful.

"*Wow look at that!*" exclaimed Davey.

From wall to ceiling the rear end of the room was piled with gold, silver, jewels. Fashioned into a multitude of artifices from statues to bracelets to caskets, the dull metal glimmered under flaring torches as the men who stared upon it drank it into their souls.

"Do not be blinded by this material wealth," said the priest, "it is more a token of faith from the savages. Their conversion will be costly, churches will have to be built and missionaries will have to take on the task of educating the people. Is this not so commander?" he asked seeking some sort of commitment.

"It is as you say, Father," replied the commander, immediately aware of the priest's reason for asking such a question, "The first raft-load of the spoils of war is already making its way down-river, it carries immeasurable wealth. More will follow, soon the first ship will sail to deliver this new found wealth to King and Church. Father, I ask you to place your blessings upon our mission in this country."

Father Salamanga was not wholly convinced but did as he was asked.

The commander tried using another tactic and changed the subject, "The Shaman has shown us loyalty but we cannot hope to deal with such a man for long. I fear his power is far too great. I propose that we look towards *removing* him," he looked towards the priest, "if that meets with your approval?"

"But of course Commander, we must enforce God's will in all matters, we cannot make a deal with the Devil himself. Have not my teachers in Toledo warned me of just such a man."

"Thank you Father, you have made the Church's position perfectly clear to us," said the commander, happy that he had diverted the priest's question but even he shivered at the priest's mention of the Spanish Inquisition.

Carlos spoke, "Sir I have to inform you that I have learnt from talking to these people that if we harm the Shaman then the nobles and elders will almost certainly lead the warriors against us. News of our attack upon the settlement is spreading, if it were not for the Shaman insisting that we are gods and that the people need to be cleansed, we would be attacked immediately."

Francesco was jealous of the junior officer, he decided he should make a bold statement.

"Then if such is the case this problem of the nobles and elders will have to be resolved before the Shaman can be removed. Father, these are military matters, I request that you absent yourself from our presence whilst we discuss possible solutions."

"As you wish my son, as you wish," sighed the priest. His sandals flapped over the stone floor as he made his way from the room.

"This is timely," said the commander, "I have of course been thinking exactly the same thing myself Francesco, which is why I brought up the question of the Shaman."

"Of course Sir," replied Carlos in his flattering manner, "did you not inform me of such this very day."

"Thank you Carlos," said the commander pausing to smile at his favourite's commitment before continuing, "I have been aware over these last few days that the men are losing battle awareness, they are drinking to excess and behaving like beasts. The time to celebrate is when victory is complete, not now. I propose that before the men relax and we lose our element of surprise, and before these natives realise that, perhaps with the exception of the good Father himself," he smiled, "we are no closer to being *gods* than they are, we must seize the initiative."

Having made his little speech which provided no plan or even an idea of how they were to accomplish what he proposed the commander looked at his officers for answers.

Francesco was determined to be seen as someone with a complete grasp of the situation, a leader whose thinking could be counted upon. He spoke in his short, clipped voice, "To kill the Shaman would cause us a major problem, the people would then unite behind the nobles and elders. They outnumber us so greatly that if they all joined forces and stopped fighting amongst themselves we could not hope to survive. But if the nobles and elders were in our power we would be able to state terms and demands as we see fit."

"And how do you propose we achieve this?" asked Carlos with a hint of a smirk upon his lips.

"It will be quite easy." Francesco paused, obtaining full attention before continuing. "We shall invite the nobles and elders here, to celebrate our return to these lands...." His voice dropped to a whisper.

"*What's 'e saying lad? I can't hear a thing.*"

"*They're going to set a trap so they can capture them,*" said Davey, he moved towards the mirror.

"Excellent Francesco," said the commander when he had finished.

Francesco seemed pleased to have re-established his position. The commander added to the plan, "After the Incas are merry and the drink has loosened their wits...we strike."

Joaquim felt something scratch against his skin, he ignored it at first but then put his hand inside his shirt, immediately he screamed in pain and snatched his hand back out. Attached to it was a great spider, its hairy legs and body were tossed around as the man jerked his whole arm around trying to dislodge it.

"Get it off me! It's biting me!" he roared in his pain.

Someone drew a sword. "Not with that imbecile!" shouted Francesco.

He took a burning brand from the wall and pressed it against the spider's body. It leapt to the floor and scuttled away, the sword bit into the ground as the spider escaped through a crack in the wall. The bottom half of one of its legs was left twitching where the sword had struck.

The poison spread rapidly through Joaquim's bloodstream. "Send for Father Salamanga," whispered Francesco.

The priest returned, sandals flapping furiously, cassock ballooning out behind him as he ran.

Joaquim groaned, "Bless me Father, forgive my sins."

"Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini," said the priest, but his words fell on deaf ears. The body was in such seizure that even the final death rattle was prevented.

"Well that's one less to worry about," said Paddy.

Father Salamanga tipped water from his flask to his forefinger and drew the sign of the cross onto Joaquim's forehead. He followed the body out reading aloud from his Bible as the two guards dragged it by the feet, "You will all fall away because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'"

"What does he mean?" asked Davey.

"I reckon 'e's going to do the dirty on 'em lad. But the sooner this lot start knockin' each other off the better for us. The girl and Axa are the one's we need to worry about. There's only one chance we've got up till now and that's the old man. Nobody else knows who we are."

"Except maybe the Shaman. Should we have another look at the old man, he may have come round?"

"Aye, give it a go lad."

They flashed back to the small cell in which the old man lay.

"Yeah! He's startin' to wake up. Come on yer lazy old git. Get yerself up!"

The old man raised his hand to an excruciating pain in his left temple, he sat up, thinking about the things he had witnessed but it was all too much for his thoughts to comprehend.

"I must get out of this place," he cried. He moved to the door which creaked open to his pull. Crouching low to get under the doorway he stepped outside into a barely lit corridor. Torches flared along the walls dropping burning embers to the stone floor. He pulled a torch from a recess then started to walk. As he walked he remembered what had happened; his flight through the ether, the strange sights, the child and her father.

"He's looking for the girl and Axa!" said Davey.

"There's no way of tellin' what he's up to lad, the stuff he's had pumped into him I'd be surprised if he remembers who he is."

"No, he's looking for them, I'm sure of it."

Paddy chewed the side of his lip.

The old man travelled along corridors passing stern guards who did not look at him as he went by. He was in a labyrinthine maze with no way out. He walked for some time, then realising that he was possibly re-tracing his own steps he used his flaring torch to scorch and char an arrow against the side of the passageways. On he went marking his course but never once returning to anywhere he had marked. The size of the pyramid was immense with different levels of subterranean passageways woven into its structure.

"This place is massive, that old man can't have a clue where he is lad. He must be lost."

"He is lost. If he was looking for the girl he should have turned left at the start of this corridor, that would have taken him back towards the chamber of the snake, from there he'd be able to find them."

"But how do you know that lad?"

"I was just thinking how would I get there and the helmet showed me the best way. Hold on what's he doing now?"

"Look's like he's throwin' in the towel, he must have had enough."

The old man opened a door and moved into a cell, once inside he slumped to the floor. Like the other numerous cells it was totally bare. For some time they sat watching him, he sat without moving.

"Come on lad, leave 'im here. He's a waste of space."

"Wait Uncle Paddy, remember those images we saw when he was sitting with the Shaman?"

"Yeah."

"Well they were things he was thinking. How come we could see them?"

"Got me there lad."

"He's clever Uncle Paddy. He's up to something. Look, he's looking at something on the wall."

Davey leant forward and focused on the object. It was a big copper-coloured beetle.

"Yugh! It's a flippin' cockermouchy. They had them in the Chinese down the road. Took months to get rid of 'em. Them 'roaches is indestructible."

"You mean in Chowney's?"

"Yeah, that's the one, never ask for curried prawns in there lad," smiled Paddy.

"Uurgh Uncle Paddy! That's horrible."

"What's 'e doin' now?"

The old man jumped up from the floor and although the insect scuttled rapidly away he caught it and clamped his hand around it. Back to the centre of the cell he moved, still clutching hold of the struggling insect.

"What on earth's he up to? Don't tell me he's heard us and is feeling peckish?"

"Hush Uncle Paddy. It's something like that."

"What! You're kidding me. He's not goin' to eat the thing is he?"

"No, but there's something going on. I can feel what he's trying to do.... the insect is important."

"Well if you say so lad. Just looks like a 'roach to me."

"Watch Uncle Paddy. Something's going to happen!"

The old man used his teeth to rip a strip of cloth from his garment and carefully tied it tightly round the insect. He then lowered the insect to the floor, as soon as its feet touched it tried to scabble away.

"He's going to let it go. Watch where it goes!" exclaimed Davey.

"I know this is fascinating lad but wouldn't we be better off seeing what's happening with Lord Axa or the Shaman."

Again Davey hushed him into silence.

"There it goes!"

The old man opened his fingers, releasing the insect. In the same instant he pressed the palms of his hands against his eyes and pushed his middle fingers hard into his ears.

"He's gone flippin' nuts, I hope the flippin' roach bites his backside."

"Follow it Uncle Paddy!"

The insect ran behind the old man, darted to where the wall met the floor, then scuttled along it to the corner of the cell where it disappeared into one of the many cracks. All that showed was the strip of cloth.

"He wants us to tell him where it is!"

After a short time the old man removed his hands. He sat still, without opening his eyes, then pointed behind him at the corner where the insect had disappeared.

"He's got it! shouted Davey.

Paddy sat frowning chewing craters into his lip.

The old man turned round and smiled when he saw the strip of cloth. He carefully dragged the insect from the wall.

"Here we go again," sighed Paddy as he watched the old man return to sit in the middle of the cell. He released the insect in the same way as previously and clamped his hands in place.

The cockroach shot underneath the door out of the cell. Davey followed it along the passageway for a short distance before it was able to bury itself into a recess in the wall.

The door opened and the old man appeared.

"Watch Uncle Paddy, I'm letting him know where it is!"

The old man walked straight to the spot which Davey focused upon, retrieved the insect, then released the cloth which held it before setting it free.

"He did it!" cried Davey.

"Mind tellin' me what's 'appenin' lad? Or should I send for the fellers from the funny farm? Me skins crawling watching this."

"He knows we're here Uncle Paddy! He saw us in the mirror. This is fantastic! He knows that we know that he knows!"

Paddy interrupted, "Hang on the flippin' slack lad! get a grip of yerself. Tell me in plain flippin' English what the heck yer goin' on about!"

"He saw us in the mirror. He heard us asking him to help the girl. He knows we're here. He knows we're watching him. He's clever Uncle Paddy, he thought of using the insect to test us, to check if we can do anything to help him!"

"Hey this is good this, I see what yer gettin' at," said Paddy lifting his eyebrows, "Don't waste any time, show 'im how to get to the girl."

The old man turned round and walked back in the direction he had come from, on the wall he walked past a charred arrow he had drawn.

"SEE! I told him he was going the wrong way, now he's going back."

"You sure he's goin' the right way lad?"

"It's easy Uncle Paddy. I just ask and then I know."

"Be handy that thing in Jimmy Duffy's market. The time me mother wastes down there trying to find her way from stall to stall. I remember when me and yer old feller were workin' on the Queen Mary a feller got hiself lost in the hull. We could hear 'im bangin' his way round for two days, tryin' to find his way out. If he'd had that 'elmet he'd have been out in five minutes."

"We'll get him to look in the mirror Uncle Paddy then we might be able to help him some more."

The old man walked on down passageway after passageway, all identical, all leading nowhere. All cold, dark and frightening. A fierce looking guard appeared and questioned him. The old man made no attempt to reply but imposed his will upon the guard who swung back a block of stone, revealing a narrow passage.

Torchlight lit the way as the old man entered the passage, it quickly reduced in size so that he was forced to stoop. A stone snake stared at him, its fangs were barely wide enough for him to pass through but inside the snake he was able to stand up.

Flaring light showed up the carvings on the walls in stark relief. One look at the carvings convinced him that the things that had happened to him were not dreams but were real, the carvings matched his dreams.

He noticed that the flame of the torch were burning brighter, "The air in here should be still and weak," he thought. He placed the torch into various places around the chamber until he found a narrow opening set low into a wall, the slight draught which pulled the flames towards it told him that it must lead to the outside air.

He was about to leave but saw the flat, highly polished stone the Shaman had looked into resting against the wall. Within its depths something stirred. Carefully he picked up the stone and stared into it. Suddenly a vivid image presented itself, it was such an intense image that he almost dropped the stone in fright. It was Davey.

"I can see you," said Davey.

"I hear you," said the old man.

"We do not have much time, the girl must be saved," said Davey.

"Her soul cries out to be saved, take me to her that I may help." He returned the mirror to its resting place and crawled from the chamber.

"He's going to have to go past the room where all the skulls are," said Davey.

They watched as the old man crept past the chamber of the skulls. He was sickened by what he saw. It was a charnel house of the dead, the stench was unbearable but he kept on. The corridor he followed met another larger passageway. He could turn either to the right or to the left but the hair which raised itself upon the back of his neck told him that something not of this world was near. From a cell on the left side of the corridor he heard the harsh grating voices of the crystal skulls. He edged closer until he could hear more clearly.

The skulls spoke together of things he could understand;

"What of the Lord Axa?"

"He is to be tested at the stake before sacrifice, his fighting energy will be great but the testing will wear it down that we may absorb his soul more easily."

"What of the old man?"

"Is he not a god?"

"He has the *mark* upon his temple."

"Did he not travel the winds of the ether?"

"It is of no account, the helmet would have given any man the power to travel,"

"We must warn the Shaman of these things."

And they spoke together of things which he could not understand;

"What of the man encased in stone?"

"He bears the signs on his hands."

"Concentrate upon his future."

"The fates are becoming clearer, nothing can stand in the way of our domination, we must combine our powers, transform destiny and alter the fates to suit ourselves."

The old man did not dare to look through the doorway. Davey looked into the room.

The skulls were arranged into a semicircle on the floor, the helmet was placed before them.

They emitted a low humming sound as they concentrated their energies upon the helmet. The sound allowed them to release their energy which was so strong that light and sparks flickered from out of the doorway as the helmet became the hub for their evil powers.

The old man crept slowly away, he had heard enough. It would not be long before these things of evil discovered that he was just a man. He tried to pass down the corridor to the right but from another identical cell he heard voices, this time he recognised one of the voices, the voice was not those of the foul skulls and the Shaman. It was a Spanish voice, it was the voice of the priest.

"Father Salamanga," he whispered to himself as the realisation dawned upon him. He crept towards the cell door and listened to the priest.

"You must understand we come to deliver you, we are your gods returned but even the gods can become evil. I am not only a God but am also a holy man as you are, we can work together to rid ourselves of this evil, listen to me. The commander of the gods is going to steal your country from you, your wealth will soon be on ships sailing far away, the commander is going to murder your people and will take everything from you. He wants everything for himself, the Incas will cease to exist. The commander must be stopped, I can help you but you must listen to me."

The Shaman spoke, "It is hard for a man such as myself to understand these things of which you speak. I listen but I do not understand."

"Look at this!" the priest thrust out his crucifix towards the Shaman, "it is the sign of the God of all gods, it was on this same-shaped cross that the Son of God was crucified."

"Then where was his father?" asked the Shaman, "Why did he not protect his son?"

"His Father gave His son in sacrifice."

"It is the highest sacrifice when a father gives his child," agreed the Shaman.

"The Father of the son has stayed in the heavens above and sent us to earth to carry out his holy message. This sign is carried by me alone because I am his messenger."

"Can you fly the ether, and become an animal or insect? Can you carry out magic? Show me these things that I may witness your power," said the Shaman.

"My power rests in the hands of God the Father, he will not act when I command him, he is too great to be commanded by any lesser god. He will never show himself to anyone but He is with me at all times. He listens to me and answers me when I call."

"Then call this great God that I may hear him answer you," said the Shaman, an evil sneer curled his lips.

"Only I can hear his voice, he speaks only to me. You must believe me. I have come to warn you, tonight the commander plans to capture the nobles and elders, the celebration is a trap."

"It is good that you have told me of these things. I shall warn my people to be ready."

"Good, good, you must tell your men that I am to be left alone, that I will burn anyone in flames that comes near to me. You must tell them that this sign is my power," the priest held out his crucifix.

"I shall see to it that your holy power is protected by the leader of the guards, his name is Aquila," said the Shaman, "he shall carry out this task and shall then join those others who hold power and threaten the gods."

The two holy men sat still, staring at each other, the look in the Shaman's eye was like that of a wild animal whose life depends on its stealth and slyness in its hunt for food. The priest looked away from him.

"There is one other matter which needs to be resolved," said the Shaman, "within this temple a great noble leader and his child are held ready for sacrifice, their deaths must take place as soon as possible. While the noble is alive the warriors will always have someone to lead them. He is a danger to you and to me and must be eliminated."

"I understand you Shaman," said the priest, "this is why I have come to see you, the commander will not allow you to make anymore sacrifices to your God but you and I know it is something which must be done. Once the commander is taken care of there will be no problem with this."

"Before the sacrifice the man will be tested at the stake, if there is to be enough sun left for his testing today, we should take him from this place immediately," said the Shaman, "Come."

Sounds of movement sent the old man hurrying back along the passageway, running on shaky legs as fast as he could he stubbed out his torch against the wall only a moment before the Shaman walked from the cell. The Shaman walked with a slight limp, a toe had been sliced off, blood had congealed upon the stump. Concealed in darkness the old man shrank back against a wall.

The Shaman's eyes started to narrow to a slit and began to pierce the darkness. "Who is there?" he hissed.

The old man lowered himself to the floor and lay very still but something told him that the darkness would not be enough to hide him. It was the priest who inadvertently saved him, "What is it? What's wrong?" he asked, distracting the Shaman's attention for a moment and allowing the old man to crawl out of sight into a cell.

"Crikey lad, that was a close call. If yer really communycating with the old man then keep 'im well away from the Shyman. He's the flippin' devil in disguise he is."

"I'll do me best Uncle Paddy."

In darkness the old man followed the sound of the priest's sandals as they flapped along corridor and passageways, down stairways and over ramps he trailed until the sound of the echoing footsteps stopped. In fear he shrank back into a recess in the wall.

"It's okay Uncle Paddy, they're at the cell where Lord Axa and the girl are."

From within came the plaintive cries of the child.

The Shaman drew back a heavy wooden bar which bolted the door, then slowly pushed it open, the child within clung to her father, crying in her fear.

The priest looked fondly at the child, "There, there," he said, "do not cry child, it will all soon be over." Lord Axa returned his look with such fearsome hatred that he quickly stood up, "I see what you mean, this man is dangerous."

Fearing that they would return past him the old man moved from the recess and hid in a cell. To his good fortune as soon as the Shaman had slid home the wooden bar they continued along the corridor in the opposite direction. He lost no time in entering the cell.

"Go on lad. Get yerself in there," urged Paddy.

"Do not be afraid child," said the old man, "I am here to help you."

"Set me free," said Axa. His war costume had long since been ripped from him, under-nourished his body had weakened but the fire still burnt within his eyes.

"What have they done to you?" asked the old man realising the trapped man could not have been fed for many days. The realisation also dawned upon him that he himself must have slept in a dead sleep for a similar length of time.

Axa was held in place by a wooden block which was fastened to the wall by means of two thick wooden pegs hammered through it at either end. The old man took hold of each of the pegs in turn and used all his strength to try to turn them. They did not move even a fraction.

"Find something to use to withdraw the pegs," whispered Lord Axa.

There was nothing in the bare cell, the old man started to leave to search for anything that could be used but as he put his head into the corridor faint footsteps could be heard, it was the flapping of sandals.

"Take her! Take my child, quickly old man, protect her from harm," begged Lord Axa. The old man knew there was no other choice. He held his arms out towards the child, "Come now child. Follow me." But Chacuti clung fiercely onto her father, she would sooner die than leave him.

"Go my child. GO!" ordered Axa. She turned sorrowfully towards the old man but her legs were so weak she was unable to walk, the old man lifted her in his arms and carried her out of the cell.

Davey shot along the corridor and saw the Shaman and priest returning with two guards.

"Hurry up, they're coming!"
"Get out of there!"

"Where is the child?" snarled the Shaman at Lord Axa, "what trickery is this?"

He turned to the two guards, "Take him! I shall find the child!" His eyes cut like knives into the thoughts of the priest who visibly shrank with under the stare.

"I cannot understand how she has escaped," he protested his innocence.

Along pitch-black passageways the old man ran carrying Chacuti. He had a plan, as he ran he thought it through, "We cannot leave this place by any proper entrance, guards will surely be posted, I must return to my cell while this child must hide until I can fetch her and take her to a safe place." He felt her thin arms and legs, "Child you must hide, I know of somewhere you can stay until it becomes safe for me to fetch you. Can you do that?" he asked.

Chacuti knew her only chance of survival was to do whatever the old man told her, "My father has told me to be brave," she said.

When they came near to the chamber of the snake the old man walked into an empty cell and gently lowered her to the floor, "Stay here, I shall be but a moment."

He walked along the corridor and took a flaming brand from a wall, outside the entrance to the chamber stood the guard, "Do you come as a friend?" asked the guard.

The old man smashed him full force across the head with the torch. "No!" he said, as the jaguar guard fell dead at his feet. He dragged the guard back to where he had left Chacuti and left his body in the cell. Already in the distance cries of searchers echoed along the passageways.

The old man carried the child into the chamber. "See that hole child," he pointed out the hole in the wall, "that is where you must hide, you will be safe in there, no man could enter into such a confined space. Come now, crawl inside and you will be safe."

Chacuti had lost a lot of weight, her thin frame allowed her to wriggle into the hole and squirm her way along it for a short distance before her weakened state forced her to rest.

"That's it child, make your way up as far as you can, I shall come back for you when it is safe," he encouraged her. Then quickly he left the chamber and returned to his room. He had barely made it back before the door slowly opened. He knew better than to feign sleep to the Shaman.

Sitting up on his bed he groaned, "Where am I? What is this place?"

The Shaman stared furiously into the old man's eyes, his powerful evil mind searched for tell-tale thoughts. The old man knew what the Shaman was doing but just kept looking back at him with a puzzled look on his face, the clarity of his ice-blue eyes seemed to reflect the Shaman's thoughts back to him. Without needing to use any energy the old man began to win the contest of wills but just before the Shaman was forced to look away, the old man pretended that he could not withstand the Shaman's gaze and fell back onto his bed exhausted.

A guard appeared, the man looked terrified, "The child is nowhere to be found," he said but with a baffled look on his face added, "And yet she could not have left the temple."

The Shaman snarled, "Leave her! Take Lord Axa!"

"Blimey that was a close shave!"

"They'll get Lord Axa but the girl's safe."

"Don't count on that lad, that Shyman's such a sly number nothing's safe when he's around."

"I'll check she's alright Uncle Paddy."

"Right lad, the sooner she's out this bloody pit the better."

CHAPTER 18

Snake

Within the tunnel Chacuti felt a faint draught of air against her face. Resting frequently in her weakened state she managed to squirm further and further into the narrow space until it narrowed to such an extent that she found it difficult to move.

"There she is."

"Poor lassie, she looks done in."

"It's horrible in there Uncle Paddy."

"Aye lad but at least she's free. If the old man can get to her again he may be able to save her."

"I'll see what's happening to her dad."

Lord Axa was taken along a passageway, the temple guards who guided him were determined to soften him up, they kicked and punched him, knocked him to the ground then pulled him roughly to his feet dragging him half-conscious between them. The passageway wound its way underground for some time before it began to ascend by means of stone steps. At the top of the steps was a doorway that was flung open flooding the passage with light which blinded Axa and his guards.

More guards took hold of him and led him out into a small area, the area was to one side of the arena. As his eyes accustomed themselves to the light he could make out the crowd who were already watching a ball game in progress.

"So the murderers are arrived," he said as his eyes took in the Spaniards seated in tiers of seats overlooking the arena. The Spaniards were in seats of honour. They shouted and jeered as the costumed figures of Quetzalcoatl, Tlaloc, Huitzilapochtli and other gods walked into the arena.

Some of the men were drunk, "Look at the face on that one!" jeered one of the men to uproarious laughter from the other soldiers. The game began, one group of the costumed gods had to try to knock a small leather ball through a stone hoop set high onto the wall of the arena, another group opposed them. At first the Spaniards split their sides laughing at the figures so hampered by their elaborate costumes that they could hardly move but they soon tired of the spectacle and began jeering and yelling at the boring display. They wanted something they could relate to, they had expected far more than this.

"These aren't games they are a joke," said Francesco to the commander who sat alongside him.

"The losers will pay with their lives, up there," replied the commander pointing to the top of the temple.

Francesco insisted, "It adds a certain interest to the proceedings but I think the men will run riot unless something more appropriate is offered."

"I feel you are right Francesco," said the commander, "but I do not think the good Father would approve of anything more *interesting*." They looked around, "But if the good Father is not here to deliver us from evil...Sergeant, take a squad of our best pikemen and offer combat to these Incas."

The gods had requested the combat, the Incas had no choice but to accept. Young Tizoc was to be one of the combatants. "How can we fight against gods?" he and the other young men asked, "If we fight we are committing sin, if we do not we shall be killed."

The combat began but it was clear that the Incas were in no mind to fight.

"What kind of a poor show is this?" exclaimed the commander. He stood up and yelled, "STOP! Tell these men to fight as they have never fought before, the gods cannot be killed, if the body is destroyed they will just take another form. FIGHT like men!" he roared.

The Incas grouped together, battle-axes were their weapons, shields their defence. They looked magnificent in their jaguar costumes and finely toned physiques compared to the Spaniards whose defence was the armour they wore and their long pikestaffs. Twenty men opposed twenty men.

The Spaniards adopted a military square, five men to each side, and edged towards the Incas who rapidly spread out and surrounded them. Then began a fantastic game of cat-and-mouse, with the lighter armed and more mobile Incas running around, darting in and trying to strike the gods. The crowd was normally perfectly silent while the ball game was in progress but the Spaniards yells and encouragements for their men were copied by the Incas who cheered and yelled for their side, the idea of these strangers being gods was forgotten in the heat of the combat.

"I think we should see how Lady Axa is Uncle Paddy," said Davey.

Paddy was in no mood to leave the free-for-all, "Let's just see how these Inkers get on lad, I'm betting a pound to a penny they'll beat them Spaniards. That'll teach them wouldn't it."

"Just a quick look Uncle Paddy."

"Arr eh lad!"

Davey moved back, pulling their view high into the air, they looked down upon the arena, rapidly moving figures were dotted around the small defensive square. Over the main square they soared then zoomed in upon the palace.

Lady Axa was listening to the roars from the arena, they sounded frightening.

"What can be happening Uncle?" she asked, "is it Lord Axa, has the testing started?"

"I shall go and see my dear."

"Please be careful Aquila's men are rounding up anyone they suspect."

"She seems alright, I'll follow him back to the arena should I."

"May as well just go straight there lad." said Paddy eager to return to the fray.

"No, she said it's dangerous, I want to make sure he's alright."

Uncle Popacata made his way along deserted roadways, all the men were at the ball game, the women and children must remain indoors during the festivity. He came to a road which he knew he must cross but at one end roamed one of the large dogs of the gods, the animals were very fierce. The elder was not a very brave man nevertheless he prepared himself to dash across the street. "May the sun shine on me," he blessed himself hoping that the animal would not notice him, luck was with him. The dog spotted several small dogs hung outside a house ready for eating. It bounded across and leapt up at them, with a loud snap its teeth ripped one from where it hung.

Shaking the elder dashed across.

The area of the stake was overlooked by the arena. Lord Axa was already fastened to the stake by a thick cord which bit into his wrist, he was unable to see the games but could see the crowd and they could see him. From the corner of his eye he saw movement and wheeled round, "Popacata! Well done, what brings you here?" he laughed at the elder who was puffing and panting. Popacata was immediately heartened, how could Axa ever be defeated, his spirit was unconquerable. But seeing the cord which held him and how thin and weak he had become during his captivity, he realised that even Lord Axa would not be able to fight his way out of this one.

"Greetings my Lord Axa, what a fine day it is," joked the elder.

"It is a good day to die," said Axa with such seriousness that the elder lost no time in what he had to tell him.

First he looked anxiously around, "Where are the guards?"

Axa nodded with his head to where the guards stood on a parapet looking down at the battle below.

"They may return at any moment, I have much to say and to ask," said Popacata.

"Then speak away Uncle for I am in need of some pleasant conversation."

"Where is Chacuti?"

"Tell Lady Axa that she is safe, the old man, the man who bears the mark, has rescued her from the Shaman. I know she will be safe with him. I knew I could depend upon that man, the gods themselves are with him."

"She was to have walked the walk of death, Bonampak's brother learnt that the mountain-top the Shaman had chosen for her sacrifice was Acconcagua."

Lord Axa looked grim-faced.

Popacata continued, "These strangers are nought but vicious killers, travellers have told of the settlement which your quipu warned of."

"Then maybe the warriors will make a stand, you must warn them to be ready Uncle, I shall not be with them to help them but I have seen the holy man of these murderers, he has betrayed these false gods to the Shaman."

"Their own holy man has betrayed them?" repeated the elder, "then he is as wicked as the Shaman."

In the background Paddy and Davey could see the combat in the amphitheatre. Paddy urged Davey to take just a quick look.

The square of pikemen had cut off a section of the arena, within it three Inca warriors were trapped, while the other sides of the square fought off any help for them the square closed on the trapped warriors and butchered them.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" cheered the Spaniards as each man met his death.

The loss of the men provoked the warriors who were watching to scream at their men in the arena, "Fight! Fight and Kill! You are warriors!"

The Incas felt the lust of battle grow in them, Tizoc and another brave young warrior ran quickly towards the square, they darted to one side of the pikes at the last moment before the razor sharp axes sheared into them then seized hold of the shaft of one of the great weapons. Before the men in the square had time to move forwards to spear them they had dragged the pike and the man holding grimly onto it into the open. The man was swiftly set upon.

The square quickly closed up to fill the gap. The death of the Spaniard seemed to inspire the warriors, they now knew that they could kill, the blood-lust stopped them caring whether the god returned in another body or not. They simply wanted blood.

The square tried the same tactic of cutting off a section of the arena. The Incas were wary of the trap, they charged the square in a feint attack, three warriors ran forward but just before they were impaled upon the axe heads they veered off, the pikemen could not help their instincts but naturally followed the attackers by moving the pikes to one side. This gave other warriors the opportunity to rush in past the axe heads. Pikes had to be dropped in favour of short swords, a number of individual battles began to take place. Urged on by the shouts of the sergeant, "REFORM

or DIE!" All but five of the pikemen managed to beat off the attack and reform a square. The men outside its security were no match for the Incas whose razor sharp clubs quickly defeated the short swords.

"You alright watching this lad? Not too rough for yer is it?"

Uncle Paddy was becoming as incensed as the crowd. Davey looked towards Francesco. He was issuing orders.

"Tell the musketeers to line up ready on that low wall, at my signal unload a volley into the crowd, *we'll* take care of their friends down there," he withdrew his long fighting sword from its scabbard.

"You know what they say lad, if yer can't stand the heat don't go in the kitchen. These fellers are gettin' a taste of their own medicine."

The men in the square fought ferociously, what they had imagined would be an easy victory when they first paraded around the arena had become a life or death struggle. They stopped responding to the false attacks and stood firm ready to sell their lives dearly.

"On my order," shouted the sergeant-at-arms, "Pick your man. Ready. ATTACK!" the pikemen exploded from the square charging after the Incas who scattered but not before several of them were left for dead or put out the fight from wounds inflicted by the axe-heads.

The Incas were unable to shake the defences of the square again. The men in it knew that to falter was to die. "Draw swords. Ready. ATTACK!" screamed the sergeant.

The variation again surprised the Incas, more bodies were hewn to the ground. The pikemen ran back to the safety of their pikes before their opponents had time to recover.

Davey spotted Father Salamanga returning.

"Eh up, here comes trouble," said Paddy.

"What is this!" shouted the priest at the commander, "This is like some sick parody of the Roman games, the early Christian martyrs gave their lives to end such diabolic contests. I demand that you call a halt to these proceedings at once."

The commander waited until an individual battle between a Spaniard and an Inca ended with the life of the Inca.

"Give the order Francesco," he said reluctantly.

The spectacle was brought to a finish by a loud trumpet blast. The square reformed into two files and marched smartly out of the arena over comrades and foes alike.

"You should be ashamed of yourself Commander," said the priest, "I shall report this matter."

"With respect Holy Father I feel your report, **if** it reaches the authorities, will be of little interest to them. We are in a war situation here. I wanted my men to appreciate and feel the measure of the Incas. We have done that I think, have we not Francesco?"

Desperate to win the commanders confidence, Francesco agreed, "Of course Sir, this has been an excellent introduction to the men."

The priest decided to play the matter down. "It is of no significance, I understand your motives, I am not a military man such as yourselves but now you have acquainted me with the circumstances I accept your explanations."

"Thank you for your indulgence Father I shall attend Holy Mass this evening and confess myself," said the commander.

"Forgiveness will be granted you my son," said the priest, "It was an affair of men not an affair of state which caused my disapproval. Take the man over yonder," the priest pointed down to where Lord Axa stood, "The Incas wish to punish this man who has acted against their state. I feel that until we have converted them from their savage ways to that of the true gospel then we should show charity to them. Was not Christ (he crossed himself) put on trial by his own people? Who are we to deny these people their own simple justice until they come to God."

"You have sound judgment Father," said the commander but his thoughts were instantly suspicious of the priest's motives, "Let the Incas carry out their punishment."

Popacata stood at the warriors side urging him, "Lie down at the first knock Axa, do not give them the satisfaction of beating you to a pulp, save your strength." However he knew that his words were wasted on the fighting man who laughed at the suggestion.

"Hurry off Uncle, tell my wife Chacuti is free and will soon be returned to her. Tell the warriors faithful to me that I shall live to fight again, I can feel the strength in my spirit, I swear I shall live to spill the blood of these false gods, I can taste it on my lips." He ran his tongue across them "Listen Popacata," he said intently, "my wife and children must hide, they are my only weakness, when they are safe from the Shaman I am my own man and know no fear."

Take them, hide them in the hidden city, tell my men they must be ready to defend themselves to the last, there will be no escape from these false gods. The Incas will surely perish. Only in the hidden city can we survive to live out our lives."

"I shall do as you bid, may Inti shine upon you," called Popacata as he left Axa to his fate.

"idden city? Maybe we should 'ave a scout round lad, see if we can find it."

"Let's see what happens here first Uncle Paddy."

Four fiercesomely dressed warriors presented themselves before the man tied to the stake. The eagle feathers tied to their headdresses showed the number of captives they had taken in battle and told of their skill.

Axa knew the men. One of them was loyal to him but the others would fight to defeat him, with one hand tied to the stake it could only be a matter of time until he was beaten.

"It is a fine day my Lord," the loyal warrior greeted Axa, "say the word and I shall cave in the skulls of these dogs."

"This matter must be settled my friend," said Axa, "after your first blow show me the side of your head that I may knock you cold, you or your family would be punished by that dog Aquila if you do not seem to fight."

In the background stood the leader of the guards, he was as cold and uncaring as ever, he just stood still, icily taking in everything around him.

"It shall be as you wish my Lord," said the warrior.

Both Axa and the first warrior he was to be tested against were given clubs which had had their razor sharp blades removed. The warrior had a small shield in his other hand with which he could defend himself, he also had the freedom to move at will around the man tied to the stake.

"Come on, do not be so afraid," chided Axa to the man.

"I shall come when I am ready, then you shall feel the power of my arm," replied the warrior.

Suddenly the warrior darted in and hit Axa in the side, he made no attempt to stop the blow but tensed his muscles until they were as hard as rock, the blow hurt him but by taking it he had drawn the warrior into a position where he could strike. He hit him so hard across the base of the neck that the warrior was dead before he hit the floor.

"YAAGH!" he shouted his victory cry so loud that it echoed around the arena. The cry silenced the jeers and calls from the Spaniards.

"It seems like this chap is not so keen to accept his punishment," said Francesco to the commander but loud enough so the priest would hear him.

The fallen man was dragged away by two helpers who apprehensively eyed Lord Axa's club waving slowly backwards and forwards.

The second warrior was more wary, what he had witnessed made him especially cautious. He circled round the tied man who waited, relaxed, with an almost curious expression on his face as he slowly followed him round in a circle.

"This is not a game of touch-chase Quito," said Axa, "let us come to blows as real men, see, even the gods grow impatient," he waved his club towards where a low booing and hissing was starting to come from the crowd.

Quito was not to be hurried. Axa stopped following him in circles and stood stone still, even when his opponent walked behind him he did not turn but stood facing the crowd.

The Spaniards were impressed, "He's either very brave or very stupid," remarked Carlos.

Quito had lost his nerve, he ran in weakly swinging his club. Axa dispatched him with a blow to the forehead, again his victory cry rang out.

This time the helpers would not go near to the fallen man until Axa had moved to the other side of the circle. They quickly dragged him away.

The Spaniards began to chant, "PANCHO! PANCHO!" over and over.

The commander decided that it would be a good idea, "Sergeant, choose your best swordsman, this fellow needs to feel the hand of the gods!"

A trumpet blew so that proceedings at the stake were brought to a temporary halt. Aquila and Lord Axa looked at each other with total enmity glaring from their eyes. "I await the time you may feel the strength of my arm you cowardly dog," said Axa, "may you soon join your friends in hell."

Aquila did not respond but just stared back with a slight smirk on his face.

The Spaniard appeared, he was covered from head-to-foot in armour. So much armour had been lent to him from his comrades that he was like a knight of old. Shoulders, shins, head and hands all were weighed down in metal plate. Axa had seen the strength of this metal before, he knew he would have to hit the man in the unguarded areas. The

man did not hesitate, he was a big, powerful soldier who had been the winner of many a brawl, Axa struck towards his face but the Spaniard raised his arm and the blow glanced off the metal plate which covered it. He struck low and hard, hitting Axa on the side of his knee, the blow numbed his leg. Recovering Axa used his club to ward off a second blow which would have decapitated him and then used the butt end of his club to jab into the man's mouth.

"First blood to the Inca, I would say," said the commander.

"Yes but it will not stop Pancho," said Francesco, "I've seen him in action before."

The contest was unequal, freed from his restriction Axa may have been able to make a fight of it but as the contest wore on it was obvious that he was beginning to take punishment. A nasty gash to an eyebrow poured blood into his eyes reducing his vision.

Through obscured eyes Axa saw Aquila's smirk break into a mocking grin. Axa's temper exploded and he struck towards his opponent hitting him on the hand. The man dropped his club but at the same time punched towards Axa's head with an armoured fist, Axa saw it coming but in his weakened state was unable to ward off the blow, it hit him hard on the temple.

A great cheer went up from the crowd, Axa started to stagger, the wave of unconsciousness could not be stopped, a further blow was unneeded and unfelt as he fell full length to the floor.

"PANCHO! PANCHO! PANCHO!" yelled the Spaniards.

Battered, bruised and senseless Lord Axa was dragged from the circle. Down the stone steps the helpers descended pulling him by his feet, then along passageways until they reached his cell.

"This is gettin' beyond a joke lad. Move it all forwards, I want to see if he survives."

"First we've got to see how the girl is Uncle Paddy."

They heard a great shout which echoed throughout the temple.

"What the heck was that?"

"IT IS I WHO SEEKS YOU! IT IS I WHO SHALL FIND YOU," roared the Shaman. The shout had a horrible hissing quality to it. As they looked closer they could see why. Only his head and forearms had yet to be absorbed into the body of the snake, his split tongue flickered in and out.

His head poised itself before the hole in the wall of the cell, the tongue scented the air wafting along the shafts. A look of comprehension passed through the remains of his face before it became totally reptilian and without expression.

The snake entered the tunnelways, its huge mass filled every space as its muscles propelled it forwards. The scaly scratch its skin made as its scales gripped the sides of the tunnel echoed horribly.

"Jesus Christ Davey!"

"Chacuti!"

Powerless to do anything they sat and watched.

On a slightly angled stretch of the narrow shafts lay Chacuti. The stones she lay upon were cold and damp, there was a sweet and sickly smell to them, she told herself not to even begin to think what could cause such a smell. It was of no matter, whatever her condition she was free, the old man would return for her and save her, but then she heard a sound. Onto a grazed elbow she raised her tired body, slowly turning her head from side to side as her keen ears sought to pick out the sound from the total silence.

No, it had not been her imagination, there was a sound, her tiredness was forgotten as her mind sprang into total alertness. Something about the sound terrified her as her instincts took control over her. Quickly she began to move back down to the chamber of the snake hoping that it was the old man returning but when no encouraging cry came and knowing that to go back down into the maze of passageways would mean certain capture, she had no choice but to crawl higher.

She felt her way forwards in the pitch darkness with a hand outstretched until she reached a position where the shaft forked to left and right, there she stopped and listened intently. It seemed the sound was greater in the shaft to the right. She struggled into the tunnel to the left and hurried on, already her knees and elbows were rubbed raw by the unyielding stone, the tunnels continued to rise but were slippery, at one point she slid back and only by pressing herself into the sides of the shaft was she able to make any headway.

The increase in volume of the sound which seemed to fill the dank air all around her told her that whatever it was, moving in the tunnels, was getting closer. She knew no man could hope to follow through these thin shafts. "What can it be?" she cried to herself. As she slipped yet again a low sob escaped her lips, she knew it was a mistake. The

faint cry echoed and bounced along the tunnel walls, weakening as it went until it became inaudible to any human ears but the snake paused as it linked the sound to the vibrations of movement it felt through its skin.

Chacuti's sixth sense told her that she must lie still and quiet if she was to survive. She stopped moving and lay perfectly motionless barely daring to breathe. Her mind was screaming in fear but nothing betrayed this fact except that her eyes had widened to their fullest. The total silence thumped in her ears, her heart pounded as loudly as the sound. She had no doubts now, she was being hunted.

The snake stopped moving, it had glided onwards almost unconsciously, stopping only to locate the position of its prey as its refined senses picked out the faintest vibrations. But now nothing was received, no sound was picked up, nothing was felt. The snake stopped and lay still, flicking its forked tongue in all directions, tasting the air, seeking the faintest vibrations.

Chacuti grasped at the hope that she could escape and rushed onwards but the rasping, panting sound filtered into the silence around her, faintly at first but then clearly, she became panicky but remembering something her father had once told her *"when a man panics all is lost"* she halted and fought to control her fear. As she listened intently the sound following her stopped.

"It listens to me!" she realised, "As I listen for it, so it listens for me."

"Flippin' heck lad. Get to the old man an' see if yer can get 'im to come an' help!"

Instantly they were back in the cell with the old man. Davey stared intently at him, he rose and walked from the cell guided towards the chamber of the snake.

"Well done son, now he's on his way, get back an' see what's goin' on."

"Will he be in time Uncle Paddy?"

The child was lying still and quiet, when she heard the snake move she scrambled forwards, outstretched hands sought turn-offs in the shafts which she quickly entered not caring where she went only seeking to lose whatever followed her in the maze.

The snake found it difficult to gain ground on its prey which only moved when it moved but the evil mind of the Shaman knew the labyrinth. By cutting off twists and turns taken by the child the huge mass of the animal was able to steadily reduce the distance between itself and its prey.

Suddenly the snake surged forwards, the child heard its sound growing louder and louder until in the pitch darkness she was unable to control her panic and screamed. The scream shattered the silence, it penetrated the darkest depths of the temple so that in the passageways and corridors guards paused and listened.

The old man also heard the sound, he knew it must be the child, he knew that only the Shaman could have discovered her hiding place. He started to run.

"This is terrible lad. I can't stand it," said Paddy, *"yer goin' to have to carry on without me for a bit."* He lay back upon his bed. Sweat stood out on his brow.

The old man was nearing the chamber of the snake but he realised that the child was now so far away within the depths of the stone mass of the temple that there was little chance of her returning to that particular point.

"The old man's stopping Uncle Paddy, I reckon we should get him to go to the chamber of the skulls. That's where the Shaman will head for."

Paddy made no attempt to reply.

The sound following Chacuti had stopped. In her terror she had lost all her strength but the sound was no longer behind her. Her scream had covered the movements of the reptile which had darted off into a side-shaft only to return, stealthily and silently, dropping down towards her scale by scale. With its ability to perceive the victim's heat the snake was able to pierce the darkness until it sensed the child only a lunge away. Its tongue tasted her scent.

Scale by scale it extended its length towards her.

The tiniest of scratches was heard by the child immediately above her, she looked slowly up and saw the snake's eyes, two faint points of light. The terror which freezes the victim and shields it from its fate, aided by the hypnotic stare of those eyes, froze the child into a deep state of torpor.

The lower jaw of the snake dislocated itself, the snake moved towards her.

"What's 'appenin' now lad?"

Davey was unable to answer, the sight before him had shocked him into silence.

Paddy struggled towards him and lifted the helmet from his head. The images faded but Davey was unable to snap out of his shock.

"Get a grip there little feller," said Paddy, "Come on now pull yerself together."

Davey managed to turn away from the mirror. "It was terrible Uncle Paddy. It got her."

Paddy nodded sadly, "I could see sommat like that comin' up. I've seen too much in my time lad, there's only so many fights in a fighter an' I reckon I must have had me lot. You'll get over it, that's just one knocked off yer scoresheet. Question is, now what are we goin' to do?" He sat drumming away on his chess-board with the tips of his fingers. "If yer could get in there lad an' slit that things belly open yer might be able to save 'er. Get hold of this." Paddy forced his razor into Davey's hand, "Now have another go. Even if you can't get in, if yer can pass that to the old man he can do the job for us."

"It's no use trying Uncle Paddy. We can see what's goin on but we can't ever get in there. How could we, I mean it's in the past and this is now."

"Give it just one more go for me lad," urged Paddy.

Again Davey pressed against he mirror it resisted his efforts, he tried pushing the razor through the glass but it was no use. The images were reforming and revealing themselves as he sat back down and removed the helmet..

"Never mind, yer tried," said Paddy.

"Hang on Uncle Paddy, she can't die! Not yet anyhow!" exclaimed Davey.

"What yer sayin' lad?"

"Well I've seen her in Carnatic, and she's older, if she was dead now she couldn't have grown older could she!"

"Yer right there lad. Must be like Jonah in the belly of the whale!"

"And there's another thing, when I was talking to her in Carnatic, she told me that she'd seen me before, that she recognised me. How could she have if she dies now? She hasn't seen me has she?"

"No, she hasn't lad, yer right. One thing's puzzlin' me about what yer saying though," he paused and chewed on his lip as he tried to put his thoughts into words. "She told you that she'd seen you before, we know that she can't have seen you up till now so when she sees you must be in the future, we haven't got there yet so how can it have happened?"

Davey didn't even try to answer the question, Paddy answered it himself, "This lot's doin' me head in!"

Davey returned to their present predicament, "I reckon we need to get the old man into the chamber of the skulls Uncle Paddy. It's there that the Shaman will head for."

"An' as soon as the Shyman shows is ugly head. Wham! yer man lops it off!"

"Just one problem with that Uncle Paddy."

"What?"

"The old man doesn't know the snake's got her. In fact he doesn't even know about the snake."

"Then he's in for a bit of shock isn't he!"

Davey replaced his helmet.

CHAPTER 19

The Temple

"Hold it Davey boy. I reckon we're goin' to need to know a lot more about what's happening here if we're going to be of any use, what do yer say we keep the old guy moving towards the snake, but we'll have a look around."

Davey's answer was to shift back away from the mirror.

"Right lad, that's it, that's far enough back. Now give everyone the once over. If there's owt goin' on let's check it out."

"I'll start in the palace Uncle Paddy."

"It's as good a place as any lad."

They swept in through the balcony window into Lady Axa' quarters.

"Where is everybody?" asked Paddy.

The rooms were deserted, nobody remained.

"Maybe these flippin' Spaniards moved in and got 'em? Check the walls and doors lads, see if there's any signs of a struggle."

Davey examined the dividing walls and the barricaded doors but nothing was out of place.

"Hold on Uncle Paddy I remember, Lord Axa told Popacata to take them to the hidden city didn't he."

"Well done lad, I'd forgotten all about that, that flippin' snake'd make yer forget yer own name, yer right, that's were they've gone. Thank God they're out the way."

"Should I catch up to them?"

"Whiles we're 'ere check out these Spanish, sommat's brewing that's for sure."

They moved through the dividing walls and watched the nobles and elders entering the section of the palace occupied by the 'gods'. The guests wore their finest garments; colourful, beautifully woven cloths and feathers from the rarest birds adorned their bodies, their most precious jewellery decorated their limbs.

Davey continued to search around and spotted the last minute preparations for the capture of the nobles.

Troops stood to attention ready for inspection, all wore their full armour. The concealment of weapons was checked so that nothing might betray their sinister motives. As the men marched along a magnificent hallway into the great hall they were checked by officers for anything that might give away the weapons they carried.

The great hall had been decorated with beautiful paintings: artists had worked long days preparing works of art, from wooden beams which spanned the hall hung beautiful tapestries woven specially for the occasion; high above the beams the roof arched upwards, it was covered with thin leaves of gold which reflected the burning lights.

Bugles and drums thumped and blared out a battle song as the Spaniards entered the great hall.

"There's the priest!"

Father Salamanga studied watched the troops march into the hall, his eyes picked out the tell-tale signs of concealed weapons; a sword pommel protruded from a loosely tied robe, a knife scabbard poked through a man's trousers, in the corner of the room resting against the walls stood heaps of pikestuffs, he grinned to himself when he thought of the surprise the commander would be in for. The Incas would be first to strike, the Shaman had said he would warn his people. He moved nearer to Aquila, if the commander suspected anything he might need the protection of this warrior and it would not pay to get in the way of the Incas when they started, they had shown their fierceness in the arena.

He turned and looked at Aquila, Aquila returned his look with his sneering half-smile. Something about the smile unsettled the priest, he quickly looked towards the Inca nobles and elders. His eyes scanned their costumes, their clothes were worn to show their bodies off, not like the Spanish clothes which hid the wearer. He realised with a shock that they could not be carrying any weapons there was simply nowhere they could be hidden.

Realising that he had been outwitted the priest yelled a warning to the Incas. The urgency in his shout caused every head in the hall to turn towards him. He stepped forwards and started to speak but what he intended to say was never known, Aquila carried out his orders. Removing a short spear from beneath his cloak of feathers he strode towards the priest and speared him in the side.

As Aquila withdrew his spear and allowed the mortally wounded body to fall to the floor there was a deathly silence. Father Salamanga cried out, "They shall look upon Him whom they have pierced," and turning towards his murderer said, "fool, your master has already condemned you...."

Francesco's shout of, "To arms!" was followed by yells of "Attack!" and "No Mercy!" which rang out as men shouted their battle cries and flung off the clothing revealing their weapons. Swords and daggers were dragged free, the doors to the hall were slammed shut and barred.

The scene was set for a massacre.

Francesco realised the mistake - without the nobles in their power they would have nothing to bargain with - but his cries were unheeded as he sought to call a halt to the slaughter.

Swords and axes were swung in fury.

Francesco determined that Aquila should die by his hand, he yelled his name, "AQUILA!" and charged through the mêlée, a desperate attack from an unarmed Inca nobleman prevented him from carrying out his intention. He slashed his attacker to the floor.

The assassin had planned his escape. Hurling his short spear into the body of a Spaniard who threatened him he ran to the pikestuffs, seized one of them and rested it against a beam high above the floor, swiftly he climbed up. Even as he reached comparative safety the scenes below him were unspeakable. He lifted up the pikestaff and used it to balance himself as he walked across the beam to a point where the vaulted roof was not so high.

Men occupied with the life and death struggles below paid no attention to him.

When he reached the far wall he swung the heavy pikestaff into a vertical position and began stabbing upwards with it into the roof, quickly a hole was formed. He was about to make good his escape but beneath him he saw Francesco. A horrible smirk crossed the Aquila's mouth as he lowered the butt-end of the pikestaff towards the man on the floor. With hands cupped around his mouth Francesco was shouting out, trying to call a halt to the bloodshed. The butt-end wavered for an instant before lining up on its target, then Aquila plunged the pikestaff downwards with all his force.

Francesco fell pole-axed to the floor, the men near to him looked up and saw Aquila, "Pikes!" they yelled seeing that he was out of reach of their swords. One man threw a dagger it but Aquila lowered his shoulder and dodged to one side, the weapon buried itself into the beams above his head.

Swiftly swinging the pikestaff through his hands he rested its butt end upon the beam then began climbing upwards along its length.

Pikes were brought and thrust up towards him but he was already too high, with surprising agility for a man of his size he disappeared through the hole in the roof and hauled the cumbersome weapon after him. As soon as he was outside he placed the axe-head between two stone columns and snapped the axe-head from the unwieldy shaft, armed with the murderous weapon he began to climb down.

"This feller's dangerous Davey," said Paddy watching Aquila descend like a great cat.

"But he knows now that the Shaman will kill him as well, surely he won't still keep trying to help him?"

"Yer just don't know what makes people like him tick lad. One thing for sure if 'im and Axa ever meet up it'll be blue bloody murder but not of this helps us to sort out that snake."

"I'll go back into the temple Uncle Paddy."

The noise and yells of the murderous battle in the great hall was in stark contrast to the total silence inside the temple.

"Well done lad, yer man's got the message, look, he's goin' in with the skulls," he patted Davey on the back.

"Who is there?" asked one of the skulls.

The old man did not answer.

"There is someone near," said the skull, "I sense a presence."

"It is he who bears the mark," said another skull, "What do you want from us?" it rasped in its unearthly voice.

The old man asked, "Who are you? What do you wait for?"

"You know all the answers to these questions," said a skull, "you have dreamt the dreams, you have flown the ether."

"I have seen strange things, things that I do not understand," said the old man.

"You have flown the winds, you have worn the helmet of power, *think* and you shall know," replied a skull.

From a hole near to the floor the old man heard a scraping sound.

"The Shaman returns," said a skull, "stay that we may answer your questions together."

"It's the flippin' snake lad, and yer man ain't got so much as a flamin' penknife. I can't look."

The old man moved behind one of the large blocks of stone. The scraping sound grew louder until the head of the snake appeared. "Do you have her?" rasped a skull.

The serpent hissed, "I have her." Coil after coil of the reptile fell into the room, the old man's heart missed a beat when he saw a lump in the otherwise smooth lines of the snake.

"I don't believe it lad, this is 'orrible. The old man's got the message, look at 'im."

The old man was searching round for a weapon, anything to use upon the animal. The lump began to move. Muscles contracted as they flowed along its length, forcing the lump towards its mouth. The old man stood staring, too shocked to move, it was clear from the shape what was to be released from the foul incarceration.

She was not dead, the old man could tell that, "Thank the Lord," he thought to himself. He had seen someone fall into the sea in winter and after being rescued they had the same appearance; frozen to the bone, their skin hanging in thousands of little folds as though it were about to become as liquid as the water which had surrounded it.

His temper began to rise in him, like a white hot knife it seared into him, he looked down at the child lying in a huddle, he looked back at the snake. Its face and head were deforming, the face of the Shaman was taking shape. Soon tiny arms began to appear through the skin near to its head.

"This is not the way of men," shouted the old man stepping out from the safety of the stone blocks.

"What's he doing! He's given himself away! The Shyman'll have him no bother."

The Shaman turned towards him but it was a skull which spoke. "It is the way of the *Shamen*. Have you not seen!" The stone grey eyes of the snake looked at him, unfeeling, blank, without emotion. The old man shouted, "I have seen much I do not understand but of this I am sure, this child has hurt no-one, she is an innocent, to treat her thus can only be wrong in the eyes of God!"

"He has *seen* but does not understand," sang several skulls.

The old man walked towards the snake, the upper body of the Shaman had formed, the sinewy arms and talons of the Shaman were held up threateningly but the serpent's great tail still trailed across the floor. The Shaman raised his upper-body from the ground, his long forked tongue flicked back and forth towards the old man.

"Release this child or this foul creation will be shattered into a thousand pieces," said the old man, he took hold of a crystal skull a crystal skull and held it above his head.

The skull spat, "Beware my power, it cannot be dissolved, destroy me and I shall be absorbed into you."

In and out flicked the Shaman's tongue as he hissed, "We are eternal, the deaths of countless thousands preserve us, you carry the mark. Become one with us." As he spoke he slowly curled one of his coils beneath his body.

The old man's answer was to drop the skull into his other hand. His action caused the Shaman to spring at him, he moved so quickly that he surprised the old man and was able to take hold of the skull, his other hand gripped the old man's wrist. They struggled backwards and forwards but the Shaman had the animal strength of the snake, the old man's right hand pushed hard against the top of the Shaman's head in an effort to force him away.

"He bears the horns of the Devil!" cried the old man.

The shock of feeling the two boney projections piercing through the Shaman's skull caused him to lose his strength, the Shaman quickly overpowered him. The tail of the snake slid across the floor and curled its way around and behind him. When three such turns were completed the animal tightened its body. The old man was suddenly held rigid. It was impossible for him to move, the strength of the animal was enormous. Its sinews and muscles contracted so fiercely that they dug into his arms; breathing became difficult, blood was forced away from his heart, his lungs ceased to move. Soon he must suffocate.

"Perhaps now you will learn the truth of our power," said the Shaman. His eyes were taking human form, the thin slits of his pupils were shrinking back into round, dark black holes.

"The knife. Kill him with the knife," chanted the skulls, "he has been sent by the Gods to bring us untold power, the knife will release his soul and energy to us. Our work will be complete!"

Propelled by the thick body of the reptile the Shaman crossed over the floor to the bench upon which lay the sacrificial dagger, his arms were recovered but they were no longer needed to control the old man whose eyes were being forced from his head by the pressure, death was but a moment away. The Shaman took up the ugly jewelled weapon and turned towards his victim, as he raised the dagger a skull rasped a warning, "The child is...."

Chacuti smashed the skull she carried to the floor with all the remaining strength that she could find, it shattered into numerous pieces. An instant after it had fragmented a thunder clap and simultaneous echo were heard. Chacuti immediately felt stronger, she leapt towards another skull, the Shaman had barely had time to think but the body of the snake flung him towards the child, his hands with their talon-like nails dug towards her.

"KEEP BACK!" she screamed picking up the skull. She was quick, very quick, she moved with a speed which she had not ever known before. Her warning was not heeded, the Shaman darted in towards her forcing her to turn away and ran towards a corner of the cell.

"She's trapped herself!" cried Davey.

Without pausing Chacuti jumped up onto the wall and ran up to the ceiling, still clutching the skull in her hand she crawled rapidly across the cell above the Shaman. His talons lashed up at her but she eluded them and ran back down near to the door. She could have ran out but instead chose to stay and help the old man. "Let him go free," she said raising the skull. Her movements made clear her threat to smash it.

The Shaman slowly uncoiled, allowing the old man to fall to the floor, as soon as his chest was freed from restriction he began pulling in great lungfuls of air and slowly started to recover. Chacuti picked up another skull in her other hand, lightly she tapped them both together. The crystals made a strange sound as they clashed against each other.

The skulls hissed and spat, they urged the Shaman to attack. "The knife will recover the power, kill her, she is nothing. KILL HER!"

The Shaman hesitated, he could see the quickness with which the child moved. She was a threat to the work of centuries. "Your father is well," said the Shaman, "you would like to see him wouldn't you child?"

Her answer was to clash the skulls against each other a little harder.

"I warn you, stay away from me!" she shouted.

The Shaman moved slightly back from her but his eyes were narrowing into slits, within moments, perhaps because half of his body was still reptilian, they frosted over into the eyes of the snake. They transfixed Chacuti, she could see the eyes clearly, piercing into her thoughts, reading her mind, holding her still against her will.

"Look away lassie!" Paddy was bouncing upon the bed.

Chacuti sank into a deep trance.

Whilst the attention of the Shaman was upon the child the old man had moved, he had crawled slowly to the table and pulled himself to his feet, the skulls cried out in alarm when they felt the helmet being lifted, but it was too late, onto his head he placed it.

"I SEE THE SECRETS OF LIFE!" yelled the old man. Into his mind flooded images which astonished and bewitched him, into his body flowed the strength of the helmet.

"He *sees*!" screamed the skulls, "He knows!"

"I can hear him!" cried Davey. *"I know what he is thinking. The helmet's letting him talk to me!"*

The Shaman leapt at the old man faster than the human eye could take in, he struck him full force in the chest with both fists. Although the fists hit him with a force which ought to have caved in his rib-cage, the old man did not even seem to feel the blow. He walked past the Shaman who again tried unsuccessfully to hurt him, again the old man ignored him as if he did not exist until he reached the girl. As soon as he laid his hand upon her she snapped out of the trance. She clashed the two skulls together.

"Careful child, take care not to break them, they are an evil power. Come, we shall find your father." He took hold of her shoulder and steered her out of the cell.

"Follow him! You must get back the helmet. It is the key!" yelled one of the remaining four skulls which sat upon the blocks.

"They must not leave the temple!" hissed one of the skulls which Chacuti carried.

She smashed the skull to the floor, again a deep thunder-clap and echo sounded. Chacuti leapt to one side and snatched another skull from its block.

"NO CHILD!" shouted the old man, "Their energy cannot be dissolved, it will enter into you! Come, we must leave this foul place!"

They walked along corridors pursued by the Shaman who spat spells and snarled incantations but they were wasted, nothing he could do affected them. He tried to attack the child but his force was not felt, she walked undisturbed within the bubble of protection which the old man's body extended around itself.

"We shall get your father child," said the old man softly to the girl. She walked beside him as if in a trance, a pathetically skinny figure with the two crystals held at the end of her thin arms.

The Shaman slithered after them on the body of the snake, watching for the old man to make the slightest mistake.

A guard barred the doorway to Axa's cell, he raised his club and swung it fiercely at the old man's head, the club shot backwards out of his hands. The power around the old man forced him to back away. "I cannot stop him!" he shouted to the Shaman.

The Shaman did not reply. The body of the snake had left him now, only the tongue still betrayed it, he stood with his hands held like claws, his hooked talons curving viciously towards the child.

Without unbarring the door the old man pushed open the cell door, it hit the wall inside so forcefully that it was torn from its hinges. Lord Axa was battered and bloodied but his spirit was still with him, "What kept you old man?" he said. The old man knelt down and seized the wooden pegs which held him within the wooden block. The pegs flew from the holes with the same force with which they had been hammered home.

"Let's get you out of here," he helped Lord Axa to his feet, the warriors legs were quite numb.

"Father!" cried Chacuti, "It is I."

Lord Axa smiled weakly at her.

Outside the cell door the Shaman stood, watching them only the guard advanced threateningly, "So. Uxmal the brave warrior attacks," said Axa. The guard was unable to pass within the bubble of protection, as they made their way along the dark corridors he followed closely behind.

"What kind of magic is this?" asked Axa ignoring the pain as the blood began to flow into his legs.

"I wear the helmet of the gods, its brightness fills me, its brilliance strengthens me! Take those foul skulls from your child, they are a danger to her, take care do not break them."

Axa carefully took the skulls from Chacuti, as he did so he noticed the old man's eyes, they were lit up as if from the inside, they glowed in the dim light like the eyes of a jaguar at night. He glanced back at the Shaman, vaguely he

could sense that some kind of battle of wills was taking place between him and the old man. The Shaman's eyes were horrible, his stare sinister.

"Axa's looking at the Shaman's eyes!" Davey warned the old man.

"The eyes! Take care!" said the old man as he turned Axa away from the danger.

The Shaman opened his mouth wide and began to make a strange sound. *"Aaaughmmm."*

The sound was completed when he closed his lips together. There was no gap in the sound, it took several seconds before each sound faded away, and was then immediately repeated. Over and over it sounded, *"Aaaughmmm, Aaaughmmm..."*

"Careful my Lord!" shouted the old man, "the skulls will add their sound to his, you must keep hold of them!"

The skulls in Axa's hands began to make the same noise, but for the old man's warning he would have dropped them. The sound was kept up until it echoed and bounced all around it was affecting the old man. "I have heard this sound before," he said in a strange voice.

Axa looked at him, the old man had the same faraway look in his eyes that he had when he was first captured by his warriors, the scar upon his temple pulsed, he shouted at him, "Do not leave us now old man, we depend on you!"

Chacuti became alarmed, "Please save us, I beg you, save us," she cried.

The sound made by the skulls and the Shaman increased, Axa took hold of the old man and shook him fiercely, "Take hold of yourself!" he yelled.

The image in the mirror was dropping towards the floor of the temple. Paddy looked at Davey, his head was lolling forwards, his chin was almost resting upon his chest. *"What yer doin' lad. Get yer head together!"* Davey jerked back upright. *"Tell him to wake himself up or its curtains for the lot of them!"*

"I hear you," said the old man. He seemed to take control over himself, he shook his head as if shaking it from sleep, the sound abruptly ceased.

Lord Axa kept talking to the old man trying to make sure that his mind should not wander again, he sensed the old man was weakening, "How do you know where we are going?" he asked, "every wall and every stone are the same to me, might we not be going deeper into this accursed place?"

The voice is within me, it guides me to the light," said the old man. He was still very vague and pre-occupied.

The warrior continued to watch him as carefully as the devil who followed in their wake. "What voice do you speak of?" asked Lord Axa.

"There is another who wears the helmet, he is with us. I hear you boy!" called the old man.

"I can hear you," answered Davey.

Lord Axa had been weak before he started to carry the skulls but now he was growing stronger, he could feel his strength returning to him.

"The warrior takes my energy," snarled a skull.

"They must not leave the temple," said the other.

Lord Axa looked behind them, "The Shaman is gone old man. Only his guard follows."

"Where's he gone then?"

"I'll find him," said Davey.

They swept along passageways until they saw him standing, concentrating, focusing his mind upon a flaming firebrand set into the wall.

"What's he up to now?" the instant Paddy had said the words flames burst from the firebrand and engulfed the Shaman. He stood in their midst unmoved. *"Flippin' eck."*

The Shaman started running incredibly fast back down the corridors.

"He's going to get them, they'll be burnt!" yelled Davey.

"Let the old man know what's headin' his way lad!"

They shot ahead of the Shaman and waited with the old man, the warrior and the child.

The senses of the warrior told him that something was going to happen, "There is danger," he warned.

"Come close, hold onto me!" shouted the old man.

Father and daughter held onto him. They heard a roaring sound, suddenly a fire-ball shot along the corridor, it filled the narrow passageway with a heat so intense that the stones themselves blistered and cracked. Chacuti screamed as it hit them, they felt the wind of its passing and flames tearing at their eyes, hands and faces but they felt no heat, its energy did not affect them.

Screams burst into the passageway adding to the roar of flame. The body of the guard continued to jerk grotesquely until the fireball had passed over his charred and blackened remains. The fireball died down, from its centre the Shaman emerged, he did not even glance at the guard's body. His feet broke the pure charcoal shell of what moments before had been a living, breathing man, the shell crumbled into dust.

*"In goes yer eye out!" said Paddy, "How far 'ave they got to go now?"
"Just round two more corners."*

The great temple doorway beckoned. Lord Axa recognised it, so too did Chacuti. "We are nearly safe Father," she said softly. Lord Axa was not so sure but agreed with her. The Shaman would surely act again to prevent their leaving.

As they moved nearer towards the doors three guards appeared. Each was garbed in the skin of the jaguar, each carried toothed-club and shield. Axa moved ahead of the old man.

"Wait Lord Axa. These men cannot touch you whilst you are near to me," said the old man.

The guards fanned out around them. "So the noble lord is free," jeered a guard.

"Perhaps he will fare better than his warrior Manco!" laughed another.

"He could not run but he did manage to put up a bit of a fight....for an old man."

"Fought better than the tracker Topac, Aquila didn't waste any time with him."

Axa had heard enough, he left the protection of the old man, "You men must die," he told the guards. It was not a threat, it was not boasting, it was not designed to intimidate, it was a simple statement of fact.

A guard swiped a blow at his neck. Axa rolled under it, the guard had expected to hit a target, the blow threw him off balance. Axa came up behind him and hit the heel of his palm against the man's jaw knocking him unconscious, he then snatched the club from the man's hand and used his limp body as a shield. The body did not prevent violent blows being battered towards him. One of the guard's clubs struck the shield with such force that he was unable to retrieve his weapon, Axa pushed the body towards the weaponless man and dispatched him. The remaining guard retreated, he had no wish to go the same way as his fellows, he took to flight.

The doors were extremely heavy, several men were normally needed to open them. Whilst Axa put his back under the bar and lifted, the old man and Chacuti swung it away from the door, he let it drop to the floor. "The door is barred to the outside, we cannot shift it old man," said Axa, "three more men guard the other side."

"Stay close, I begin to understand the power," the old man replied. He stepped back then slammed the flats of his hand against the door. Where he struck it the door splintered and cracked open.

Axa tore at the timbers until he cleared a space through which they were able to crawl. He carefully looked outside, ready at instant to withdraw his head the moment a guard's club whistled towards him. "The guards have deserted their posts!" he informed the old man.

Chacuti was the first to escape their prison, Axa urged the old man to follow, he would not. "GO NOW!" the old man roared. Axa passed the skulls carefully through the hole to Chacuti then dived through and rolled swiftly to his feet.

Outside it was night; screams, yells and flames rent the air. Figures were running past in flight, feet skidding over stones made slippery by a heavy rain. "Come child we must go and help in this fight," said Lord Axa.

"But father, what of the old man?" pleaded Chacuti.

Axa was torn between the two. He took the horrible skulls from Chacuti and looked back in through the cracked door. The Shaman had returned. In strange tongues the old man and Shaman spoke unearthly words against each other. Their eyes were locked together as if some form of unseen combat was taking place. For some time the combatants stood until finally the old man pointed his finger fiercely towards the Shaman, "It is I who have the power. It is I who shall damage you. Be afraid for yourself, I am not alone!"

The Shaman advanced menacingly, the old man stood his ground but he could feel the immense energy being thrown at him like a wave of filth which sought to drown him. Axa could see this energy, it was dull, lifeless and void. Suddenly he felt a terrific pain in his stomach, the Shaman was holding up his hand and squeezing it into a

tight fist, as he twisted his wrist the warrior cried out in pain. Hearing his cry the old man turned and saw him, "Go Lord Axa, leave this dog to me!"

"I stay," said Axa ignoring the pain.

The antagonists did not make another move. They stood, as still as the stones around them, but the contest continued. Strange shapes grew and spread until they covered the walls of the passage. The air thickened; foul smells and mysterious sounds; racing screaming howling sounds were heard.

"The old man's losing Paddy! I can feel him weakening."

"Do sommat to 'elp 'im lad!"

"MY LORD PROTECT ME!" screamed the old man in his fear.

The huge stones surrounding the doorway were shaking, the ground they stood on shook. "Aaagh, Aagh, Aaagh, No, No, No, No, Wake Me from this!" cried the old man. "He has me, his power is of the dark, the skulls assist him, I cannot withstand him."

"You must fight on old man!" yelled Axa, "we are all finished if you fail."

The old man's body had begun to slouch down, to crumble before the onslaught but he took heart from the warrior and pulled himself up. The temple itself began to tremble. Faces of demons and devils appeared. They were solid, they had form. They battered upon the old man whose body stood in the midst of the storm.

"He's told me to go to the mirror!" cried Davey.

"But if we see what the future is we won't be able to change anything lad!"

"If we don't, they won't have a future Uncle Paddy!"

Within the chamber of the snake they peered into the smoking mirror.

The images blurred and altered, a vision of paradise was shown.

Beautiful birds fluttered under trees laden with fruit; friendly little animals ran free playing and chasing each other, gentle waves lapped against a coral beach. Set back from the beach, amongst tall palm trees, stood a giant stone head.

"Check that thing out lad! It sticks out like the wart on me mother's face."

The head looked down upon a pool of clear water, water so blue it seemed that the fish swimming within it floated in the sky. They looked into the depths of the pool, deep within it, practically embedded in its sandy bottom, were two crystal skulls.

"What are they doin' there? How the heck have they got there?"

Davey scanned back the time slightly and saw the tattooed man running towards the pool carrying the two skulls, he threw them into the water shouting, "The water shall soak away your power and kill your evil thoughts. Remain in its coolness and allow the child to live!"

"It's the tattooed man, he's chucked them in there! The water must take away their power!"

Unable to bear the agony the old man hovered above his body, it was slowly dying, soon it would be no more but he returned swiftly into it. As Davey told him what he had seen. "Aaghh!" he sought control then cried, "I hear you! The skulls my Lord! Take them and sink them in water."

The skulls vibrated in Axa's hands, they had replaced his lost energies. He ran across the temple square. Chacuti found it so easy to keep up with her father she felt that she must be in a dream. They ran towards the palace and entered by a gate which was unguarded. In the courtyard a beautiful fountain played from a pedestal which was topped with a water-filled bowl. Without hesitation he plunged the skulls into the water. The instant his hands entered he felt the vibrations cease.

They were not alone in the courtyard, a number of men rushed from the shadows towards them, Axa recognised them, "Hold Labnah! he ordered the man at their head.

"Lord Axa!" shouted a number of the men.

Axa scanned the warriors quickly, "Kabah, Labnah, Coba, Edzna....There is no time. Where is my family?"

"Safe my Lord. They travel under your orders to the hidden city. Popacata guides them."

Above their heads the flames were not dampened by the heavy rain but swept onwards across the rooftops, yells and screams could be heard from within the palace.

"Quickly Kabah, tell me what I need to know."

"A trap was set, the invaders are murdering the nobles and elders...."

"The sooner those parasites are wiped out the better it will be for all of us!" interrupted one of the warriors.

Axa turned towards him, "Will the invaders then leave us to live in peace?" The warrior stayed silent. "Will no other warriors unite with us?"

"We are fourteen in number, of those who survived the dog Aquila's selection Popacata has roused perhaps another thirty."

"Where are they?"

"They will join us if we send for them," Kabah said.

Axa issued orders, "Coba, fetch the warriors, meet us behind the first canal bridge." Coba hurtled off. "We must attack, the invaders will not expect it!" he raised the club he had taken from the guard, "Edzna, remain here, guard my daughter well." He turned to the remaining warriors and yelled his war-cry, they answered him with fierce powerful yells of their own.

Chacuti looked despairingly after her father as he led his warriors into battle.

They entered the palace and ran swiftly to the chambers recently vacated by Lady Axa. The screams and yells grew as they neared the thin partition walls. "Kabah, Labnah," Axa outlined an area of wall to them, "Charge here, we follow!"

The brothers hit the wall smashing a great gap though it, they fell to the floor scrabbling for their clubs, the remaining warriors stormed through, leaping over them.

The floor and walls bore testament to the savagery of the Spaniards attack. Into the slaughter-house, hacking and hewing anybody that was near, the warriors forged, all around them bodies dropped as whirling clubs bit home. The Spaniards were unable to use their pistols or muskets for fear of hitting their own comrades.

"Pikemen form up!" yelled Pancho. The mania of slaughter had to be replaced by military order, men had to be turned from butchery to soldiery.

"I've got to go back to the old man Uncle Paddy, he needs me!"

The old man was backing slowly away from the Shaman.

"Even without the skulls the Shaman's too strong for him!"

The old man suddenly turned round and dived through the doorway.

"He's a flamin' gymnast. I wouldn't have thought he had it in him."

"He's got to stop the Shaman getting out Uncle Paddy, it's his only chance!"

"Tell him to block that hole in the door then, it'll give him some time!"

The old man rose to his feet, the Shaman reached the door.

"Watch out, here he comes!" warned Paddy. They watched as the Shaman began tearing chunks from the door. *"It's like it's made from paper, that feller's in a right peeve!"*

The old man reached down and took hold of the door frame near to the floor. He heaved forcefully, with a cracking sound the frame loosened.

"I see what 'e's doin'. Go on, put yer back into it!" shouted Paddy.

The old man heaved harder. The frame snapped from its fixings.

"He's got it! Come on," encouraged Paddy.

"What difference will it make?" asked Davey.

Before Paddy had time to reply the old man dragged the doorframe clear, the massive doors fell back towards the Shaman, only his speed took him from their path. Davey stared at the gap left by the doors. *"He's let him out!"*

A rumbling sound started, it was so faint that it sounded as though it might actually be coming from the street outside. Davey looked at Paddy. *"Watch lad,"* was all he said.

Massive stone block after massive stone block came crashing down filling the doorway.

"It's like a stack of cards, once yer've take away the support they all start tumbling."

The whole side of the temple above the doorway slipped downwards, ramming the blocks into the ground with fantastic force, filling the gap with a mass of stone. The main structure of the temple remained intact but the effect of the slip could clearly be seen in its side.

"He's trapped the Shaman! He's safe Uncle Paddy!"

"Don't count on it lad, that snake'll have the strength of fifty men. Go on in, take a look."

They moved inside, thick dust filled the air, the downdraft from the falling blocks had forced some of the torches to blow out, the Shaman could barely be seen. The whites of his eyes glared out from the darkness. He moved towards the blocks, his temper was fearful.

"If 'e's not careful 'e'll blow a gasket. GASKET! Flippin' heck yer should be makin' them!" Paddy looked at his pocket-watch, *"Yer start work in 'arf an hour!"*

CHAPTER 20

The Corpse is Risen

Waiting at a street corner were two men and two youths. One of the youths held a dog by the thick of its neck. "Is that 'im?" asked the ginger-haired man of Fletcher.

"That's 'im."

"Right lad, we're goin' to join the queue, sort 'im for us Jakey."

The men walked off, the youths waited as Davey trotted along the Dock Road towards them.

"It's that kid in the 'elmet!" exclaimed Jake, "this is a bit of luck."

"What's 'e doin'?" asked Doggo.

"Dunno. But he's wearin' overalls so he must reckon he's in with a chance. I'll grab his left arm you grab the other," he ordered.

Doggo faced back up the road, trying to figure out which arm would be which. "Idiot!" snapped Jake, "Get that side!"

Davey saw them waiting, he also saw the dog but it did not enter his head that they could possibly be the same thugs he had encountered in Carnatic. Not until he was right on top of them did he realise his error. He was too surprised to resist as Jake grabbed one arm and Doggo the other. "Got yer! Told yer I'd get yer!" exulted Jake.

"That's for cheekin' me on the bridge!" said Doggo slapping Davey across the head.

Davey tried to fight his way free but they had too good a grip and were too powerful for him. He dropped his carry-out, the sandwiches spilled out onto the cobbles. "Let me go! I've got to get to work!" shouted Davey.

"He's got hiself a job! Cheeky little sod! My old feller's been queuing up down there fer days. Bring 'im Doggo!"

They started to march Davey along, he saw a group of men approaching and yelled, "Help me, they've got me!"

"Shut it will ya!" shouted Jake. "Up here Doggo!" they ran up a side-street forcing Davey to run with them.

One of the men asked another, "Reckon that kid needs 'elp?"

"Naw, just kids larkin' about."

The barks and yelps from Lurch drowned out Davey's further cries.

"Suppose yer thought that was smart did yer?" said Jake, "have you got sommat to gag 'im with Doggo?"

Doggo rummaged round in his pockets until he produced a filthy handkerchief. "This do Jake?"

"Aye, I'll hold 'im. Stick it on him." He twisted Davey's arm fiercely up his back so that Davey cried out.

As the handkerchief neared his mouth Davey felt sick by the sight of it. "I won't shout again Jake, honest I won't," he pleaded.

Jake ignored him, "What yer reckon Doggo? he's already shown 'iself to be a little liar."

"Might look odd takin' him through town Jake."

"Right you!" he took hold of Davey by the lapels of his boiler-suit, "One step out of line and Lurch'll have yer! Got that Lurch!" The dog gave a slaverling growl. They continued up the steep street until they were engulfed in the hubbub of the town; horses and carts, trams which were fed power from overhead cables, flat-backed trucks loaded high and hundreds of people were rushing about all intent upon getting to work for the start of the day.

Davey tried pleading with his captors, "Please let me go, I've got a job, you'll make me lose it."

His appeals brought laughter from the thugs.

The workers were added to and replaced by shoppers, hurrying to the big city stores all intent upon finding bargains, as the crowd thickened Jake took a tighter grip of Davey, "What are you going to do? Where are you taking me?"

"You'll find out soon enough!" snapped Jake. They made their way up past Central Station, steam trains were belching out thick smoke within the glass-roofed terminal, the glass was stained a dark-grey, in places it had cracked and fallen in, pigeons flapped out through the gaps, pushed upwards by the hot steamy-smoke from the engines.

Davey grew more worried, "Let me go Jake. I promise I'll go straight home."

Jake nodded his ginger-head towards a narrow street, with a heavy cuff to the head they walked their prisoner along it heading towards the back of the station. The trains ran underground into the heart of the city, Davey could hear their rumble as they passed through the earth beneath their feet. The street narrowed to a lane, apart from one shop the lane was formed from the back of buildings which towered high above. The shop sold knives, rifles and other weapons. Jake and Doggo spent some time at the window examining the display and commenting upon the various knives. Lurch made frequent use of a lamppost during the halt. Davey saw the shopkeeper, he had a kindly face, he caught the man's eye and tried to let him know what was happening but without daring to make a sound was unable to do so.

"What yer up to?" asked Jake, "Come on!" They continued up the lane, it narrowed still further to a thin alleyway. Along it they walked until near a spot where numerous drainpipes and overflows from the surrounding buildings ran into gulleys and grids they stopped.

"That's the one Doggo!" Jake pointed to a manhole cover at their feet. He took hold of his dog, "Lurchy go to Carnatic, there's a good boy. Carnatic...Carnatic Lurch." The animal trotted off.

Doggo was unable to lift the cover unaided.

"You weakling!" derided Jake. "Here you hold him, if he gets away I'll murder yer."

He pulled the cover open, it was hinged, a black hole gaped back at them. "Down there!" ordered Jake.

Davey moved to the hole, a wrought-iron ladder was set into its side. "Go on, down there!"

Davey descended, the air smelt sweet, sickly and oily, a draught of warm air from a steam train passing far below wafted up to him, it smelt of coal dust.

"Don't try nothin'!" called Jake, his voice echoed in the shaft, "if yer get lost down there yer'll never find how to get out."

The base of the ladder was set into rock, cut back into a deep recess, Davey stepped down from the ladder onto the rock. He was in pitch darkness. "Wait there!" ordered Jake as he climbed down and took hold of his captive. After Doggo had joined them they took several paces in the darkness and emerged into a subterranean cavern, gas lamps lit up sets of "stop" and "go" signals above ten pairs of parallel railway lines. The lamps provided enough light to see that the whole cavern had been hewn from solid rock. In some places huge steam engines were resting on the tracks, panting and puffing before the signals allowed them to join the mainlines.

Davey realised that Jake was not going to let him go, he tried to talk him round instead, "It's good here Jake, how'd you find it?"

Jake was not falling for such overtures, "Shut it will ya!" he snapped, "Doggo, find a cart!"

Doggo went running off, they could hear his footsteps in the distance. Before he returned two trains had passed, one entering the other leaving, they sounded like great fire-breathing beasts as they laboured along, clicking and clacking over the bright rails.

"Got one Jake."

"Come on you."

The cart was covered with an old tarpaulin, Doggo dragged it clear, the words AMMO No. 4 was stamped in black paint onto the side of the cart. The rails it rested on were thick with rust.

"Put yer backs into it!" ordered Jake. They pushed hard against the cart, "Yer've left the flippin' brake on yer idiot!"

"You never noticed it either Jake," Doggo dared to speak up for himself.

"Right, an' again."

This time the cart creaked forwards, "Keep it movin'!" shouted Jake. It rolled slowly along, "That'll do it, in yer get!" he ordered Davey as he and Doggo climbed aboard. The cart kept rolling, it followed a slight downhill gradient heading towards the exit from the cavern. Davey realised that when they emerged into the light their eyes would be blinded for a moment, he waited his opportunity but Jake was ready for him, just before the cart rolled from the cavern he seized hold of Davey's wrist. "Just in case, yer a slippery customer ain't yer."

They rolled on, a steam train came belching towards them. "It's gonna hit us!" yelled Doggo half-climbing out of the cart.

Jake sat grinning away, "Yer a right chicken Doggo, this line's never used."

Davey breathed a sigh of relief as the train veered away, the driver leant out of the footplate towards them and shook his fist, Jake shook his own back. The driver pulled a cord releasing a volume of steam which whistled deafeningly at them. "He's full of wind!" jeered Jake.

The cart rolled on, another train drew alongside so that the passengers were clearly able to see them, Doggo dropped his trousers and presented his posterior which was as spotty as his face. Elderly ladies with dead foxes draped around their shoulders turned away mortified.

"That give them an eyeful eh Jake!"

"Yer off yer head Doggo." The train accelerated away from them. "Eh up here's another! Hang about, let's give 'em a double whammy!"

The line was pulling into territory Davey recognised, soon it must veer off from the other tracks and head off on its own towards Carnatic. He looked at the imbecilic grins across the faces of his captors as they shocked the living daylight out of the passengers. It was now or never.

He vaulted from the cart and tore off across the lines, straight up onto the embankment he ran.

"Oi! Get back 'ere!" yelled Jake heaving his trousers back on, he was torn between abandoning the cart or letting his prisoner escape. Doggo was already climbing down, "Leave 'im Doggo, we'll come across him again, one thing's for sure they won't want him in Stilsons now!" he laughed and Doggo joined in.

Davey worked his way along the top of the embankment until he reached the recreation ground, he made his way back to Copperfield Street and went straight into Paddy's. Mrs Murtagh bumped into him as he entered, "Alright lovey I was just on me way to the wash-house, but yer back early ain't yer?" seeing the expression on Davey's face she asked, "Problems?"

"No..they give me a long dinnerbreak 'cos I'm new. Thought I'd just pop back and tell Uncle Paddy what it's like."

"What, all that way? But hark at him up there, he won't be in any state to hear what yer've got to tell him!"

Davey heard a racket coming from upstairs. "Is he in pain?" he asked.

"No, he reckons it's singing but it's causin' me pain. I'll let yer into a little secret lad, every once in a while yer dad and that lunk up there have a little tippie..." her imitated the movement of a glass going back and forwards to her mouth.

"Is me dad up there?" panicked Davey.

"Naw, he went off like the little gent he is hours ago."

"Should I leave it come back after work?" asked Davey.

"You go on up lad, p'raps he'll listen to you, he won't listen to anyone else. I'm off down the wash-house."

Davey stood outside the bedroom door listening to the raucous singing;

Mademoiselle from Armentieres parlez-vous?
 Mademoiselle from Armentieres parlez-vous?
 The colonel got the croix-de-guerre
 The son of a gun was never there
 Inky-dinky parlez-vous

He peeped into the bedroom and saw Paddy sitting in his cocoon of pillows, with the helmet on his head and waving his hands as though conducting an orchestra.

Mademoiselle from Armentieres parlez-vous?
 Mademoiselle from Armentieres parlez-vous?
 You might forget the gas and shells
 You'll never forget those mademoiselles
 Inky-dinky parlez-vous.

Mrs Murtagh was right, the sound was painful. Paddy spotted him, "Davey boyo, come on in lad and tell yer Uncle Paddy how yer got on!"

Wrinkling up his nose at the strong smell of whisky Davey went in, "I got jumped on the way in Uncle Paddy, I've lost the job."

"Yer kiddin' me lad, who the heck would do sommat like that?" The whisky had taken the edge from Paddy's fierce temper, grateful for that, Davey was able to tell him most of the story.

"Don't you be worrying about it lad, I know all about Stilson's, I knew a lad went there once, sent 'im down the stores for a long stand they did. Storeman says 'wait there'. Hours he waited, the boss sacked him for wastin' time."

"Did he get the long stand?"

"He sure did!" Paddy laughed, Davey saw the joke and joined in.

"That's better lad, like yer old dad says 'Keep yer chin up' I've yer've got half the spirit of that man yer'll have no problems but yer can forget about Stilsons, that ginger-headed git'll be straight in there in yer place. Swines! We'll have 'em. Should have kept that rifle. Nice little equalizer that would have been."

"I've still got it," said Davey shamefacedly.

"Smashin'!" he paused, "No, hang on a mo', it's a bit like usin' a sledgehammer to crack a nut." He looked round the room. You know them Inkers, they used them blow-pipes?"

"Yeah."

"See that curtain pole, take it down."

Davey stood on the dressing-table and lifted the pole and the curtains down from their brackets.

"Right, nip back down, in the sideboard is me old girl's sowing kit, bring it up here. She's gone the wash-house ain't she?" Davey confirmed that she had. "That's alright then, go on and get it."

Davey went back down and returned with the sowing kit.

"That's it lad, pass them needles out." He started unfastening the curtains from the pole, "I know what we need, in the back yard, yer'll find fifteen t'ousand bottles of stout. Bring us up a load of corks."

When Davey returned with the corks Paddy had thrown the curtains in a heap.

"Watch me," he took a needle and pressed it through the cork, "half-an-inch should do 'em." He pushed the same amount out of the cork. "Right lad, slip that into the pipe." He slid the cork in place. "Right, choose yer target, I ain't got the wind for it."

Davey lined up the pipe with the cupboard door, a hard puff and the needle embedded itself in the woodwork.

"It's brilliant Uncle Paddy, they won't know what's hit them!"

Paddy sat grinning away, still wearing the helmet. "And stick the pickle on an' they won't see yer!"

"Uncle Pad."

"Yeah lad."

"What am I goin' to tell me mum and dad?"

"Yer've got a problem there lad. They'll be bitter disappointed. Leave that one with me. You get on yer way, them lot need teachin' a lesson, come back tonight so yer can tell me how it went."

Davey carried the corks and the needles they had embedded into them inside a shopping bag, over his shoulder rested the curtain pole. "I've got everything."

"Yer forgettin' sommat lad."

Davey began rummaging through the bag, "No, it's all here."

"Not that Davey, the girl. The one down at Carnatic."

"I hadn't forgotten about her Uncle Paddy. If I can I'm going to go back in, try and find out more."

"Smashin', do us a favour before yer go, fetch us up me medicine, it'll be down in the left-hand drawer of the sideboard," Paddy gave a slight cough to emphasise his need.

By the time he'd returned with the green sticky bottle and oversized spoon Paddy had collapsed in a heap, the helmet had rolled onto the floor, Davey placed it into the bag and quietly left the room.

It was a bright but blustery as he walked back down the railway line. After he had passed through the tunnel he stopped and tested out his weapon against a tree. It was amazingly accurate, he could hit the tiniest mark upon the trunk without difficulty, only gusts of wind could cause the shot to hit off-target.

The cart had been abandoned right on top of the bridge. He slid down the bank then walked under the arch.

"YAARGH!" he yelled at the top of his lungs, the sound echoed and amplified its way though the woods, then he made his way back up onto the bridge. It was not long before the first scouting party turned up. It was Fleabag and Yatesy. He waited until they were almost directly beneath him.

"Ahhh!" wailed Fleabag as the needle buried itself into him.

"What you squealing about?" asked Yatesy. But squealed even louder as he was hit. The pair of them ran off into the thick vegetation with Fleabag screeching, "It's the White Lady!" Davey tore down the bank and raced after them, they glimpsed him moving through the trees keeping pace with them. Fleabag shrieked a cry of pure fear and ran along screaming so crazily that his fear infected Yatesy who chased after him shouting, "Is it her? Have yer seen her?"

They left the trees and ran into the bushes, along winding paths and under hanging rhododendrons they darted, Davey re-loaded in case he was given the opportunity of another shot but they moved so quickly he was not given the chance. Realising that they were heading back to the railway carriage he clambered up into the foliage overhead. It was impossible to locate the carriage within the dense mat of leaves but the commotion as Fleabag and Yatesy arriving at their destination enabled him to pinpoint its position. Lying down, peering at the carriage he saw several scared faces glued to the windows.

"She's out there!" Fleabag screeched.

"She stuck this in me!" squealed Yatesy extracting a needle from his arm.

"Ghosts don't go round stickin' needles in yer!" shouted Jake, but all the same he kept looking frantically around. Big Dave was still full of himself, drawling in his dopey-voice, "I ain't afraid of no ghosts," he moved to the door of the carriage. Davey allowed him to place one foot upon the bumper before a fierce blast sent a missile winging towards its target. It hit him in the forehead.

As he tumbled down in shock and pain he yelled, "Sorry missus white ghost lady. Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry....."

He had reached the fifth 'sorry' when another dart struck. Big Dave clambered to his feet and ran straight into the undergrowth, his heavy mass battered into the great stems, shaking the vegetation all around, his progress could be followed by the vibrations of leaves over his head.

The weak sun illuminated the carriage interior, Davey saw Lurch laying down on one of the cushions, the dog raised an eyelid as if wondering what all the fuss was about. It was soon to find out. "LURCH! Get out there and find out what's goin' on!"

"It won't go Jake. Dog's is scared of ghosts!" squawked Fleabag.

"Since when have you been an 'xpert?" retorted Jake. He seized Lurch by the scruff of the neck and threw him outside.

The dog was a different proposition but Davey was ready for it. "Thunk." A dart hit its rear which gave it such a fright it leapt forwards a good ten feet then stood staring at the spot it had left. "Thunk." Another hit in exactly the same spot. With a squawk of alarm the dog repeated its previous action.

"What's up with yer!" yelled Jake from the safety of the carriage. "What yer doin' playin' around!" He stuck his head through one of the cracked windows and yelled at the top of his voice, "LURCH! I'll boot yer!"

The dog gave such a sorrowful look that Davey did not have the heart to take another shot. When he looked back he noticed that Jake was alone, the last of the gang were slipping out from the other end of the carriage like rats deserting a sinking ship. "Oi! Where do you lot think yer goin'!" shouted Jake after them. "Doggo! Yatesy!" he called but they were gone and he was alone. He turned back to the window, "Lurch. STAY!" he yelled, but the dog had had enough. It slunk off into the undergrowth deserting its master.

Jake looked from one end of the carriage to the other as if trying to decide which doorway should become his exit. Choosing his dog instead of his companions he hurtled through the doorway nearest to Davey and tore off along the path shouting, "Lurchy! Lurchy baby!"

Davey dropped down and chased after him, Jake seemed to have a thorough knowledge of every trail; they cut along paths where the branches hung within feet of the ground so that it was necessary to crawl along, they climbed over stunted roots and broken boughs, the thick growth gradually cleared and gave way to clumps of bushes and tall trees, thick Autumn leaves lay underfoot and covered the cracking of twigs as Davey trailed behind. Looking ahead he saw the position that Jake had brought them to, they were nearly on the railway line next to the tunnel entrance. He cut off through the bushes and emerged on the line nearer to the tunnel.

Jake reached the line and spotted Davey, "What *you* doin' here!" he shouted.

Davey took off his helmet and placed it down at the railside with the bag and the blowpipe. "What yer doin'?" asked Jake. He grinned, "Shouldn't yer be in work?" Jake was a much larger, thick-set lad. His pug-face and piggy-eyes looked surprised as Davey advanced towards him. He'd never experienced a challenge from someone smaller than him. He quickly got over his surprise when Davey thumped him hard in the mouth. "You 'it me," said Jake incredulously as he put his hand to his mouth then looked at the blood upon his fingers, "I'm goin' to kill yer!"

Davey hooked another blow to the side of Jake's head. Jake ducked, not intentionally but so that he could put his head down and charge, the hook went spinning off the top of his head. Roaring like a bull he launched himself at Davey ploughing into him. Davey back-pedalled as he fought to stay on his feet. His back slammed into the side of the tunnel entrance knocking the breath out of his body but he brought his knee up into Jake's nose and knew from the relaxing of the grip that he had hit the target. Jake stood up, his temper had exploded, "I'LL KILL YER!" he screamed.

"Easy to say, not so easy to do!" Davey called back.

Jake put his head down for another charge. This time he came in like an express train. Davey side-stepped and watched as Jake's head slammed into the wall. The blow ought to have knocked him cold but he just stood, stunned. Davey took his opportunity, he ran in and grabbed Jake around the neck in a head-lock. His hand went up, a finger hooked into each of his nostrils and he heaved.

"Arrgh Mercy! Stop, yer'll rip me nose off!"

"You listening to me Jakey boy!" shouted Davey, heaving with all his might.

"Yeah. Yeah. Arrgh!"

"If I ever see your ugly face around here again, you know what you're going to get?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Arrgh let me go!"

With a twist and a heave Davey flung Jake away, he tripped over a rail and fell sprawling across the track. Davey walked towards him, Jake jumped to his feet and ran into the tunnel, crying as he ran. Only after he had disappeared through the semi-circle of light at the tunnel end did his cries stop echoing.

Feeling forty foot tall Davey retrieved his helmet, replaced it on his head, picked up his bag and using the blow-pipe as a walking stick headed back into the wood. The railway carriage signified that he was nearing Carnatic Hall but he couldn't resist climbing into it. Something told him that the gang would never come back.

The carriage was pretty much the same as his first visit. Cushions were scattered all around, a small table had been made from a plank of wood resting on an upturned metal bucket, on the plank was a half-full bottle of milk. Davey smelt the milk and jerked his head back in disgust, it was rancid, carefully he replaced it.

On the wall were the same scrawling's he'd seen a few days previously but others had been added. He smiled to himself when he read the names of each gang member and thought how they had received their come-uppance.

Doggo's name was written vertically between two windows, as he read the name his gaze drifted towards a window. The Shaman snarled at him. Snake-like eyes peered from blackened skin, vicious fingers curved hooked nails towards his face.

Davey jumped back in shock knocking over the plank, bucket and milk. He looked back at the Shaman hoping that what he saw was only an image but the Shaman hissed, "You see me boy! You chose to interfere, the girl will soon be mine. Nothing can save her!"

"No! It can't be!" shouted Davey in terror.

The Shaman started to move towards one end of the railway carriage, it was the end nearest to the field. Davey stood watching helplessly as the Shaman slowly rose into the carriage. "You will learn the way of the Inca. You will join the girl in sacrifice!"

Davey turned and ran. He leapt out of the end of the carriage and hurtled off through the undergrowth, he had no idea where he ran but the helmet lent him wings and he moved with terrific speed. He tore along aimlessly, expecting at any moment that the Shaman would clutch hold of him he ran for several minutes before slowing down. He had moved into an area he was not familiar with, the ground became tussocky exposing thick rhododendron roots which threatened to trip him at every step. A pathway, perhaps formed by the passage of wild deer, led him into a small steep sided valley. He looked warily down the valley, it was too quiet but he did not dare to retrace his steps into the wood. Slowly he walked through the dark vale fearing the evil would appear. Through the oily rhododendron leaves he glimpsed a dark sheet of water ahead and realised that he was nearing the lake. He slowed his pace and listened, not a sound could be heard save the rustling of the breeze. Carefully he nosed his way out of the vegetation and looked along the lane. To right and left it was empty. Fearful he stepped out of cover and looked frantically backwards and forwards but saw nothing. He had the idea of using the dark waters of the lake as a mirror to contact the old man. With great caution he began to cross the rickety wooden bridge. In the centre of the span he stopped, checked the lane, then turned round and gazed down into the murk. Within the blackness something was moving, it was no image, from the depths the Shaman rose, slowly like a risen corpse, floating towards the surface. Davey screamed as the Shaman's face showed a malicious sneer. He turned and ran at full speed up the lane alongside the stream.

At any moment he expected the Shaman to re-appear, along the lane and up the embankment onto the railway line he ran. He fled down the railway line and only slowed as he neared the tunnel entrance. Remembering the night he heard his father's footsteps from within the darkness and the tapping of his stick, he stood listening, peering into the entrance. He failed to notice the Shaman walking slowly towards him along the railway line, approaching him from behind.

The Shaman cried out, "The girl is mine boy! Nothing can save her!"

Davey tore through the tunnel like a terrified rabbit.

"What's up lad! Did they get yer? I'll have the flippin' lot of them!" Paddy blurted out when he saw the state Davey was in. Davey was trying to speak but was unable, "Come on, spit it out, what's happened?" But seeing that he was getting nowhere Paddy said, "Sit down till yer calm down, then we'll find out what's happened."

Davey sat on the bed, after some minutes his breathing had calmed.

"Uncle Paddy."

"Yeah lad."

"The Shaman was there, he tried to get me."

Paddy almost hit the ceiling, "What! He can't be. It's not possible, you must have imagined him..."

Davey stopped him, "He **was** there Uncle Paddy. He's told me he'll get the girl and that I'm going to be joining her."

Paddy went silent, "There's sommat going on 'ere lad. Sommat not to my liking. I don't know what it is but sure as the nose on me old girl's face there's sommat going on."

At that moment Mrs Murtagh gave a slight knock on the door and appeared, "Heard yer coming in Davey, got you a nice drink to warm yer up with, it's perishing cold out there today."

"Thanks Mrs M," said Davey taking the mug of warm milk from her. Paddy looked at her sorrowfully.

"No, I've told yer Paddy," said Mrs Murtagh, "yer'll get yer basics and that's all. The way you've been carrying on," she scolded. To Davey she said, "He's been lying there all afternoon like he was at death's door, give me a turn he did." Still tutting to herself about the evils of drink and rifles she left the room.

"Phew! I reckon as how I'd be better off turning meself in Davey boy," said Paddy nodding towards the sound of the departing footsteps, "Since them bobbies come round she's had it in for me."

"She'll come round Uncle Pad. You'll just have to go on bread and water until she does!" joked Davey swigging his milk.

"I'll give yer bread and water!" he scrunched his knuckles into the top of Davey's head.

"Uncle Paddy."

"Yeah lad."

"How come Mrs M never asked me how come I'm not in work. Have you told her what's going on?"

"Not a sausage lad. Paddy's tight as a drum and that's the way he'll stay. But I'll tell yer what lad she's a wily old bird. If there's owt going on she'll have an inkling."

"Will she say anything to me mum and dad?"

"Not a dicky bird, she's got more hair on her head than yer'd reckon but we'd better not take any chances in future, tell yer what, set the chess up, if she needs to come in the room or sommat we can make out we're in the middle of a game."

Davey did as Paddy suggested, then they sat silent for a moment.

"Question is lad, if the Shyman's round this way what's 'e up to? How'd 'e get out the temple for one, and if he's here why doesn't he just kill the girl and have done with it."

"Why didn't he just kill me for that matter Uncle Paddy," said Davey and shivered.

"Eh come on now, don't let that bag of bones scare yer. But yer right in what yer say lad. If he'd wanted he could have stuck yer like he did the runner, what's-is-name, Toe-peg weren't it?"

"Hotchas, Uncle Paddy."

"Aye, that's him. Hot-chess, whatever. He stuck him but he didn't even try to kill you."

"So what's he up to?"

"That, lad, is sommat were going to find out. Stick that chair by the door in case the old girl comes back. Get the pickle on and let's get down to business."

"No, wait Uncle Paddy," said Davey holding the helmet in readiness, "let's stay in the past, what I mean is if we start finding out about what's going on *now* we might change what's going to happen. We won't be able to do anything about what we're seeing."

"Don't seem yer can do much about it anyways lad."

"We can talk to the old man, he's going to help."

"Well get to 'im then lad," Paddy rubbed his hands together, "Things are happenin' if the Shyman's started pokin' his nose round here! Maybe yer should go and get me spirit-level out the shed."

"What for?"

"To flatten him with - get it?"

They both laughed, it was a welcome relief for Davey after his adventures of the day.

CHAPTER 21

Ritual of Death

The old man stared at the blocks of stone as they gave one last shudder before settling themselves into place, the whole side of the temple had slipped downwards demolishing the doorway. He watched the dust settle before making his way across the temple square. The screams and yells of fury from the palace drew him through the gate and into the courtyard recently vacated by the warriors. Edzna stepped from the shadows and began to swing a blow that would have decapitated him but for Chacuti screaming, "STOP! He is a friend!"

"You are safe child," said the old man, "the Shaman is trapped. Where are the skulls?"

Chacuti pointed towards the fountain, the old man stepped across and stared fixedly at the crystals, "Where is your father?"

Chacuti pointed towards the sound of battle.

"I shall help him and return to you."

Although the look in Chacuti's eyes was begging him to remain the old man continued into the palace.

"Someone's watching them Uncle Paddy, I saw them move when the warrior went to hit the old man!"

Davey searched the area around the courtyard. Behind a low wall crouched Aquila, the axe-head held in his grip, his eyes peered over the wall glaring towards Chacuti and her protector.

"He'll be after the skulls lad. Them things will be worth an awful lot to someone like 'im." They watched as concealed by the wall Aquila made his way nearer. *"Flippin' heck. Here we go again. Can't yer let the old man know what's going on and get him back here!"*

"You're right Uncle Paddy. He's their only chance!"

The old man looked into the great hall. Bodies were strewn everywhere, the walls were painted with the blood of men. Amongst the carnage a small group of Incas battled. Pikemen attempted to hem them in but the warriors were moving too quickly, staying close to their foes to prevent muskets being used. The commander realised the danger, "Form a phalanx!" he ordered, The sergeant yelled out the order and a wall of pikes was formed. Muskets were loaded and made ready behind the safety of the pikewall.

The old man heard the orders being shouted and knew that in an instant the Spaniards who were fighting with the Incas would retreat behind the pikewall and expose the warriors to a deadly cross-fire.

He ran into the hall: mistaking him for an enemy a Spaniard struck towards him with his sword but the blow just bounced off the bubble of protection around him. Nearing Axa he shouted in a tremendous voice, "My Lord Axa. You must retreat!"

Axa heard him in the midst of battle, pushing a body away from himself he whirled towards the old man, "We hold our ground!"

Seeing the danger was almost upon them the old man leapt towards the pike wall. In the same instant the Spaniards retreated behind the tiers of pikes, muskets were levelled.

The old man ran into the press of pikes, not recognising him the Spaniards stabbed towards him but instead of the vicious points on the axe-heads finding their target the energy of the attack was thrown back upon the man wielding the weapon. Pushing and shoving the shafts from the hands of the men who held them, the old man caused the volley of shots to explode harmlessly into the air above the heads of the warriors. One of the Spaniards, slower than his fellows to reload, had fired before he withdrew his ramrod from the musket barrel, the ramrod hurtled across the hall and embedded itself in the back of a warrior.

"Come! You must retreat!" yelled the old man, running back away from the pikemen and past the warriors. Realising that but for the old man they would have been slaughtered Axa blew his horn, his men followed him at speed out of the great hall. In disarray the commander yelled at his men to reform and reload.

Back in the courtyard they found Chacuti, she was hiding, terrified, in a small recess in the courtyard wall. She ran to her father's side.

"The skulls are gone!" shouted the old man seeing the pedestal knocked to the ground.

"My Lord, Edzna has been slain!" cried a warrior finding the body of the warrior, from the far side of the courtyard another warrior shouted, "Here lies his killer!" Axa ran to him as he kicked the body over onto its back.

"AQUILA!" he turned to his daughter, "What has taken place here child?" Chacuti was too terrified to speak. Axa repeated his question to the old man.

"I begin to see, but there is danger my lord. Let us move away from this place!" warned the old man.

Axa motioned for the warriors to move. "We shall make our stand at the canal bridge!" he ordered, at a fast trot they made their way out of the courtyard.

"What's happened lad, who's killed 'em?"

"I'll go back and take a look Uncle Paddy. I can let the old man know what's happened."

Using the wall to get as close as possible Aquila stalked his prey. Waiting until Edzna turned towards the sounds of battle he launched himself into the attack, Chacuti's warning cry came too late as the powerful arms of the guards leader swung the stunted axe-head in a vicious blow.

Ignoring the child Aquila moved across to the fountain, he was about to lift the skulls from their watery sanctuary when the child sobbed. He looked past her to the gate and saw a movement, starlight glinted upon the scales of a

huge snake. Aquila darted into the recess clamping his hand over the child's mouth, "The Shaman comes," he whispered.

The snake moved in through the gate, its tongue flicked back and forth scanning the air. Intent upon recovering the skulls the reptile was not as vigilant as it ought to have been. Straight towards the fountain it slithered. Chacuti would have screamed but for the hand which held her mouth closed. Round the fountain the snake extended its length, encircling the crystals which lay in the centre with its thick mass.

"It's flippin' massive Uncle Paddy!"

"Eh up, what's A-Killer up to?"

Aquila forced Chacuti to remain silent, it was all she could do to breathe through a tiny gap left by the fingers clamped across her mouth. When he was certain the child would not cry out Aquila released his hand, he waited until the reptile extended its head towards the fountain then left Chacuti and circled slowly in the shadows so that he was behind the serpent. The snake looked down into the water but it would not retrieve the skulls, instead it placed its thick snout against the stone bowl and began to push.

"It's scared of the water."

"It's going to push the lot over."

The bowl rocked as the snake applied more and more force: shooting its head forwards it sent the bowl tumbling so that the skulls were disgorged onto the soft earth below. At that same instant Aquila struck, he did not swing the axe, the warrior was too skilful to waste any of the power of the blow he knew would be needed to kill the reptile, instead he lunged forwards throwing all his weight and strength into the fiercesome point which extended beyond the axe-head. The steel embedded itself deep in the head of the cold-blooded serpent. Aquila jumped aside, the axe was twisted from his grasp as the great reptile threshed wildly with the agony of the death-dealing blow.

"He's got it! He's killed the flippin' Shaman!"

Davey was elated, *"The girl's going to be okay!"*

They had no sooner spoken than the snake whipped its body so convulsively that the axe was flung from its head. It lay quite still, not even the tongue flicked out to indicate it still lived, the cold surface of its eyes betrayed nothing. Aquila skirted around it towards the axe-head, he picked up the weapon and moved in upon the animal.

"He's goin' to cut its head off!" exclaimed Paddy as Aquila raised the axe ready for an almighty downward swipe.

The snake twisted upwards and bit its attacker upon the arm with jaws so powerful that Aquila instantly dropped the axe. The fangs of the snake pumped a massive dose of poison into his veins, paralysing heart and lungs, suffocating him.

Chacuti shrank into the recess.

The snake moved in jerks towards the skulls. It dropped its lower jaw and swallowed them one after the other, only when the crystals were protected within its thick body did the reptile look around. Its tongue flicked in and out as it moved towards Chacuti.

Before the recess it stopped, its head waved back and forth as its weak eyes sought to penetrate the darkness. Its heat-seeking senses probed forwards but an almost human cry of pain came from its mouth as it was driven by its agony away from the child and back out the courtyard.

Davey and Paddy heaved a sigh of relief as they watched its tail disappear.

"That was a close one Davey boy."

"The old man know's what's happened now Uncle Paddy."

"Good lad, you keep him clued up and he's got a chance."

Davey looked thoughtful as if he was listening, "He wants to know where the Shaman's gone."

"Foller the snake then lad!"

"What about the girl?"

Paddy thought for a moment, "Hang on, what are we playin' at, she's with the old man and Axa now. Remember, we shifted it back to see what had happened, not what was happenin'"

"Phew, yeah. Okay Uncle Pad."

They watched as the snake climbed up the side of the temple. It was fatally wounded, they could tell by the way it moved that it could not have long to live. To the top of the temple the animal slithered painfully, where the small edifice had stood before the Spanish guns had blasted it to smithereens was the altar upon which many a victim had ended their life. The snake reached the altar, beneath it was a hole which acted as a drainway for the life-giving blood of the victim. The reptile forced its body down into the hole and passed through the narrow tunnelways deeper and deeper into the bowels of the temple, finally to emerge into the chamber of the skulls. There it lay, weak and panting upon the filthy floor.

A skull rasped, "Deliver the skulls of the Shamen to their places, there is not much time."

The snake released the skulls from its stomach, immediately it did so the body of the Shaman began to form, the fatal injury to the back of his head was clearly visible.

"Your life has ended but your work is not yet complete, the child carries the energy she has stolen. It must be recovered," rasped a skull.

"Why did you not take her when you had the chance?" questioned another.

"Leave him. He has done well in delivering us!" hissed one of the skulls as the Shaman placed it back upon its stone block, "the girl can always be taken."

"Nothing can stand in our way. The man in stone has been turned, we have altered the fates," sang the remaining skulls.

The Shaman collapsed to the floor.

"You must undergo the ritual of death Shaman. Your body is useless, your life is ended, but while the child is still alive we are not complete, the energy she carries must be recovered."

"The helmet of power must be recovered," said another skull.

"The Shaman must take a body," chanted the skulls.

The skulls began to intone a sacred chant, it was similar to that used when the Shaman flew through the ether but instead of the sound rising and falling, it rose, remained at a certain pitch, then rose still higher before dropping slowly in tone at which point the sequence was repeated.

"Prepare yourself Shaman. You do not have much longer," ordered a skull.

The Shaman dragged himself into a seating position. He crossed his legs and sat with his hands upon his knees. The chant sent him swaying slowly from side to side, after some time he lent his voice to the sound of the skulls.

"What's 'e up to now lad?"

"No idea Uncle Paddy. I'm letting the old man know what's going on though."

"Get over and see what he's doin'."

Behind the canal bridge stood the old man, with him were Lord Axa and Chacuti. Around them stood Axa's men and scores of warriors, finally convinced by the massacre in the palace that they must fight the invaders. The canal would be the first line of defence, its raised banks zig-zagged across the plain, channelling water down from the mountains to the fields below.

A group of women, herding llamas and alpacas before them rushed across the bridge, both animals and women alike were loaded with anything that they had been able to quickly lay their hands on, their children followed on behind not knowing where they rushed or why. A younger woman cried a shout of encouragement as she passed her lover who waited, spear in hand, ready to defend their escape to the hidden city with his life. An older woman carried a small child wrapped in a thick shawl, to protect it from the first winter snow which begun falling throwing a dusty white powder over the bridge; over the beasts which crossed it, and upon the shoulders of the men who waited grimly to defend it. In the cold breeze the powder swirled, illuminated against the darkness by the flaring torches which were placed upon the bridge, allowing the women and children to find their feet as they crossed the delicate structure. Beyond the blaze of light the snow blacked out the mantle of stars overhead, to avoid detection the group continued their way in darkness.

The bridge would be the first point of pursuit, the high-banked canal would force the invaders to attempt to cross the bridge to get to them, Lord Axa was busy directing men into strategic positions, the old man was pleading with him, "You must destroy the bridge Lord Axa, only water will prevent the Shaman from getting to her!"

"Is not the Shaman trapped within his evil lair?" asked Lord Axa.

"The Shaman caused the death of your warrior," said the old man, "It was only the work of the man Aquila that prevented Chacuti being taken."

"He acted to help?" asked the chieftain incredulously.

The old man shook his head, "The crystal skulls were his undoing, he has injured the Shaman but I do not believe that any mortal man can kill that fiend," he spoke with such meaning that the warrior pursed his lips and stared hard back at him.

"The bridge will funnel the invaders into us, without it we cannot know where they will attempt to cross," answered Axa.

"Not only the life of your child is at stake in these matters," said the old man, "the powers that we fight against are more than the Earth has witnessed in aeons of time. We must act to prevent the seven becoming eight, their power will become awesome once united."

"I hear you old man, I believe in you." Axa pondered for a moment before ordering his men, "Burn the bridge! The warriors will assemble at a point behind the canal from which they can be dispersed to any point where the invaders might try to cross. Make ready!"

Several of the small reed boats which were moored along the canal bank were set on fire and positioned beneath the bridge, soon flames leapt up, licking and spreading beneath the arch. A final group of women and children crossed, their animals had to be severely whipped to force them to walk above the flames which were already beginning to take a grip. Immediately they had crossed the timbers caught alight and flames burst into the air. The burning structure warmed the warriors who were forced to move further away from the intense heat. Like a burning beacon it lit up the night sky giving away their position.

"Why do the invaders delay?" shouted one of the warriors.

"Perhaps they do not wish to taste our power again so soon!" boasted another.

"Hold on, this stuff about water can't be right, I've seen the Shaman in the water!" said Davey.

"Yer right lad. Yer'd better let the old fella know yer've seen 'im and water won't hurt 'im."

Davey concentrated briefly. In the mirror they watched the old man apparently listening to what he was being told.

"He says that I should be very careful Uncle Paddy, he doesn't know how the Shaman got to us but that if it was him he must be scared of water - remember how the snake wouldn't touch it?"

Paddy was annoyed, "Tell him that yer the one that's seen 'im, what's he think yer doin', making this up?"

"But he must be right Uncle Paddy. The way the snake kept back from the water proved it didn't like the stuff."

Paddy nodded, chewing his lip as he thought of various possibilities, "I get a terrible feelin' sometimes about all this," he said as much to himself as to Davey, "one thing's for sure though the girl can't be safe in that big old house if he's prowling around. We've got to get her out of there to somewhere safe."

"The old man want's to know if we can tell him what the Shaman's doing."

"Go for it lad!"

The air around the Shaman seemed to quiver, pulses of energy beat through the air. The skulls glowed and faded as the chant increased in intensity.

"What's that behind his head?"

Davey moved their view behind the Shaman, *"It's bright inside his head!"* he exclaimed.

A source of light moved along the line of injury from within the head of the Shaman until it projected into the chamber, the light it gave out was bright enough for it to cast shadows of the skulls against the walls.

"He's feelin' light-headed!" joked Paddy.

The light source grew in size, it was a horrible light, a light which had a brightness but also a sickening quality. It extended further into the room and continued to grow, thickening out as it emanated from the body of the Shaman.

A skull barked, "Your energy discards the body, leave the useless corpse."

Another skull urged, "Your body's life is ended, leave the useless corpse."

The light, where it connected to the head of the Shaman, began to thin, soon it thinned to such an extent that only the thinnest sliver still fastened it to him.

A third skull rasped, "Leave the useless corpse."

The thread which tied the light to the corpse was severed. The Shaman's body swayed for the last time then crumpled to the floor. Within the chamber of the skulls the light source hovered. The skulls cried out;

"The more evil the man the less he will fight you."

"The nearer to death the less he will fight you."

"Go now, take your man, find the girl!"

"We've got to warn the old man Uncle Paddy," said Davey.

"Warn him about what lad? What the flip's goin' on?"

"The Shaman's going to get out, I think he's going to get inside somebody else!"

"Ah come on lad, yer letting this lot get to yer again!"

Davey swept from the temple to the canal bridge which had all but burnt away, already the intensity of the flames had died down, the charred remains would soon crumble.

"Lord Axa, we must leave, I fear the Shaman," said the old man.

"Have we not burnt the bridge as you wished?" replied Lord Axa.

"I fear the Shaman has power that I have only begun to suspect he possesses. This water may delay him, it may not. For the sake of your child we must flee."

Axa waved his battleaxe towards his men, "Without me these men would not stand and fight, I cannot leave them though my life and that of my family depended upon it, it is the warriors way to stand and fight, we shall make these invaders pay dearly for entering the land of the Inca."

"Then I must take the child and flee," said the old man. "It is not safe for her here. Remember Lord Axa it is not simply the *life* of the child that is at stake, her very soul is at risk from the Shaman."

Axa considered the matter, "To where would you run old man, if the Shaman has the power of which you speak he will seek you out and find you no matter where you hide."

"You are right my Lord, but water shall be our protection, it cleans the filth from the darkest places, it sweeps on filling all in its path, it is change and changeless, the Shaman fears its power. I shall journey with the child across the great ocean, to my home country, there she will be safe."

Axa listened to the old man's words, when he realised what he was saying he stood still, thinking, not listening to any of the shouts and cries around them as the warriors prepared their position to repel the invaders. "Take her old man, protect her from the foul evil that has stalked our land, may you one day return and bring my child back to me." He reached down, clasped his arms round his daughter and lifted her up to his chest, "You must go with him Chacuti, you will be safe with him, I can protect you from men - not devils."

"No Father!" cried Chacuti. "Please let me stay with you. I cannot leave. What of Panqui and mother!"

"They are safe within the hidden city, unless the Shaman has betrayed it to the invaders they shall never find it."

"The Shaman is concerned with matters not of this earth," said the old man, "He no longer cares whether the people live or die, he seeks only to retrieve what the child has taken and this helmet that I wear. Your wife and child will be safe within the sanctuary."

"I have already pleaded with you once to take my child old man, without you she would have walked the walk of death; remember this child!" he urged Chacuti, "the Shaman is evil - nothing less, the way of the Inca is corrupt and wicked. The old man will take care of you as I cannot, you must go with him, he will protect you from harm."

Chacuti did not argue again. Her father had spoken, Lord Axa placed her back down then motioned for one of his men to come towards him, he spoke quickly to the man and took a small knapsack from him, quickly he showed the old man the contents of the knapsack. Three lumps of gold as large as a child's fist lay heavy within the leathern pouch. He took the knapsack and gave it to the old man. The two men stared hard at each other and clasped their hands together. With a final farewell the old man offered the child his hand. Axa nodded towards Chacuti who took it, tears were in her eyes as the old man led her away.

"Flippin' heck lad, that can't have been easy for him. It's not as if it was me mother sayin' good-bye to me!" he laughed.

"Can't you ever be serious Uncle Paddy! Hold on the old man wants to know..."

Davey swept back to the temple. The light source had gone.

"Where is he lad, quick, find him! He could be anywhere!"

Davey remained stuck within the chamber.

The skulls sensed him, "An intruder watches us!" rasped a voice out of the darkness. "It is the boy!"

"We must work together against him," rasped another skull.

"Uncle Paddy I can't find him!" cried Davey.

"Concentrate lad, focus on him and you'll get there, come on now yer've done it before."

Almost instantly their view shot out of the temple and into the great hall of the palace.

"What's he doin'? I thought he was dead?" said Paddy.

Father Salamanga stood, shouting to the men around him. His hands held open his cassock where the spear had ripped it apart, he was walking towards the men who shrank back from him as he approached, "Do not be afraid," he urged, "reach forth thy hand and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless but believing."

"Don't look like nobody wants to take 'im up on that," said Paddy. "Sounds like he thinks he's Jesus or sommat."

"or sommat," repeated Davey ominously.

"What...yer mean...yer don't think..."

Davey nodded.

"Yer'd better get the old feller and the kid shifting quick lad." Paddy moved aside a curtain, "No hold on a minute, look, it's flippin' dark outside, if yer'd been in work yer'd be knockin' off by now. Yer'd better get yerself home, nip out the back way just in case someone sees yer."

"What about the old man and girl?"

"No worries lad, till we've seen them do sommat they haven't done it, what did we say - if we ain't seen it happen then it ain't happened."

"Got you Uncle Paddy," said Davey, "I'll be back over later on."

It was quite dark outside, a light rain was blowing, out on the river the liners were roaring to each other. Davey lifted his collar up and ran round to his front door.

"How'd it go then son?" asked Hugh. Liz stood behind him, the proud mother.

"Not bad, I'm learning me way round first before they start me training," said Davey.

"Good for you son," said Hugh, "what did I tell yer girl, he's took to it like a duck to water."

"I've put a bit of dinner on for you Davey. You must have worked up an appetite," Liz said.

"Famished Mum, I could eat a big fat pig!" he jumped up and squeezed the fat upon Liz's hips.

"Well he's not so tired that he can't still raise the roof!" joked Hugh as Liz shrieked.

As he tucked into his meal Davey's thoughts raced along, he took no pleasure in lying to his parents but he had no choice, it was either that or try to explain a magic helmet; Shamen, mirrors and bodies rising from the dead. How could they hope to understand. How could he keep on hiding the fact that he did not have a job from them? No, he'd keep it secret and see the thing through one way or the other, the girl in Carnatic had done nothing to deserve her fate, someone had it to try to help her.

"You're lookin' worried lad," said Hugh, "don't worry you'll settle in, those fellers on the factory floor always make it hard for new workers, it's like a test, they'll stop soon as they see what yer made of."

Davey forced a smile, he wanted to tell Hugh everything, if only he knew what was happening, but as he started to speak he choked on the words. Paddy and Mrs M might be comfortable with weird goings-on but his parents would never hope to understand. He realised how right he was when Liz came into the room.

"Going over to Uncle Paddy's again later?" she asked.

"Aye, I thought I'd stay over," said Davey trying to sound disinterested.

"Just one thing son, you know what Mrs M's like, with the cups, you know, don't be getting yourself involved in anything like that will you."

Davey pretended ignorance, "What 'cups' Mum?"

"She's talkin' tea-leaves lad," offered Hugh.

"Don't worry about me, that stuff's for old ladies," joked Davey.

They sat together listening to the wireless. The news told of Mr Churchill receiving a presentation copy of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* from Colonel Lawrence, "That's Lawrence of Arabia that Davey, flipping hero he were, fought against the Turks with the Arabs."

Davey was keen to hear more, "He got captured didn't he Dad?"

"I'll do the washing up," said Liz, making her excuse to escape to the kitchen.

It was not long before the strain of talking told upon Hugh and he gave a short cough, Liz indicated to Davey that he shouldn't ask any more questions. They all sat round the fire and stared into its flames, the wireless wasn't playing anything worth listening to so they turned it off and Davey passed down the novels they were reading from the shelf.

"Any good lad?" asked Hugh of Davey's book.

"Smashing Dad, the Martians have got a death-ray and they're incinerating everywhere with it, they've just burnt up a village called Knaphill, tell you what Dad if you'd had one of them in the war..."

"Davey," his mother cut in, "come on now, don't be going on about the war all the time."

"Ah he's all right Liz," said Hugh, "probably that Paddy's been feeding him battles and the rest, eh lad?" he laughed,

"Hey lad you'd better be getting over, Paddy'll be missing the next instalment of telling you how he won the war single-handed!"

They all laughed together, Davey took the opportunity of sorting out his clothes.

"Will you be needing a carry-out for tomorrow Davey?" asked Liz.

"Naw Mum, it's alright, Mrs M will make me sarnies."

"What about overalls lad? Did you leave your boiler suit in work?"

Davey stuttered, "Ye-es, I've got a locker to leave all me kit in." Feeling that if he lingered any longer he might say something to give himself away he hurriedly said his goodbye's, pecked his mother on the cheek and shot back over the road to the Murtagh's.

Liz had a worried look upon her face, Hugh encouraged her, "Come on then girl, out with it, what's bothering yer?"

"Did Davey seem at all, you know, strange to you Hughie?"

"Yes, now you come to mention it, he did girl. Reckon it must be nerves, starting a new job's always hard the first few days. I'll have a word with Paddy tomorrer, he's keeping his eye on the lad, he might know something that we don't."

CHAPTER 22

The Devil is Risen

"Back already," smiled Mrs Murtagh.

"Aye," said Davey.

"Gone on then, he's up there waiting." She winked as she spoke, it was a knowing wink, a wink between her and the boy.

Davey made his way up the stairs pondering what she had meant to convey to him, did she know what he and Paddy were up to? or was it something else?

Paddy must have heard him, he was coughing as Davey went up the stairs but stopped when he entered the bedroom.

"How's yer mum and dad then?" he asked in his deep gruff voice.

"Fine Uncle Paddy, fine..." he was about to tell him about the reception he had received from his Mrs M but thought better of it. "Should I put the helmet on Uncle Paddy?" he asked.

"Just hold it for a sec there lad. I've been worrying whilst yer were gone about this poor girl stuck up in Carnatic, I reckon that if the Shyman's prowling round the sooner yer get her out of that place the better it'll be for her."

"Should I go there tomorrow, see if I can talk to her, tell her that she's not safe?"

"I reckon there's no harm tryin' lad. She'd be a lot safer with us back here than stuck up in that old house on her own."

"This all seems so weird Uncle Paddy. It's like a dream, I keep on expecting to wake up. How can we be trying to save the life of someone who's already dead?" Davey laughed, the idea was so unimaginable.

"Look lad, the helmet's there, under the bed. It's real, we've got hold of it, if yer can run like a rabbit and hide like the invisible man when yer wearing it then what's there to imagine? How come these pictures appear in the mirror when yer wearin' it? How come them scally-wags yer sorted out, you know the ginger-head and his mate, how come they saw the White Lady? I tell yer lad it's no dream, it's flippin' happening and we're goin' to see it through."

"I'll go back there tomorrow, when its light, see if I can talk to her," said Davey convinced.

"Yer'll have to take certain precautions though lad," said Paddy chewing his lip.

"Such as?" Davey realised he was referring to the Shaman.

"Well for one, I reckon that we can get advice from the old man on how's yer can go about protecting yerself from that evil little sod."

Davey nodded, "I'll ask him," he put on the helmet.

The snow was falling thick and fast, the old man and girl trudged along the canal bank walking though freezing slushy puddles and slipping on black ice. The snow grew thicker blotting out even the faintest starlight. Far behind them the last flames of the bridge flickered. The old man told Chacuti to walk in front of him so that he could always see her. "Come child, we shall take to water," he said seeing a reed boat, "it will be speedier for us and safer." The old man slipped and skidded his way up the bank but Chacuti seemed to float up it. They boarded the vessel and rummaged round until the old man found a paddle. The boat was surprisingly stable and was so light that the merest pull on the paddle sent it flitting across the surface of the canal. Under the weird shaped branches of gnarled trees they skimmed along, "Take shelter child," said the old man nodding towards the back of the boat where the stern

raised up in a great curve and provided room beneath it for the child to crouch. The snow continued to fall but the helmet gave the old man all the warmth that he needed, the energy from the skulls kept the child similarly warmed.

"He's asking where the Shaman is again," said Davey.

"Well get on and tell 'im, what yer waitin' for," said Paddy impatiently, "yer can ask him about how to protect yerself from the Shyman later."

Father Salamanga was running away from the great hall in the palace.

The Spaniards stood staring at each other as he left, some had open mouths, others had looks of total terror etched into their features, not because of the foul act of murder they had committed, not because of their treachery but because of the actions of their own priest.

"He is possessed of a demon!" exclaimed Carlos to the commander, putting the thoughts of all into words. "No man could hope to have survived such a wound."

"Witchery has taken place here tonight," the commander said quietly but his mind was on other matters, he shouted to his men, "Form up, the Incas must be defeated swiftly before they have recovered from their shock. Without the nobles they will be leaderless!"

"But what of Father Salamanga?" enquired Carlos.

"He makes his own destiny," answered the commander. Another officer approached him, "Sire, the men are saying that the man who aided the Incas was the cook. One of the men says that he would swear to it, the old man carries a great scar but they cannot all be mistaken."

"Witchery has taken place here tonight," repeated the commander quietly to himself. He shouted the sergeant to hurry the men into forming up.

Across the dark plain the priest tore, his sandals quickly became sodden and slipped from beneath his feet but still remained fastened to his legs by the thin ankle straps, he did not slow his pace or even attempt to remove them but thundered swiftly onwards. The snow increased and battered into his face, soon his beard turned white with the frosty crystals encrusted upon it.

"YOU ARE MINE!" yelled the priest as he ran, shouting frenziedly into the air. He cut across the plain, leaping irrigation ditches which the cold night was already beginning to freeze over, heading straight for the canal.

"I hear you boy," said the old man. He stood up in the boat and scanned his eyes across the plain.

"What's he doin'. It's pitch dark," said Paddy.

"He's wearing the helmet Uncle Paddy."

"Right lad. Well the flippin' speed that Shyman's moving he'll think he's seen a 24" shell or sommat. How's he know where to find the old man anyhow?"

"The Shaman is drawn to the helmet," said the old man, then more softly, "the child he seeks is with me."

The old man saw the priest. He was clearly shocked, "The devil is risen," he said with dismay in his voice. He returned to paddling, this time he paddled hard and swiftly sending the boat surging along on the side of the canal furthest away from his pursuer. "Go forwards boy, check the length of this waterway, there may be another bridge which would allow this demon to reach us."

Davey zipped along the length of the canal, he was able to report the good news that it had only the one bridge and that had been destroyed by Lord Axa. However the waterway did narrow at one point, *"Better warn him about that lad, spring-heeled Jack over there might try to bounce on board,"* said Paddy.

They watched the priest, the snow was cold and dry but as it settled upon his steaming body it melted saturating his cassock which had blown open. *"Look what he's carrying lad, if ever yer needed convincing there's yer proof!"*

Tied to the priest's belt by a his rosary beads was the Shaman's sacrificial dagger.

"Maybe if the old man was to throw his helmet into the water the Shaman would stop chasing them and go after the helmet," suggested Davey.

"Not a bad idea lad, try letting him know it."

The old man spoke, "He will never let the child get away. The helmet gives me strength, it is better that it protects us than we run the risk of allowing the Shaman to use it."

"He's no idjit is he lad. He's talkin' sense."

Father Salamanga halted at the exact point of which Davey had warned. The bank on the side on which he stood jutted out towards the far bank due to a great rock which had proven too much of an obstacle for the Incas to clear. Onto this rock the priest climbed until he overlooked the waterway below.

"He'll be able to jump onto them from there without any problem Uncle Paddy!"

"But he might not chance it lad, not if what we reckon about the water's true, what if he slipped and fell in?"

"The old man reckons the same as you do but..." Davey watched the priest gathering great stones which he heaped onto the rock.

The boat raced beneath, warned to move as fast as he could the old man dug furiously with the paddle sending a bow wave the full length of his small craft.

"Watch out!" cried Davey.

The priest slammed one of the stones downwards with terrific force, it narrowly missed and sent a spray of water high into the air.

"Flippin' 'eck it's like a flippin' bomb went off!" exclaimed Paddy.

In a whirl of movement the priest hurled another stone, this time the stone was directly on target, the bubble of protection around the old man, still weakened from his battle with the Shaman, was just enough to send the missile glancing harmlessly into the water. Whilst its splash was still falling upon them the Shaman loosed off another rock. This time the bubble failed to hold, the stone slammed through and hit the boat, the small craft lurched dangerously to one side, Chacuti screamed and slipped into the water, droppin his paddle the old man grasped her hand and hauled her back onto the stricken craft. But they had passed further away from the Shaman, they were no longer in range of the stones but the boat had been damaged, as the stone had powered its way through the reeds it had picked up a greater mass in its progress so that when it eventually ripped its way through beneath the keel it tore out a great hole.

As the boat lurched along its bow began to turn towards the Shaman's bank. They watched as Father Salamanga ran down from the rock and stood waiting, chest heaving from exertion, waiting for them to fall into his clutches.

Nearer and nearer they floated towards the Shaman, he stood leering at them, a terrible grin had crossed his features, his hand rested upon the handle of his dagger. "I have them, soon I shall return," he snarled.

"Who's he talkin' to?" asked Paddy, *"the feller's cracking up."*

Davey concentrated and they listened to the old man's reply, "The skulls speak to him, they advise and strengthen him."

"Can't we get back to them flippin' things and smash 'em like the girl did?"

"We could listen to what they're saying Uncle Paddy but we can't do any more than that. Hold on, the old man's going to take his helmet off!"

"Is that safe lad? Tell him to leave it on."

But the old man had already removed the helmet, he began using it as a paddle, scooping it through the water which felt icy cold without the protection it gave him. He locked his numbed fingers into the two holes in its base in case the freezing water caused him to drop it. He could no longer see in the darkness, neither could he communicate directly with Davey, it was more by a kind of instinctive feel, much as they had experienced in the temple, that Davey was able to direct the old man along the right course.

Chacuti sat in the stern, aware that the old man was risking everything to help her she asked, "Why do you wish to help me?"

The old man never stopped scooping but answered, "I never did take to men of evil child, and this one is worse than most."

"Couldn't have put it better meself lad!" Paddy encouraged, "Eh up! Talking of the devil, where's he gone?"

The Shaman had moved off. The old man was becoming tired without the strength that the helmet gave him but he had steered the craft away from danger, he was gradually forced to stop scooping and put the helmet back on allowing the slight current to take control over the craft, only endeavouring to steer when it tilted its way towards the far bank.

The hole in the base of the vessel allowed water to rise into the boat but the individual reeds trapped chambers of air which kept it from sinking hardly any lower than before the stone had struck, the main problem was its manoeuvrability which appeared to have been quite badly affected.

"There he is, look, what's he doing?" They watched as the Shaman trotted along the canal bank ahead of the boat, not too far ahead so that he lost sight of the craft but far enough ahead to allow him time to utilise whatever opportunity presented itself.

"Should we tell the old man to land on the side away from the Shaman and try running for it?" suggested Davey.

"Might not be such a good idea lad, they didn't make very good time of it before and this snow's not getting any lighter. It'd be a bit like sticking yer head up out of a trench. The enemy know where yer are but they can't do a damned thing about it except when yer leave yer shelter, then WHAM!" the way Paddy shouted his final word caused Davey to jump up into the air with fright, it wasn't until he had settled himself back down again that he recovered sufficiently to be able to reply, "I see what you mean."

"Tell yer what lad, while it's gone quiet here how about nipping back and seeing how Lord Axa's lot are gettin' on?" Davey thought for a moment, "The old man wants us with him Uncle Paddy."

"Arr eh lad, this is goin' to get boring if we've got to keep doin' what he wants all the time."

"He's up to something Uncle Paddy."

The old man slipped from the side of the reed-boat into the water, a thin film of ice had formed across the surface of the canal, as he swam he used the helmet to help him to break a path. Without its protection he could only have hoped to survive for a few seconds, with it he felt no discomfort whatsoever. The Shaman's tongue slipped in and out, it was forked, it tasted the air and scented the old man in the darkness, with a vicious smile he began to walk back towards the point where the old man would reach the bank.

The old man reached the side and began to pull himself up the raised bank, swollen with snow from the mountains the canal had risen near to the top of the bank. The Shaman stood back from the old man just outside the bubble of protection, his savage eyes glared.

"Begone evil one!" cried the old man. The Shaman remained rooted to the spot. The old man flung his whole arm against the surface of the water sending a thin sheet of icy water cascading towards the Shaman. He did not move but remained standing still staring at the old man. The water added itself to the soaked cassock.

"The water didn't bother him!" cried Davey.

"The old feller's had it!" added Paddy.

"No wait, the old man's right, if the Shaman wasn't frightened of the water he'd have attacked him by now. He wouldn't just be standing there would he."

"Yer may be right lad," said Paddy not sounding convinced.

"The skulls were put underwater, he's got to go right in the water!"

"Like a baptism!" exclaimed Paddy, "I tell yer what though I wouldn't want to be the one to baptise that baby."

"Maybe that's why people got baptised like that in the olden days Uncle Paddy!"

"Hang on the slack lad, yer letting this lot get to yer again. What's he doin' now?"

The old man starting digging into the top of the bank using his hands like shovels. The strength the helmet gave him allowed him to dig great chunks of earth free and he flung them towards the Shaman. The Shaman did not move but stood watching the earth as it shot towards him then veered away before it hit him.

"He's bullet-proof as well is he," sighed Paddy. *"What's the old man doing, can't he see he's wasting his time?"*

The old man continued digging and throwing clods of soil, rocks and stones towards the Shaman. *"I know what he's doing, look!"* Davey shot their view in for a closer examination.

The surface of the canal met the narrow trench the old man had dug. Hesitantly, the water trickled through the gap then dribbled down the bank towards the Shaman. Within moments the gap widened and the water began to pour through the breach. The Shaman walked slowly away but as the water continued to pour down the bank he was forced to trot.

"He's not taking any chances with getting caught is he lad!"

The old man dug further into the bank.

"I'd better tell him not to go too far Uncle Paddy or there'll be nothing for him left to float on."

"And Axa will end up with egg on his face if he thinks the canal is going to defend him," joked Paddy.

The old man halted and began paddling back to the boat, it had moved further away in the current and it was some time before he was able to reach it and climb onboard. He picked up the paddle and rowed hard, Davey and Paddy watched as the water continued to pour from the canal forming a great, ever deepening sheet over the plain, the Shaman sat like an animal upon a boulder within the sheet, watching it slowly rising.

"He's trapped lad, tell the old man that he's too scared to leave his perch!"

Davey stared at the old man, "It will give him some time but as soon as the canal finds its new level the water on the plain will quickly freeze and the Shaman will follow," said Davey.

As if to confirm what the old man had told him they saw the priest extend one of his bare feet towards the surface and press as if testing the rapidly forming ice.

The old man paddled for hours, the night grew colder and the ice on the surface of the canal gradually grew thicker, slowing his progress. The water on the icy plain was quicker to freeze, before long the Shaman was able to test it and find that it would take the weight of his body. It was no more that knee-deep he had nothing to fear. He raced after the boat skating along on the flats of his feet over the ice.

The canal had met a larger waterway, the old man had followed the current, rowing hard, forcing his small craft through the ice. Soon the current increased to such an extent that ice was not able to form, it would not be until the depths of winter had set in that the cold would freeze even the waterfalls into solid walls of crystal. Davey scouted ahead, informing the old man of what to expect.

"He want's to get to the sea, he says that he can get on one of their ships there," said Davey, "I'm going to find the best way for him to go, write it on that paper Uncle Paddy." They soared their way rapidly down river valleys, twisting and turning through chasms and over wide estuaries to the sea, the sun was rising on the horizon sending promises of warmth for the forthcoming day.

"Right that's it, have you got it all down Uncle Paddy?"

"Aye lad," said Paddy pointing towards his diagram which looked like something an injured spider might have drawn.

They steered the old man's craft down to a great river, as the sun rose Davey recognised it, "This is the river that they followed up to the city Uncle Paddy. This must be the same way that those rafts the commander was talking about have been shifting all the gold back to their ships."

"It fits lad, it fits."

Davey swept their view back up the river valleys, past cliffs and through gorges to the Shaman. He was climbing higher seeking to reach the high plateau which crossed along the back of the mountain range like the spinal cord of a great animal. He never tired but raced onwards drawn by the pull of the helmet and the child who had interfered with the plans of the gods.

"He's going some isn't he lad?"

Davey joined in with Paddy's light-heartedness, "We could have done with him in the CLB cross-country team, we'd have been in with a chance!"

"Yeah, no-chance," quipped Paddy.

The reed-boat bobbed along on the racing waters far below unseen to the Shaman's eyes, sometimes it was necessary for the old man to place a foot into the churning waters to provide enough of a drag to steer the craft back out into mid-channel and the flatter, faster currents.

Davey was elated, "He'll never catch them, the speed they're going, look he's falling further behind all the time."

"Don't count yer chickens lad," warned Paddy, "did yer see his eyes."

Davey recalled the fixed, half-crazed stare that emanated from the eyes of the priest and shivered.

The Shaman was moving swiftly, his cassock had ripped along the bottom, shortening it, the hood had been torn off. The sandals still flapped crazily around his ankles, occasionally he screamed a fierce oath into the ether, on more than one occasion he fell flat onto his face but seemed to bounce back to his feet with renewed energy and vigour. No obstacle could halt him, nothing could slow him; the deep snows which permanently covered the high peaks were frozen as hard as stone, the Shaman bounded up the sheer white slopes. The feet of the priest were worn to the bone by the action of the frozen crystals. In places the ground dipped sharply downwards before continuing its steep ascent, the Shaman simply threw the body headlong and hurtled downwards to be halted with numbing force against protrusions of rocks.

"Tell yer what lad that flippin' priest is gettin' a taste of his own medicine. Do yer reckon he knows what's happening to 'im?"

Davey shook his head. He had no idea.

Arriving at the plateau, the ground levelled off and the Shaman attained an even greater speed hurtling over rocks and boulders as though they did not exist, the best part of the short winter day had passed before Paddy and Davey were able to notice any slight decrease in his rapid movement. He headed for a cleft between two towering rock formations which surmounted the top of the section of mountain range which he was traversing. Halting near to the cleft he cried out in a strange tongue, "OIKAERT GOIJE!" The rising sun projected its rays into the cleft.

"What's 'e going on about?"

The Shaman walked into the cleft, it was just wide enough to admit the shoulders of the priest, he walked towards a wall of ice-covered rock and halted. The priest's hand was laid upon the ice, it moved over the slippery surface as if trying to detect something that lay beneath then halted over a certain spot. Thick nails scraped away, soon a small gold replica of a llama was revealed, further scraping found a small silver replica of a jaguar.

"What's going on, they look like a kid's toys."

The nails dug deeper, what appeared to be a child's doll, fashioned in silver with a cloth dress was torn free from the ice. The Shaman gazed up into the sky and yelled, "I take what is mine!" He jerked free a slab of compacted ice, beneath it the face of a young child stared out. It was frozen, mummified by the intense cold and dryness of that altitude.

Lightning rent the sky, the mirror flashed bright bolts of blue as the Shaman reeled from the power which he had unleashed and which was being drawn into the body of the priest. Thunder crashed and roared as the energy increased.

"Jesus Christ! What the hell's going on 'ere!"

"I don't.. like.. this.. Uncle Paddy," said Davey jerkily.

"Get out of here!" cried Paddy. "Take the 'elmet off!"

After Davey had sat and cried for several minutes he sobbed, "I don't want to do this anymore Uncle Paddy."

Paddy comforted him, "It all happened hundreds of years ago lad. It could never happen nowadays, those times were cruel and people did stuff like that, them Shamen were flippin' monsters, it's all over now, forget yer saw it."

"What about the girl. Is that what she's running from, is that what they mean by *the long walk of death*. Would they have done that to her?" he broke down again into fresh sobbing.

"I don't know the answer to that one lad, you just rest yerself now, come on, stick the helmet under the bed and get yer head down."

Davey lay down on his bed nothing that Paddy said could console him. He was still crying when fatigue and the trauma of the events he had witnessed combined to send him to sleep.

Paddy watched him moving about, an occasional moan escaped from the boy's lips, it was clear that his sleep was not a haven of refuge, a place where the terrors of the day were forgotten. The boy was walking the trail of that child of long ago, surrounded by evil men who carried fierce weapons and who wore terrifying clothes and evil masks. Across the mountain-tops of the world they led the child, as they walked they sang the sound, "Aaaughmm," strange curved horns were blown which added themselves to the sound. Over and over it was repeated throughout the dream. On towards a distant peak, passing through villages where people cheered and clapped and threw garlands of flowers, on towards a distant peak. Terror set in with the realisation that the child *knew*, knew but had no control, it was powerless in the hands of the men. Evil stalked the earth, stealing its strength from children. The destination was reached, rough hands forced the child to drink the red earth. The Shaman walked forwards...

Davey woke screaming in the night.

Mrs Murtagh rushed in to the room, "What's goin' on?" she struck a match and lit the light, Paddy was either fast asleep or was pretending to be. "You alright Davey? I thought I heard sommat," she said.

"It was nothing Mrs M," said Davey, "I think I had a dream."

"Flippin' nightmare by the sounds of it sunshine, you sure yer alright?"

Davey's answer was to turn on his side and go back to sleep. Mrs Murtagh looked slowly round the room before returning to her own bed.

Paddy's eyes flicked open as she closed the door softly behind herself. He lay there in the darkness listening to the sound of the boy's breathing, when it became regular he knew Davey had fallen asleep.

CHAPTER 23

Carnatic

A knock on the door and the call of Hugh's voice produced the cry from Paddy, "Wake up lad! It's yer dad!" Davey jumped out of bed in a panic, when he heard the sound of his father's cough followed by his slow footsteps making

their way up the stairs, he ran hither and thither. "Should I put the helmet on Uncle Paddy and make meself invisible?"

"Get in the cupboard!" hissed Paddy. Davey barely had time to close the door behind himself when the door to the bedroom swung open.

"Mornin' Pad," called Hugh cheerily, "lovely day out there today, bit fresh though."

"Alright there Hughie, how's the missus?"

"Yeah Liz's fine, she's just baking some scones, you know, the ones you like, I'll bring some over for yer when she's finished."

"Can't wait mate."

Hugh decided to broach a tricky subject with his friend, "She was a bit worried about the lad last night Paddy. You haven't noticed owt have yer?"

Paddy blustered, "N..nothing Hughie, he's fine."

"Got himself off to work this morning did he?"

"Yeah fine, no problems, couldn't wait to get back in there, got some feller named Bert showing him the ropes."

Hugh seemed relieved, "Yer doing a grand job Pad, I tell yer I was getting worried about him the other day, what on earth do yer reckon he meant about that helmet, I tell yer what Pad I've hardly stopped worrying about it since he mentioned it."

"Like I told yer Hughie, 'magination. The lad's got spirit, that's all. What's the harm in that? Gets it from you I reckon. Don't be worrying about him, he's doing alright now he's out of that flippin' school and from under the feet of that Queerk." Paddy coughed and laughed at the same time as he mentioned the teacher's name.

Hugh could barely speak for laughing, "I told Liz and the lad that.. yer always was... a crack shot!" Paddy joined in, the pair of them lay on the bed cackling away until their lungs got the better of them and they were forced to bring themselves under control. Davey huddled in the cupboard biting onto his lower lip to prevent himself from joining in. It was good to hear his father so happy. Downstairs he heard the front door being slammed as Mrs Murtagh came back in from her morning trip to the corner shop, she called up the stairs, "Need anything Paddy!"

"Naw," barked Paddy bad-temperdly.

"Come on lad, don't be rough on her, she's doing yer a grand job, you know that," said Hugh.

Paddy was not so generous, "I knows yer right mate but...well, you know how it is."

Hugh knew. "I'll look in on you later on, I promised I'd help her with the housework today," he got to his feet. Paddy merely nodded. "Come on now old feller, keep that chin up," chirped Hugh as he left.

Mrs Murtagh bumped into him in the hallway, "Mr Mac, I didn't know yer were here or I'd have put the kettle on," she said.

"Don't go to any trouble, just popped over to see Paddy and find out how the lad's getting on."

Davey and Paddy listened intently for her reply.

"What did Paddy tell yer?"

"He said he's doing brilliant and that he's started his 'prenticeship."

"That's right lovey, that's right," agreed Mrs Murtagh.

Paddy and Davey looked at each other in disbelief. After they had watched Hugh make his way back to Number 99 Davey burst out with, "How come she isn't saying anything Uncle Paddy?"

Paddy sat chewing his lip, "She must know that we're doing sommat, question is what does she know?"

They sat quietly in the room trying to find an answer to the question. After some minutes Mrs Murtagh made her way up the stairs, "Just though I'd make yer a nice cuppa tea," she carried two steaming mugs into the room. Davey looked towards Paddy and began to say something to her but seeing what he was about to do Paddy intervened, "Ta Mum, that's just the job." He motioned for Davey to keep quiet. After she had gone safely back downstairs Paddy told Davey, "She must have her reasons for saying nowt lad, let's let sleepin' dogs lie, if she gets the wrong idea the game's up."

Davey sat looking worried. Paddy asked, "What's the matter now then?"

"Well, thanks to all this magic stuff, and flaming mirrors I **have** lost me job."

"I see what yer mean," said Paddy, "but is what yer saying quite right, I mean it weren't as if it was the Shaman that tied yer up and dragged yer over half the town was it?"

"I don't know about that Uncle Paddy, I'm beginning to get the feeling that he knows exactly what's going on, he's too clever, too powerful and too evil not to be able to get at us. He's onto us, I can feel it."

Paddy was quiet for some time then said, "Well what yer goin' to do about it? The girl's still stuck up in Carnatic, are yer still going to go up there today like yer said yer would?"

Davey gave a deep sigh, "I suppose so, but I'm getting bad feelings about this."

"Well first things first, yer've got to try to get the girl somewhere's safe. Now I reckon that if she was here with us she could help us. I mean she's there in the past, in the mirror, and if she could see herself in there she'd be able to do something about what was going to happen, wouldn't she?"

"Like you said Uncle Paddy, it's doing my head in, I can't figure it all out. I mean I thought that what was in the past was *in the past* but we seem to be able to see things as they're happening. How could she see herself in the past but be able to see what she was doing *before* it happened?"

Paddy burst out laughing, "Blimey, give it a rest, me flippin' head's starting to explode."

They both sat chuckling away. "I've got it," said Paddy, "the trick is that we don't try to explain what's going on, we just get on and do what we've got to do."

"That's the first bit of sense I've heard from you all week," joked Davey.

"Cheeky!" Paddy pretended to hit him with a feather pillow, which, as it was compacted so tightly, would have been like hitting him with a mallet.

"Right, okay then, I'll go up to Carnatic and see what I can do," Davey paused, "but what if I run into the Shaman again?"

"Flamin' heck lad, we said we'd ask the old man what yer could do to protect yerself from him. We got so flippin' carried away by it all we never bothered to ask. Stick it on yer head now and give him a quick onceover, ask him what the method is."

"There they are!" cried Davey.

The reed-boat bobbed along between the towering sides of a deep chasm, the roar from the river as the racing waters were pressed between the unyielding rocks was tremendous.

"They've got a long ways to go, look, up there, it's that bridge them Spanish built."

Davey swung their view up the cliff face to the intricate structure, the winter sunlight had melted away the last remnants of snow from its cobweb-like framework.

"Them fellers sure knew their stuff lad."

Davey nodded in agreement which sent their view up and down the cliff face, they watched as the boat raced on powered by the mighty waters, the old man sat near to the bow, Chacuti still remained crouched in the stern.

"Go on then lad, ask him," urged Paddy. As Davey spoke to the old man Paddy called out the various points along the river which he recognised as the little craft hurtled along below.

"That's where the mule fell in; here's where they swung Bonampak from the tree; look, there's where the priest whipped the slave." The speed of the craft compared to the laborious toil of the column as it had climbed into the mountains was quite fantastic. Davey turned to his uncle.

"He says we should wait Uncle Paddy."

"Wait! what's he mean *wait*?"

"He reckons it could be dangerous to go up to Carnatic."

"Well what about the girl, isn't it dangerous for her?"

"He needs more time to think about what to do." To reinforce his answer Davey pointed at the little vessel as it veered out of a great eddy into a stopper wave which held it and subjected it to the full force of the river before buffeting it back into midstream.

Hearing Mrs Murtagh's footsteps on the stairs Davey removed the helmet, "Quick lad, the chess set!"

A slight tap on the door was followed by Mrs Murtagh's entrance, "Just come for yer cups, havin' fun Davey?" she said looking towards the game.

"Ye-es thanks," stammered Davey.

Mrs Murtagh picked up the cups, "Paddy yer haven't finished yours, if yer don't drink it all up don't expect nothin' from me today."

"Arr give it 'ere," moaned Paddy, draining the mug. After she had gone he complained, "If she doesn't stop interferin' we're never going to get anything done."

They did not have any more interruptions from Mrs Murtagh. She sat in her little kitchen cradling Paddy's mug in her hands, the moistness of her eyes betrayed her thoughts. For some time she stared into the mug then burst into tears crying over and over to herself, "My Paddy, my Paddy. Not my Paddy."

"Well I don't know if we actually needs that old man to tell us what to do," said Paddy, "If it weren't for us he'd be in a right state, he'd probably still be stuck back in that flippin' temple."

"But you said last night that what he was saying made sense Uncle Paddy."

"Yeah an' I said he's no idjit but he must be if he can't tell that the helmet is protecting you just like it does for 'im!" exclaimed Paddy.

"We don't know that do we though, I mean the Shaman hasn't attacked me has he?"

Paddy shook his head and muttered, "Bah! Well find out what he's up to now, with any luck he's fallen and broken that priest's flippin' neck."

The Shaman had begun the descent of the mountains, hurtling downhill he powered on, the icy wastes of the high peaks were left behind him as he raced onwards. Sparse and hardy plants which had died back in preparation for the coming winter were replaced by thin outcrops of trees which eked an existence from the weak soil. The priest's cassock was in tatters, the Shaman's dagger was plain to see. As he neared the jungle his progress became more difficult, masses of foliage slowed his pace, the vegetation thickened in places almost barring his path. The hands of the priest tore at the obstructions but the mass soon became impenetrable. Eventually he sat down cross-legged and placed his hands upon his knees.

"I've got a good idea what he's up to," said Paddy. They both sat watching, *"I knew it!"*

The reptile slithered its way through the vegetation twisting and curling between dense undergrowth where little light penetrated. Occasionally it came across narrow pathways made by the passage of small animals which were carved like tunnels through the solid foliage. The snake made use of these, in one place a tiny deer stood startled by the giant reptile. Fear froze the terrified animal but the reptile brushed it to one side, its sinewy body pressed the deer against the unyielding branches which encased the tunnel as it rushed on after its chosen prey.

"They're never goin' to get away from this feller, I can't stand watching it anymore. Yugh snakes! Can't you hurry it on lad to where it catches them?"

"What if we can stop it catching them Uncle Paddy? If we rush along and see it catch them we won't be able to do anything about it will we?"

"You've started that stuff again lad, I told yer there's no point, let's just get on and do what we've got to do. Tell you what rush it on to where the Shyman starts getting close to them. Then if we've done owt we shouldn't have done they've still got a chance to get away."

Davey was still not sure but couldn't stand the suspense himself any longer, watching the great reptile as it bore down upon its quarry was more than he could bear. He moved in quickly towards the mirror. Days and nights flew by.

The old man was using a piece of driftwood to paddle their way across the river's huge estuary to where four great sailing ships were moored at a wharf. Close by the ships a small fort had been built from wooden logs, it straddled a narrow spit of land which extended out into the slow moving shallow waters of the rivermouth, virtually surrounded by water the fort was in an excellent defensive position.

Staring out towards the flat curve of the sea's horizon Chacuti was stunned by the vast expanse, "My father has told me of this great lake," she said to the old man.

"It is the ocean, child, it is bigger than all the lakes of the world put together."

The land which bordered the estuary was covered with thick patches of reeds, little rivulets cut their way through the reeds pouring their clear waters into the brown, mud-laden waters. Near to the fort Chacuti pointed towards a group of what appeared to be huge rats, bucking and bounding they ran through the reeds then plunged into the water and swam strongly away against the slow-moving current.

"See them, rats again! They've got something to do with the Shaman!" asserted Davey.

"Them things weren't rats lad, they didn't 'ave tails."

For fear of alarming the crews of the ships or the soldiers who could now be seen lining the wharveside and patrolling the battlements of the fort the old man cried a hello. The sound of his voice echoed across the water to the guards.

"Advance and be recognised!" yelled one of the guards.

On board the ship nearest to the reed boat a single cannon was being levered round as men struggled with tackle and handspikes to bring it to bear. Under its threatening black muzzle the old man paddled, it was not the sight of the cannon however which caused him to give the ship a wider berth than necessary but the sight of the three flags fluttering from the top of each of the galleon's towering masts. Each flag showed a black spot on a white background. He paused from his rowing when he glimpsed someone watching his slow progress through one of the

many leaded windows which lay under the poop deck at the stern of the ship, whoever it was quickly disappeared. Beneath where he had stood, carved into the side of the ship, was its name, CARNATIC each letter was painted red and set into a green background.

"It's called Carnatic! Same as the house!"

"Well we're on the right track, that's for sure lad. Who was it lookin' through the window? Was it the Shyman feelin' too shy to show 'iself?"

Davey zoomed their view in through the leaded lights. They found themselves looking into a large cabin with wood-panelled walls. A cot, suspended at each end by twin ropes, served as both a bed and a seat for the man who was sitting upon it. Its swinging action indicated that he had just sat down. In front of him was a large table covered with navigational maps, an astrolabe and other instruments. In one corner a massive oak chest rested, it was half-opened but filled with broken links from a huge anchor chain. The man appeared to have just arisen, his long hair was unkempt, his small goatee beard awry, only his bottom half was properly dressed; he wore breeches tied above the knees with purple knee-bands, twin white hose ran down from the knees into black, silver-buckled shoes, he was busy fastening a lace shirt when a tap-tapping came at this cabin door. "Enter!" he barked.

"There 'e is!" cried Paddy as a man wearing a cassock entered. *"What's 'e up to now?"*

As the man moved into the cabin and nearer to the light which fell in through the windows his face became clearer.

"It's not him!" said Davey.

Paddy's eyes were not so strong, *"It must be him lad, who else could it be?"*

The captain rose from his cot. "Friar Domingez, do you bring good tidings?"

"I am afraid that the disease has taken another good soul Captain," the friar crossed himself, "I fear that it is gaining a grip on the rest of the crew, in the night another man broke out in the dreaded spots, I fear for us all."

The captain crossed to his map tables, "We were due to sail on the morrow. The Winter winds will soon increase to such an extent that to return to Spain will be out of the question until Spring. Is there no treatment which can be administered?"

"Faith in the Lord is our only shield."

The captain shook his head, "If we can just prove to that fat-bellied fool Espadrille that we are fit to sail he will load the rest of our cargo and release us. We must do something, the men who are suffering must be left behind, there is no other alternative."

The friar pursed his lips, "I fear that what you are saying is no longer a possibility, Don Espadrille has placed guards along the wharf to prevent such a happening."

"WHAT! WHEN! I am the master of this ship, who is that maggot to stick his interfering nose into my business!"

"The guards were placed during the night. They act directly upon his orders, no other may countermand them."

"We shall see. Come!" The captain stormed out of his cabin followed by the friar. He emerged on the top deck level, immediately below the upper or open deck. Two rows of great cannon lined each side of the deck; swinging hammocks, some with men who lay moaning and groaning in them blocked his path. The captain pushed the hammocks aside and ordered the crew of the cannon which had targeted the old man to stand down. "What are you doing! Stand down! Can you not see it is but one man and a child!"

They ran up a flight of stairs onto the upper deck, crossing quickly to the bulwarks at the side of the ship the captain yelled down to the lieutenant commanding the detachment of guards, "On whose orders do you quarantine my ship!"

"I am responsible to Don Espadrille!" barked the officer, "Nobody may go ashore without his express permission!"

Although the captain felt like turning his guns upon the guards he realised that the situation was very delicate; a ship with an outbreak of smallpox, men who would not be able to sail her, and above all an oaf like Espadrille to exasperate him. Nevertheless he yelled back at the lieutenant, "We shall see about that!"

Further along the wharf the old man was making his boat fast to one of the uprights of timber which had been piledriven in to the riverbed to anchor the structure against the strong tides. He listened to the exchange between the captain and the officer then began to ascend the wharf by mean of cross-pieces nailed onto the upright. From out of the fort marched a squad of pikemen, they were led by a stout gentleman wearing a three-pronged hat and who carried an umbrella made from reeds woven together to protect himself from the sun which was still strong on the coast.

When the squad reached him the stout gentleman asked in a peculiarly high-pitched voice, "Who are you, where do you come from, what is your business?"

The old man slowly removed his helmet and placed it into his knapsack, a musket was trained upon him but he replied calmly, "I am the cook from the expeditionary force, I have returned from the Inca city Sit-Nalta bringing an Inca child as a slave."

One of the soldiers in the squad recognised the old man, "He **is** who he says, Don Espadrille," he addressed the stout gentleman. "We'd heard the Incas had killed him."

"Very well then, it appears that our friend has yet to meet his maker." He glanced towards the galleon and decided that he did not wish to risk a confrontation with Captain Alonzo. "Welcome old man, come, I wish to find out what is happening and when the next raft-load is due to arrive." The emphasis upon the latter half of his question was plain to all.

Rough hands hoisted the slave girl up onto the wharf, the old man took her by the hand and at the head of the squad they entered the fort.

Chacuti was clearly astonished by the sights and sounds she witnessed. It was like nothing that she had heard, seen or even dreamt of. Men patrolled the top of the log walls upon narrow walkways, they carried great muskets with long fierce bayonets attached to their length, upon each castellated corner of the fort two cannon were positioned covering every approach. Beneath one of the castellations a collection of small reed-roofed houses huddled shabbily together, horses were tethered outside the houses, men tending to the animals turned and stared at the child and the old man as they walked past.

"Don't be minding them now missy," said Don Espadrille in his high-pitched voice, he turned to the old man and told him by way of explanation, "they're a bit nervous, the Carnatic's got the pox onboard. We've put the ship and crew under quarantine but you know how these things are. Mind you the pox did a lot better than we did at sorting out those Caribs on Hispaniola. Might not be such a bad thing for us to give these Incas a taste of it." He led them down a filth-filled alleyway which passed for a street until they reached a ramshackle doorway set into the side of a lean-to, "Please enter," he squeaked. Inside was even filthier than outside, he sat down upon an upturned barrel opposite a rough bench which rested against a wall. The wall had been formed from sticks covered with river mud baked hard in the sun, cracks and gaps ran along its length. "Please be seated." He looked at Chacuti, "the child must go into the compound with all the other slaves," he started to shout orders to the guard who waited outside but the old man reached into his knapsack and withdrew one of the nuggets. Don Espadrille's eyes fastened upon the gold...

"Where's the Shyman lad, I thought yer were going to get to where he catches up with 'em."

"I didn't want to get too close Uncle Paddy, I'll chance it again but what if the old man tells this Espadrille feller something he shouldn't. Maybe we should stay with him in case he needs our help."

"He's not going to say anything to get him and the girl into trouble lad. He'll fill him full of blarney don't you be worrying about him now."

Davey again speeded the images up, the sun rotated through the heavens and brought a new day. The old man was leading the girl by the hand along the wharf. They approached the guards who were preventing the crew of the Carnatic from going ashore, as they neared the lieutenant of the guards he saluted smartly and allowed them to pass on a narrow gangplank which led up onto the ship. The hulking sides of the majestic vessel loomed above them as they made their way onboard. The old man counted the gun-ports, eleven on the top level, thirteen on the central, and thirteen on the lower. Some of the gun-ports were open others were closed, he suspected the reason why but was interrupted from his thoughts by a loud cry.

"Ahoy there cookie!" called a pig-tailed sailor in typical sailor-speak, "What you doing back here so soon. Did the expedition realise you were more of a danger to them than the Incas!" The sailor held his stomach and simulated a bad case of food-poisoning.

"I'll give you something solid to chew upon Juan," joked the old man clenching his fist towards the heckler. "Is the captain aboard?"

"Aye, he is, but have you got a death wish?" he pointed over their heads to where, high above, the black spots fluttered.

The old man ignored the question, "Who is the captain, do I know him?"

"Know him, you used to cook for him, it's Pedro Alonzo, best man in the king's navy, worked himself up from cabin-boy to captain." The old man grimaced. Juan continued, "But I don't know whether he'll be so pleased to have you come onboard. We've had two dead already and another five suspected cases, pretty soon we're all going to start dropping like flies."

Juan led them across the deck of the galleon; beneath webs of rigging, past a great mast which carried three sets of thwarts to where a heavy carved doorway led beneath the raised poop-deck. They entered, Chacuti held tightly onto the old man's hand as her head darted from side to side taking in the alien surroundings. Juan led them down a flight of stairs, past the cannon to the captain's quarters, "This way old man," he motioned to the door which led to the captain's cabin, knocked for them then stepped back.

The captain appeared, still in a state of half-undress. He stared hard at the old man, "It has been a long time old man," said the captain clasping him by the hand.

"Phew, thank God for that," said Davey, "at last a friendly face."

"Where's the Shyman lad! He must be flippin' close."

Their view swept out of the ship, along the wharf, over the fort and along the shoreline which curved around in a great arc providing sheltered anchorage for the ships. As they passed over a sandy beach the Shaman's face jumped into the mirror. He stood on a small curve of sand, staring back towards the ship.

"There he is!"

Davey moved towards the face of evil. Set deep into its beard the mouth of Father Salamanga betrayed a faint smirk, he spoke softly to himself, "The Revelation of John has seen it all: The Devil who is called Satan, the deceiver of the whole world, he pursued the woman but the woman was given wings that she might fly into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times and half a time. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the serpent. Then the serpent was angry with the woman and went off to make war on her and all those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea."

"What does he mean Uncle Paddy?"

"Well he's goin' a long way about it but I reckon what he's trying to say is that he's on the flippin' warpath. He's right about sommat - he's at the seaside, but I don't see any signs of his bucket and spade."

"Who's he talking to? What if he's talking to the skulls Uncle Paddy!"

"What makes yer think that, don't be wastin' any time with them things. Get on and see how the old man's doin'."

But Davey was already back in the temple, in the chamber of the skulls. They sat upon their stone blocks, "The boy is here!" rasped a harsh voice out of the darkness. Then there was total silence. Nothing could be heard, it was as silent as a tomb.

"He's talking to them, I know it. They're helping his every move."

"Don't be worryin' about them things lad, come on get back to the old feller."

The old man sat with the captain upon a bench covered with a horse-hair mattress, Chacuti sat on her haunches crouched down in one corner.

"Don Espadrille tells me that all goes well with the expedition," said the captain. He filled a glass of rum for the old man and one for himself. Both men downed the grog in one swig.

"The commander is a clever man," replied the old man.

The captain gave a slight shrug of one of his shoulders, to indicate that he might not agree with the old man's sentiment. "He has found great wealth," said the captain, the gleam in his eye betrayed his weakness. "Tell me old man is what they say true, are these people the richest that walk upon God's earth?"

The old man reached into his pocket and withdrew a lump of gold. He held the weight between forefinger and thumb as the captain's eyes feasted upon the dull yellow metal. The captain recovered his composure, "Tell me old man why should I need that when I carry a ship-load of the stuff?"

"For the same reason that Don Espadrille wished to find out whether I had come by any gold," replied the old man, "you are to sail for Spain with tomorrow's tide, the gold you carry has already been melted down into ingots and stamped with the seal of the King. His treasurer is onboard as we speak, all is accounted for."

The captain smiled, "You always did talk straight old man, but there is one small problem in what you are saying, we are quarantined, pox is onboard, Don Espadrille himself is preventing our sailing. It is my belief that out on the ocean, away from these low-lying, fly-infested swamps the men would be a damned sight healthier than staying here waiting to see who is the next to die."

"I have seen Don Espadrille, he did inform me that you were quarantined but, as a special concession to me (the old man smiled at the lump of gold) he has granted permission for you to sail as you will."

"I perceive a change in you," said the captain, he stared into the old man's eyes then looked away, "there is a brightness about you which brings disquiet to one such as me. And this scar, it pulses most strangely." He put his fingertips to the old man's temple. "But put your gold away, I, Pedro Alonzo, do not take from my friends. What do you want of me?"

The old man pushed the ugly lump into the palm of the captain, "I want passage to Spain for me and the child. There'll be another like it when we arrive."

The captain hesitated but then closed his fist over the nugget. A breeze caught the galleon causing it to rock gently at anchor as he thought over the old man's request, "And from whom do you run?"

"You were never one to mince words Don Alonzo, they are matters of which I do not yet fully understand but the life of this child is in danger." He waved his hand towards Chacuti who, unable to understand their conversation, shrank back even further into the corner. "You know the priest, Father Salamanga?"

"Aye."

"He is possessed of the devil. He desires to tear the heart from this child."

"And do you have proof of this, these are dangerous accusations to make," the captain walked to the cabin door and quickly opened it to check that nobody was there before resuming his seat.

"The priest will arrive at your ship. Do not allow him onboard, he is a danger not just to me and this child but to the whole crew."

"To prevent a man such as the good father (here the captain mocked scornfully) from coming aboard is not in my power, you know that. He is one who has acted with the brothers of the Inquisition itself."

"And who ought to be tried by the Inquisition itself," added the old man, "but Don Espadrille's men are still under orders not to withdraw, they will not allow anybody aboard. Don Espadrille himself will prevent the good father from risking his scrawny neck with the pox. Withdraw your gangplanks, then let anyone argue that they have a right, god-given or not, to risk the spread of the pestilence."

"I shall do as you say old man. Your fear of this man you say is a demon must be great for you to prefer to risk the pox. But the sooner I can get my ship out of this god-forsaken hell-hole the better."

"You have made a wise decision Captain Alonzo, I thank you," said the old man.

Davey and Paddy watched as the captain gave orders for the gangplanks to be raised. Don Espadrille's guards remained at their posts as the old man had said they would. Night was falling when the last remaining supplies were swung aboard the vessel by men who only worked when the wind blew away from the galleon. Every inch of it had already been inspected and prepared for their voyage, the three towering masts had been refitted and the supporting shrouds and halyards re-tightened; the canvas had been checked and stitched then tied securely into place upon the thwarts far above the deck of the proud ship.

"So far so good lad," said Paddy.

Davey shook his head. He moved slightly nearer to the mirror and positioned himself so that they could watch the ship tugging at its moorings as it slowly rose on the incoming tide. Night fell, although there was a sliver of moon lighting up the wharf, the captain ordered torches to be lit and placed alongside the gunwales, they cast their glare over the wharf allowing the guards to see anybody who might approach.

"What's that!" Davey swept their view swiftly in, with its coils tightly wrapped around a mooring rope the reptile was slowly sliding its way up from beneath the wharf. It slid so slowly that even if a man looked towards it in the half-light he would not detect any movement, with infinite care the snake wound its way higher.

"Check where the old man and Cutey are!"

Davey swept back to the captain's cabin, *"They're not here!"* he concentrated and found them together in the bowels of the ship. A single candle burnt lighting up bulwarks of timber, stanchions, great chests, kegs and barrels which filled the hold all around them. The old man was holding the helmet and using it as a crow-bar to prise apart planking between two baulks of oak.

"I can't tell him the Shaman's here, he's not wearing the helmet!" exclaimed Davey.

They went back to the mooring rope, the snake had gone.

"Find 'im!" panic was in Paddy's voice.

The friar had finished tending to one of his flock, as he was making his way down a passageway to his quarters a man stepped from the shadows. It was but a moment before the shocked friar recognised him; in torn clothing, with a battered appearance, blood running from numerous cuts and bruises, "Father Salamanga!"

The Shaman used his dagger with a skill developed through much practice, the friar slipped to the floor of the passageway. It was an engorged snake which slid swiftly down the mooring rope and disappeared beneath the wharf.

"Why's he done that? Why didn't he just get the old man and Cutey? It must have been 'cos they're protected by the helmet."

"Or maybe he knows that they're onto him and that he wouldn't be able to find them quickly enough."

"Yer right lad, the fiend's plotting each of his moves."

Mrs Murtagh called up the stairs, "Daveee, you stayin' for yer dinner or are you goin' home to yer mam and dad's?"

"I'm not hungry thanks Mrs M," he called back without even looking away from the mirror.

"Need anythin' Paddy," she called.

"Naw nothin'," he replied gruffly.

They heard her tutting as she went back to the kitchen.

"Do you think I'd better make out that I've finished work for the day?" asked Davey.

"It's up to you lad. Might be best, yer dad's already starting asking question's hasn't he."

"I'll go home but come back as soon as I can." He took off the helmet, the image in the mirror showed a skeleton structure of the galleon before fading away completely. He placed the helmet carefully under the bed. As he was leaving the room Davey turned back, "Do you think they'll get out of there?"

"Well Shark-cutey's in Carnatic lad so some way or other she must have got herself here. It's up to us to make sure it stays that way and those flippin' skulls don't do their *changing the fates* bit. Hey rub some of that oil that's down in the shed into yer hands before yer go."

Davey stood in the shed putting a day's worth of work into his hands in a few minutes.

"Here's the tyke Liz," Hugh called, "smelling like an engineer, look at the state of 'im!" Hugh's face beamed with pride. Davey could have curled up and died of shame.

They all sat and ate dinner together during which Davey told lie after lie about the work he was doing in Stilson's, "Yeah, they've got machines in there that will cut a block of metal in two and shape it before yer can say Jack Robinson." However, finding that he had no idea what he was talking about and inventing machines that had yet to be invented he got off the subject as quickly as possible. As usual the war provided the opportunity to deflect the conversation. Davey desperately wanted to ask questions about the helmet but was careful not to do so in case he alerted his father to the fact that his suspicions were far more than that.

"Going over to Paddy's tonight?" asked Hugh after they had all settled down to read.

"Naw, think I'll have a rest tonight," said Davey.

He lay on his bed thinking about what was taking place. He needed time on his own to try to get his mind round the events of the last few days. Try as he might he could hardly begin to build up a picture of everything that had happened, the one thing he remained sure of was that the girl was in Carnatic and he had to do something to save her, but what? A shiver ran down his spine as he remembered the Shaman floating up through the water towards him. If it was possible for the skulls to change fate maybe they were working on him even as he lay there. He could feel himself beginning to sweat. His guilt at deceiving his parents was also beginning to eat into him. It was to be another sleepless, tormented night which gave little rest to his mind or body.

CHAPTER 24

Plague

"Didn't fancy it last night then lad?"

"I thought it would be best for me mam and dad if I stayed home."

"Right yer are lad, me mam's down the wash-house, let's get down to it, eh. I've got a funny feeling that things are going to start hotting up."

"If they get any hotter we'll melt," joked Davey.

"Go on with yer," said Paddy hoisting himself higher so that he could observe the street, "yer dad sometimes pops over of a morning so we'd best keep a weather-eye out for 'im."

On the wharf stood Father Salamanga, he wore a slightly grubby cassock, in one hand he fingered his rosaries, in the other he held a Bible, alongside him Don Espadrille stood, sweating profusely under the hot sun. The lieutenant of guards was blocking access to the gangplank whilst Don Espadrille remonstrated with the priest. "But my dear Father, it is not possible for you to go onboard, the ship is in quarantine. The rules of quarantine expressly state that no man is able to go onboard *quaranta* - forty days, until the vessel is proven to be all clear of disease."

From the deck of the galleon Captain Alonzo added his voice, "Good Father, would that you were on board, but our friar has shown great courage in these matters and has ministered to my men with the care of the virgin mother herself." All three men crossed themselves.

Father Salamanga spoke, "I have only the welfare of yourself and your crew at heart Captain, if you are in good hands then so be it," he smiled, "I understand you have been given leave to sail today," at this point he stared

meaningfully at Don Alonzo, "without an emissary of His Holiness onboard you sail without sanctity and without observance of the law which requires that a man of the cloth must be in attendance on all His Majesty's ships."

Captain Alonzo hissed at one of his officers, "Hernando, find the friar, this priest knows something we do not." A hurried search through the three decks of the galleon; in officers sleeping quarters, down in the hold and even in the small area set aside for the animals; cow, goats and chickens that would provide fresh produce during the voyage, revealed that the friar was indeed no longer on the ship. By the time Hernando and the men returned the priest had already asked to speak to the friar and excuses had been made for his not being present.

"It is of no matter you are in good hands," said the priest, he turned to leave but as Don Espadrille and Captain Alonzo sighed with relief he seemed to have an afterthought and turned back, "And the name of your good friar?"

"Friar Domingez," replied Don Espadrille.

"My friends I fear that your good friar has left your ship, I spoke to him last night travelling northwards on the self-same road upon which God called me to do his work in this port."

Captain Alonzo became desperate, "The pox has already taken two of my men!" he shouted, "Would that the good father were onboard but to what avail? Would he not run the risk of suffering the same death as that of me and my men?" He stepped back from the gunwale so that he was not observed by the priest and asked his officers, "How did the friar get ashore? Was the watch last night not aware that he had left the ship?"

Father Salamanga cried out so all aboard could hear him, "Is it not written: You shall not be afraid of the pestilence that walks in darkness; A thousand shall fall at thy side and ten thousand on thy right hand but it shall not come to you, neither shall any plague come to thy dwelling."

The captain had no answer. A plank was lowered to the wharf.

Father Salamanga hesitated but stepped onto the plank, slowly he inched his way up trembling as he passed over the shimmering water below. Seeing his fear the captain thrust his foot firmly onto the timber sending it shaking along its length. With a loud hiss the priest fell to his knees and grasped either side of the thin plank. Every man around stopped working and watched him as he crawled up onto the galleon, still trembling he raised himself up and stared hard at the captain, in a voice filled with menace he said, "Surely in the floods of great waters they shall not reach him. *Thou art a hiding place for me.*" The voice and stare sent a shiver down the back of the captain, he knew the words were meant for him.

Paddy was grim-faced, "Yer'd better let the old feller know he's onboard."

The old man had removed enough planking for him and Chacuti to be able to crawl through into a narrow section of the hull which had an inner and outer skin, the old man was wearing his helmet and was able to see in the blackness of their hideaway but Chacuti sat in total darkness.

"Looks like they're in a flippin' coffin already, how does he reckon they're goin' to survive a trip to flippin' Spain in there?"

"He's got some water in that small cask Uncle Paddy," said Davey touching the place on the mirror where the cask lay, "and look, they've got a big lump of cheese."

"Well the rat's will just love that. And tell him the biggest one of the lot's going to be after more than a lump of cheese."

Davey told the old man the Shaman was aboard. He replied, "The child must never fall into the hands of that monster, tell me when he draws near and with the trust her father has invested in me I shall make sure that she does not fall prey to him. But we are below the waterline here boy, it is my hope that the beast will not be able to find us."

"Fat chance," said Paddy, "fat flippin' chance."

"He may be right Uncle Paddy, maybe that's why the snake, I mean the Shaman, didn't bother even to look for them, maybe he knew that it would be too hard to find them."

Paddy chewed his lip, "Yer may be right lad," then added, "more like too hard to find them *quickly*."

The ship heaved into life as the mooring ropes were cast away, its sails were run out, they filled and picked up the breeze sending the stately ship coasting from the wharf. As the magnificent galleon reached deeper water more canvas was unfurled, the old man could tell from the sound of the water rushing past the hull that the vessel was increasing in speed but knew from the lack of pitching that they were still within the area of the estuary and its flat waters. A tremendous rumbling vibrated through the ship and he knew that above them gun-crews were rolling out the cannon for a farewell salute. Chacuti cuddled close to him for comfort when a terrific crash sent the ship lurching backwards then rocking forwards as the cannon fired. From onshore came a booming roar as the battery of the fort fired an answering salvo.

"Have a scout around lad, check were the Shyman is, I don't like this setup one little bit."

On deck Father Salamanga had gathered his new flock, they stood back from the five seamen who were laid out on the deck. The men's bodies were covered in red spots which were slowly turning black, the moans and groans the men made told of the pain they were in. Above the assembled men, on the raised poop deck, stood the captain with his first-mate Hernando and the other officers.

Overhead the wind tugged at the acres of canvas pushing the noble vessel towards Mother Spain, three of the sails carried great red crucifixes which ballooned outwards as the gusts swelled them. Men crawled high in the rigging, unwinding sheets and hauling on halyards, tiny figures to the men who stood far below. As the ship passed from the shelter of the estuary into the broad ocean waves showed the galleon's lack of seaworthiness as it began to pitch and yawl. The men in the rigging swayed out over the ocean, rocked back above the deck, then swayed out over the ocean on the other side of the vessel.

Captain Alonzo ordered the two men at the tiller to alter course, they heaved on the great wheel forcing the rudder through the clear blue waters; the galleon jibed as it felt the wind spill from its sails then, as the canvas snapped back open with a crack, the ship kicked forwards and took up its new tack.

"O ye of little faith!" shouted the priest. "It is your own evil ways that have brought this pestilence upon you." The men cast their eyes down towards their comrades who lay crying in their pain. "The Lord's anger must be appeased through sacrifice."

"What did he say?" exclaimed the captain. He turned to two armed sailors, "Marines. Arrest him!"

"Wait!" urged Hernando, "the men are terrified of the pox spreading, if it were the Devil himself telling them he could get rid of it they'd listen. Let the priest have his say, he will show himself up as a charlatan."

Captain Alonzo considered the advice and realised with some annoyance that it was sound, "I shall be in my cabin, take the watch!" he ordered, then strode down from the poop-deck, he stared hard at the back of the priest but thought better of doing anything to interfere and made his way below decks.

The priest handed Juan his Bible and told him to read from the text of Leviticus. The pig-tailed seaman read hesitantly but well enough for the priest to carry out his instructions. Two chickens were fetched, one of them Father Salamanga took by the neck...

"Whoa! 'ang on the slack. This feller's up to his funny business again," said Paddy. "You was tossin' and turnin' enough the other night without watching this. He's only playin' for time, soon as he gets the chance he's going to be after the old man and kid. Check 'em out lad, see what they're doin' eh?"

The old man was in the captain's cabin, Don Alonzo was pacing up and down.

"The good father is controlled by a demon. You must make every effort to destroy this fiend before he begins his foul work, already he wins the blessing of the crew. They will not be keen to act against him," said the old man.

The captain crossed to the window and looked out upon the wake of the ship, "I saw fear in him when he crossed on the plank to us. Why would such a devil ever be afraid?"

"The power of water holds a horror for him, it can be used as our weapon to destroy him. But wait! Is it not the case that if this devil can dwell within another man's body, if we destroy him, would we not be making a danger to ourselves that he will take yet another body? Perhaps one of your dying men would become his next tabernacle."

"What if we were to seize him and clap him in irons?" asked the captain.

The old man seemed to be talking to himself, "The Shaman was able to turn himself into a snake, the boy had told me that he still has the power to do so."

"Which *boy*, was it not a girl that you have secreted on board?"

"Yes, yes, if you take the Shaman then you must trap him, he must be held in something that he cannot wriggle out of. Something strong that he will not be able to burst apart, above all his life must be preserved or else every man on board will run the risk of being possessed by this demon."

"Will not the power of prayer suffice to destroy him and send him back to the foul regions from whence he came?"

"Consider; even now he uses the good Book itself to administer to your men. This demon has such stealth and cunning we must make careful preparations in the utmost secret, if we are to be able to trick him into a trap from which he cannot escape."

"I doubt you not old man, I know you of old, but even so I find these things of which you speak to be of such mystery that I can but wonder whether I am not in a dream and will wake up."

The old man gripped him by the shoulder, "I only wish that what you are saying was the case. It is not."

"And this helmet you wear, it is strange," he placed his hand upon his chin and stroked his goatee as he thought hard, then remembering what he was trying to draw from the depths of his memory he said, "when we sailed together to Ceylon we saw such a helmet. The giant helmet of Jetawanaramaya resembles it in the finest detail."

"These things are known only to the Gods, we men can only follow their will."

"Then I shall make preparations, the carpenter shall begin work at once on a place of confinement for this creature that has crawled up from the nether world. Come, first I shall assist you in returning to your place of concealment." He crossed to the corner of the room where the chest filled with chains lay. It had been moved revealing a small trap-door set into the floor of the cabin. The lid of the trap-door hinged downwards, the old man lowered himself into the hole until his feet found the rung of a short ladder. He then aided the captain in dragging the huge chest into position, but for the fact he wore the helmet they would never have managed to shift such a massive object unaided. As soon as the chest was in position the old man closed the trap-door and descended into the darkened hold. He crossed to the planking which led into their hiding-place and whispered, "I am returned child, are you safe?"

Chacuti made no reply, fearful, the old man listened and heard a clicking sound, the clicks increased in speed until they blended into one continual sound which rose in pitch until it became a whistle, "Do not fear child, the sounds you hear are dolphins, they swim alongside us, they are the most friendly creatures that God has placed upon the Earth."

Chacuti moved in the darkness and listened to the sounds which had terrified her. "I am safe," she told the old man. Reassured he crossed through the hold; climbing over kegs and barrels and all the other paraphernalia with which it was filled, to where a solid wall of timber had been nailed. He tested the wall for soundness and examined the nail heads which were clean and bright, they had clearly only recently been struck home. Not until he was satisfied that nothing had been interfered with did he return to their hiding-place. After climbing inside he placed a wooden board into the hole, it fitted perfectly and lined up with the planking between the baulks of oak.

"Well he seems snug enough in there. But **he** knows, **you** knows, an' **I** knows who or what is goin' to be lookin' for them."

Davey nodded, "But they're below the level of the water aren't they. He said that might stop it from finding them."

Paddy scoffed, "Pigs might fly lad. Pigs might flippin' fly."

The captain walked from his cabin and began to return to the top-deck but Hernando met him, "Captain, the priest is taking strange actions. I felt I should report to you before he goes any further."

The captain looked out through one of the open gun-ports and drank in the salt-air and the fine misty spray thrown up by the great ship, he was thinking hard. His mind made up, he sat down upon one of the cannon and motioned for his officer to sit opposite him on another. "I must take you into my confidence Hernando," his eyes scanned round the deck, all the hammocks had been neatly stowed away giving a clear view of the whole layout. "This voyage will be subject to a number of *factors*."

Hernando looked puzzled, he was about to speak but the captain seemed intent upon supplying him with answers, so he held his tongue.

"We have onboard two stowaways, for want of a better description. They are running from this priest. You will remember the cook, from our voyage to Ceylon?" Hernando nodded assent, "he is one of the stowaways, the other is a strange child with wide staring eyes which tell of horrors that you and I have never witnessed. The old man has told me the priest is a devil. Not just an evil man but something terrifying, something which has hunted him and the child down to our ship. We have the pox onboard but if I were to only believe half of what the old man has told me this demon is more deadly than any disease."

"Then let us take him and rid ourselves of this menace," said Hernando, "even now he runs amok."

"It is not so simple, we must trap him or run the risk of losing our own souls, go to the carpenter, tell him to fashion a great chest, bound in chains, we must capture this demon."

"I shall see that it is done," said Hernando. He strode off but the captain called him back, this time with a more earthly concern, "See to it that the men keep these gun-ports shut, otherwise every privateer between here and Spain will see that there's little more behind them than fresh-air."

"Aye-aye Sir."

He heard a noise from above and stood up, listened for a moment then hurried on his way. He emerged to an uproar; men were leaping and howling, jumping and bawling, some were playing instruments; a small drum, a Jew's harp, a fiddle and an accordion all throbbed away. It was like a scene from Dante's *Inferno*. Three of the dying men had risen to their feet and were performing acrobatics, juggling, standing on their hands and spinning cartwheels. The priest was tending to the remaining two men who still lay close to death. Seemingly unnoticed the captain crossed to the stairway to the poop-deck and witnessed Father Salamanga scraping his thumbnail over the raised spots which covered the men's bodies. The nail scratched deep opening up the spot which bled momentarily then healed over as if it had never been there.

"It's a miracle!" shouted one of the men trying to dance a horn-pipe with the captain, "We're all saved!"

The captain shrugged the man off and climbed up onto the poop-deck, "What has taken place here?" he questioned the officers.

"It is as you see Sir," replied one of them, "the priest has cured the men."

"The Devil takes care of his own," muttered Paddy.

"I'm going to ask the old man about the girl while all this is going on," said Davey.

He swept through the length of the ship and plunged down into the hold, through the planking their view moved as he jerked his head slightly forwards. The old man sat, cuddling the child and talking to her, telling her tales of the sea and the countries which lay beyond it.

"I hear you boy," said the old man.

"I don't know how it happens but someway or other Chacuti ends up here," said Davey.

"And where is here?" asked the old man.

"What an idjit, tell him bloody Liverpool," said Paddy.

"She's a ghost up in a big old house which is called the same name as the ship you're on," said Davey, *"we think that she'd be safer with us than left on her own. I've already seen the Shaman. He's right close to her."*

"You said you saw him in water boy?"

"Yeah that's right, come right up out of it at me he did."

"Then it was the Shaman in flight. Water would have destroyed his body. What you saw must have been his astral-self. Did you have the helmet in your possession when you saw him?"

Davey remembered hunting through the woods with his blowpipe, "Yes! I had it!"

"Then this is a puzzle we must try to understand, without the helmet the fiend cannot fly. The Shaman did not fly from the temple when I ascended into the heavens because I wore the helmet of power and he did not. Only the gods themselves are capable of passing through time, only in their craft could this be accomplished."

"Tell him 'e doesn't know what he's going on about lad, you saw him didn't yer!"

"Hush Uncle Paddy."

"From what century do you watch?" asked the old man.

"We're in the nineteen hundreds."

"Then you are four hundred years ahead of my time. The child must pass away long before then but it appears that her spirit must remain upon the Earth," his brow furrowed sending a pulse of blood across the scar upon his temple, "I begin to see."

"See what? What's he goin' on about, ask him," said Paddy.

"The child has broken two of the crystal skulls, their energy will preserve her for all time. The Shaman will know this, his knife will allow him to destroy the child's spirit and seize back what she has taken. We must never allow him to do this, it is not only the soul of the child that is at stake in these matters. The future of mankind would be in jeopardy."

"If you want we could go right forwards and tell you what's going to happen," Davey offered.

"Never do that boy. I feel that we are both destined to be a part of this picture, to help each other. If we work together we will save the child, the skulls power is such that they can alter the fates but with the helmet in our hands we can surely defeat them."

"How come you've got the helmet and so have I?"

"The cloak of the future casts its shadow over that knowledge, together we shall go forwards and learn of these things."

"Me and me Uncle Paddy keep wondering how we can do anything to help you. I mean we're in the future so what's happened to you and Chacuti has already happened, hasn't it?" said Davey not sounding convinced.

"The Gods transcend time, they voyage to where they will. Look around you and you will understand."

Davey looked at the strange assortment of dials and objects surrounding him in Paddy's bedroom, they were there, not so he could ever take hold of them but were real enough for him to be able to see them clearly.

"I tell yer what lad, you two are a pair together. What's the point of all this stuff, let's just get on with it. Ask him about getting her out the house."

"I counsel that you stay close to me, help me as I shall help you. When we learn how the child enters the great house then we may also learn whether we must remove her from it."

"Tell him while he's having his adventure the flippin' Shyman's flying around outside!" growled Paddy between clenched teeth, *"She'd be far better off here with people she knows than hanging about being terrified."*

Davey moved slightly forwards causing their vision to move out through the hull of the ship above the churning sea. It was black outside. *"It's night-time, he'll be after you!"* Without another word he swept through the ship seeking the priest.

The hammocks had been unslung from their positions lining the bulwarks of the galleon where they had been packed as protection from arrows and musket-fire; the men lay alongside each other, crammed together like sardines, head-to-toe, rocking gently from side-to-side as the ship carved its way through the heavy swells of the

Pacific Ocean. The exertions of celebration had exhausted them, not even the customary arguments over taking each others space had taken place, they had fallen into their berths praising the divine intervention of the good priest Father Salamanga.

He was beneath were they lay, crawling on all fours like a cat, skirting round the cannon, evading ramrods, shot and charges, heading towards the stern of the ship to where the deck narrowed until only one hammock lay swinging in a tiny space. The pig-tail of Juan swung rhythmically over the side of his hammock...

"I'm going to get the old man to warn the captain!" said Davey.

"Yer'll be too late lad."

The Shaman rose stealthily to his feet, his knife flashed. Not a sound was made, he held his prize exultantly in his hand, his body shook as it absorbed the power of the seaman's soul. With ease the monster lifted Juan's body from the hammock, slung him over his shoulder like a haunch of meat and crawled to one of the gun-ports, a quick shove and he was gone.

"He's goin' to kill them all one by one, there'll be nobody left sailing the ship if he has his way."

"I'm going to tell the old man."

"There is nothing that can be done boy. The captain was made aware of the dangers before we sailed, he chose to leave that port rather than face the certainty of the pox taking them all. But he is a false man, I knew him in a far off country named Ceylon. His greed cost the lives of forty men in Trincomalee harbour. He appears to be on the side of what is right but the only side he is on is his own, he has no love for any man but only for gold. Nevertheless, if any man can catch that fiend it is Alonzo, but he will not take the chance of giving him any warning, not before he is ready to spring his trap."

"Aren't you going to let him know what's happened?"

"It is pointless, Alonzo will find out soon enough what has taken place, it would be too dangerous to leave here whilst the shroud of darkness provides cover for the fiend. There is the added danger that the men will not act against the priest now he has cleared the ship of disease."

"Why'd the Shaman bother doing that?"

"To be secure amongst the men whilst he searches for us, their souls will now be strong and healthy. He will feed upon them until he finds us."

Davey looked down at the child huddled upon the old man's lap. *"We've got to do something for her Uncle Paddy."*

"Now this old feller's taken charge it doesn't seem like we're allowed to do owt at all," said Paddy crossly.

"I'll go up to Carnatic right now, I'll try and get her out the place," said Davey.

"Good lad, that's more like it. Keep the flippin' helmet on and yer'll be okay, yer've seen how it protected the old man, the Shyman can't touch yer if that's on yer head."

CHAPTER 25

Chacuti's Tale

She stood in the same bedroom where Davey had first seen her, her feet seemed to float slightly above the floor, perhaps on a thick layer of carpet which had once covered it he thought. He stared at her eyes, those wide staring eyes that had shown themselves frightened in the face of the child in the mirror were now even larger and set into a face that was the most beautiful he had ever seen.

"I knew you would return," she said in her sad voice.

Davey blurted out, "I know who you are and I've seen what's been happening, do you remember how you got here and who was chasing you?"

Her reaction to his questions showed that she knew exactly what he asking, "I have been here for many many years, the old man..." she paused and looked towards the boy.

"I know him, that is the old man. He can talk to me but I need to look into a mirror. It's this helmet, it's special, the old man's got it as well." He looked sheepishly at her, as if expecting that the difficulty he felt in talking of things which he couldn't understand to something which possibly didn't even exist, would be equally disbelieved by the whatever floated before him. But such beauty, she had to exist; although he could see straight through her transparent outline every feature was perfect, her large swept-eyes, the mascara which lined them; the bare arms

save for the gold bracelets upon her wrists and the bangles fastened to her thin upper-arms and her jet-black hair which floated gently across her bare shoulders and reached down to the long white dress.

She stared without speaking.

"I've come to help. Come with me back to me Uncle Paddy's, you'll be better off with us than stuck in here on your own."

"I can never leave. The house protects me from harm. If I should ever leave then I would be in danger. Nothing of evil may enter this house and yet it is evil that keeps me here."

"I know. It's them skulls you smashed. You shouldn't have done that, that's why you're stuck like you are." He decided to press her to leave, "You know who's after you don't you?" She showed a look of terror. "Well he's getting too close for comfort. He chased me the other day when I was up this way. The sooner you get out of here the safer you'll be."

"But I must not, the old man told me that it is not safe for me to leave this house."

Seeing that she was growing fearful Davey made one last attempt, "The old man knows who I am, he's told me to come here and see you."

"Did he tell you I should leave?" she asked.

"Well kind of..." began Davey, then added, "well not really."

"Many years ago, the old man told me that I should remain here but you are the boy I saw in the mirror, you wear the helmet of power and I will do as you say."

Davey was having second thoughts himself, "No maybe you're right, hang on a mo', let's just check this out." He walked to where the small window, cross-hatched with lead, was set into a wall. The thickness of the wall cast a shadow upon the glass allowing it to act as a mirror. As soon as he gazed into it the old man appeared, he was looking into the room. In his hands he too held a mirror.

"I see you boy," he said looking past Davey, "and the child. She is well?"

Davey was too stunned to answer. He just nodded.

Chacuti crossed to the window and stared at the image of the old man. It was but a short moment before she saw herself as a child, crouching down behind the old man, and broke down into heavy sobs. The child too cried with fear of whatever had befallen the spirit who gazed upon her.

"Do not upset yourself child, it will all go well for you soon, you have my word upon it," said the old man. "The boy will aid us, we shall free you from whatever accursed prison you are in," he looked towards Davey, "Boy, speak with her, learn all that you can from her. Whatever she says may prove of use to us in our fight. I must focus my attentions upon our present situation." Davey watched him using the mirror to look from out of their hiding-place in the hold, through the deck he searched, between the skins of the ship's hull and amongst all the equipment littering the hold itself, searching for anything which might indicate the presence of the Shaman. "If you think of where he is the helmet will take you straight to him," advised Davey.

"Just as the water casts its cloak over our position boy, it shields the actions of the fiend from us, he is near, I sense him, but cannot find him."

Davey turned away from the window and back to Chacuti, she was dumbfounded, "It is the old man, I was there with him, you must help him. The snake it is near."

"Where is it?" shouted Davey, but immediately shouted again, "NO stop! Don't tell me. Wait." He returned to the window and gazed upon the old man. "If I find out what's happened from her I won't be able to help you will I?"

"She is there with you in the future boy. Whatever has happened to her cannot be changed, it has taken place. Nothing can undo her destiny. But there will be many things she does not know and many things she has not seen, you will be able to work with me upon these matters. Whatever the girl may tell you will aid us in our task, do not be afraid of her, she is no spirit, her body has passed away but she is not dead, the power of the skulls preserves her."

"What's made all this happen?" asked Davey, "is it all real?"

"The fates have taken you to her, they have thrown the helmet of power into your lap, the Gods themselves await the outcome. Good shall triumph over Evil."

Davey turned back to Chacuti. She sat upon the chair or whatever object it had been which had long since disappeared. Her face was buried in her hands. "It's going to be alright," said Davey, "you heard him."

"The power of the Shaman is strong. He will never give in until he gets back what he seeks."

"Well we're going to give him a run for his money," said Davey, he laughed when he realised that she wouldn't have the faintest idea what was meant by the expression. His laugh caused the face of the spirit to brighten.

"Right, that's better. Now come on let's get cracking, the old man says we should go through everything from start to finish, that way we might have a trick or two up our sleeves waiting for *him*."

"But I do not wear them," said Chacuti looking very sorry for herself.

Davey laughed, "You stop your worrying, I'm here now. You must tell me everything that you know Chacuti. This business has gone on long enough, now we're going to finish it. We're going to help you."

"It has been so long since anyone has said my name." She began to speak, faltered, then sobbed heavily, "My family," she cried, "I have never known what happened to them."

Davey turned towards the window, "Look and you shall see," he told her.

"It is my father," was all that Chacuti said.

They watched the snow falling during that long, cold night. The expected pursuit by the Spaniards did not take place until first light, such had been the effect upon them of Father Salamanga's rising from the dead. Through the early morning mists they appeared, dragging their cannon behind war-horses, all the men were fully armoured, the sound of swords clattering against the bands of steel which protected the horses flanks carried across the frozen ground. When they reached the canal the Spaniards fired off a hail of cross-bow bolts and arrows whilst the Incas replied with spears, flung further by means of throwing-sticks, and slings which hurled fist-sized stones with great force. It was a stand off situation but the commander had the use of cavalry. He issued orders to Carlos; forty horses and their riders peeled off from the body of men.

"To where do they go?" asked Chacuti.

Davey followed the men as they hurtled along the canal bank, the ground was frozen firm so that they were able to maintain a gallop. They continued their course, wiping away the snow which built up on their faces, until they reached a point where the canal narrowed at a great rock, without climbing the rock they urged their mounts onto the frozen surface of the canal. The horses reared and bucked as they were forced up the bank onto the ice, they knew it would never hold their weight but with fists and spurs the men drove them forwards. The ice groaned and bent beneath the weight of the lead horse. A tearing cracking sound was followed by the ice suddenly shattering and horse and rider plunged through into the freezing mire below. The men were hardened soldiers and did not halt, they knew the cold would not get to them before they reached the other side. Plunging forwards the horses forced their way through the ice aided by the men who sat astride them using swords and war-hammers to hack a passage through the frozen surface. Up the far bank the animals climbed, their strength was terrific, the men clinging to them were half-frozen but Carlos knew that their charge would send the adrenalin surging through their veins and the cold would soon be forgotten.

Lord Axa had seen the movement and realised the danger, the speed of the horses was not something he had ever experienced. To bring his reserve of men into the fray in time to meet the animals would be impossible. He reached to his belt and sounded his horn. Quickly the few men who still maintained their position near to the bridge retired and raced to join the body of men who were in reserve. It was fortunate for them that they did so. With swords drawn, lances couched and axes swinging the Spaniards tore along the opposite canal bank. Finding that the Incas had already withdrawn Carlos received further orders which were shouted across the canal by the sergeant-at-arms. He assigned a number of men to hold the position then galloped in pursuit of the retreating Incas.

"Where is father?" asked Chacuti. It was well for Lord Axa and his men that there was a hogs-back ridge of rock close by, through a narrow defile in the ridge his men retired in a tactical retreat. Davey swung back to the horsemen and witnessed them bearing down upon a handful of men who guarded the entrance to the defile. At their head stood Lord Axa.

Armed with their obsidian clubs with only leather shields as protection Axa knew the Incas were no match for the armoured riders who bore down upon them. He ordered his men to get amongst the rocky outcrops which were all around them thereby preventing the use of horses. The Spaniards loosed off arrows, cross-bow bolts and fired an arquebus but the warriors were too well protected. Angry at missing the opportunity of slaughter Carlos sent a rider back to the canal with the order, "Fetch the dogs of war." Dismounting he led a group of men in to the attack.

The ground was to the liking of the lightly dressed Incas; in full armour, carrying double-handed swords which were ideally suited to furious swinging from horseback, the Spaniard's fighting ability was drastically reduced. The snow covered rocks were treacherous, by dodging amongst them and only fighting when absolutely necessary the warriors kept the Spaniards at bay and gave the body of their men time to make good their retreat. At one point a number of Spaniards succeeded in forcing their way into the defile. Axa ordered, "Let them go, they won't get far!" Davey followed the men into the passage and witnessed Kabah and Labnah hurling huge rocks down upon the soldiers from the high sides of the defile. By the time Davey had returned to the fray the remaining Spaniards had retired back to their mounts. Lord Axa ordered all his men to retreat into the defile and brought up the rear.

"Have they escaped?" asked Chacuti, "will the soldiers let them go?" Her answer was not slow in coming. The rider returned with four great fighting dogs. The animals had been able to slip and slide their way over the canal without breaking through its icy surface. Wearing collars studded with spikes, their huge mouths hanging open revealing great fangs they looked fiercesome and dangerous.

"Hup, get in there!" urged their handler as the dogs ran into the defile. The speed of the animals was awesome as they scented their quarry and gave chase, Kabah and Labnah slammed down rocks onto the animals and succeeded

in killing one and injuring another. Undaunted the two remaining dogs scrabbled and clawed their way over the rocks.

"They send in their beasts!" shouted a warrior to Lord Axa. They halted and looked back, the sound of the animals barking grew as they hurtled nearer. The sides of the defile at this point were too high to permit any possibility of climbing them in time, the speed of the animals was such that at any moment they would appear.

"Leave me!" ordered Axa. His men obeyed. He waited, club in one hand, shield in the other. The animals bounded around a corner and charged down upon him. He slashed his club hard down upon the head of the lead dog felling it but the other animal hit him and sent him crashing to the ground. The weight of the animal as it landed upon him knocked the breath from his body but he quickly recovered and hit hard with his club into the animal's side. It had no effect, the club's obsidian blade was wedged into the head of the other dog. The huge fangs bore down upon his throat and only the fact that he was able to get the thin leather shield to cover that vulnerable area saved his life. He dropped the club and managed to get a grip upon the thick folds of flesh around the animal's neck but its power was immense, he realised that the strength of his arm would not be able to hold it off for very long. As its slaving jaws neared his face, he felt the dog jerk and stiffen, the clubs of Kabah and Labnah slammed into the animal, with a whimper its body was dragged from the chieftain. The brothers helped Axa to his feet, without a word they continued into the defile.

"Do they get away?" asked Chacuti.

Davey followed the band as the defile became more and more tortuous, twisting and turning and steadily rising as it climbed a massive mountainside. At a point where the defile was in almost total darkness through the sheer height and steepness of its sides, they came upon a huge wooden gate, next to it a number of steps had been cut into the rock-face to act as a ladder. The warriors climbed the steps which rose twice the height above the gate. A huge body of water was held in check by the gate which allowed only a trickle to escape down the defile. The path continued, hew out of the solid rock almost level with the surface of the water. Axa turned to the brothers, nothing was said but the three men remained at the gate.

Davey swept back down the defile to where the Spaniards were slowly advancing. They had tied a number of shields together and in groups of four were holding the shields above their heads as they moved up the pass. The first group of four was led by Ricardo and Vargas, the amount of gold they were wearing hampered their every movement, even in the danger of their present position the men had only thoughts for only one thing. "Do you reckon this might lead us to an even richer city than Sit-Nalta?" asked Vargas.

"There's got to be something at the end of this, otherwise why would they all bother coming up here!" retorted Ricardo revealing his horrible gold tooth as he struggled beneath the weight of shields. "Why couldn't you have kept your mouth shut instead of volunteering us for this?"

"It'll be a damned sight easier than trying to repair that bridge," barked back Vargas, "these Incas have got no fight in them, look at that lot back in the palace."

Davey had a quick look at the bridge, the main body of Spaniards were busy salvaging whatever could be retrieved from the burnt structure, Ortéga had been placed in charge and already men were rushing off to obtain the materials necessary to repair the damage.

Davey returned to the men wending their way up the passage. There was about thirty of them, the slight increase in the trickle of water at their feet went unnoticed as they intently peered up between the protection of shields or darted quickly from corner to corner of the chasm expecting the Incas to charge down upon them at any moment. They came across the bodies of the first two dogs, their handlers cried as they picked the animals up and staggered back down with them in their arms. The same happened for the second pair of dogs but by now the trickle was noticeably becoming a stream.

"What is this?" enquired Vargas. Ricardo looked down suspiciously at the water, "I don't like the look of this." The two men studied the trickle and watched it growing rapidly. Carlos was following on behind and passed shouted orders up to them, "Keep moving!" but the two men had thoughts only for their own skins, they ignored the orders, dropped the shield cover and began climbing the sides of the defile. The men behind realised what they were doing and began to copy them, soon the whole sides of the cleft were covered with men trying to climb upwards and out of any possible danger. The increase in flow of water below warned that their fears were correct.

Worn smooth by the passage of water over the ages, the rock did not provide enough purchase for so many men, some dragged their comrades back down and attempted to climb in their place only to find themselves being pulled back in turn. The water steadily increased until soon it had risen to ankle-height and was covering the rocky floor. Carlos and a group of men were splashing their way back down, if he had been able to remove his heavy riding boots he would gladly have done so, at every stride the spurs threatened to trip him but he knew that by the time they were removed whatever lay in the watery danger would be upon them.

Davey swept up to where Lord Axa and the brothers were hacking furiously into the timbers of the gates, freeing the pent-up waters from the ice which had welded the gates to the volume of water which lay below. Labnah was pulled

to safety as the gates gave way and the water was released. Like a mad animal it powered down the defile, roaring and raging like a wounded bull.

Ricardo and Vargas were high, the first blast of flood swept beneath them tearing screaming men from the rock walls and engulfing them in its midst. They looked at each other, Ricardo gave his horrible grin as they looked down upon the torrent of death which rampaged below.

Davey remembered his first glimpse of the two men torturing their captives and shook his head. He moved their view up the defile and saw a huge wall of water following on behind the initial torrent, it slammed into Ricardo and Vargas, it continued to explode down the defile, rising higher and higher between the steep sides as it fought to descend. Carlos and the other men were caught and battered down in the torrent. As the wall of water burst forth onto the plain far below horses were galloped to safety.

"Well I don't reckon anyone's going to be chasing your dad after that lot!" said Davey.

"To where does my father go?" asked Chacuti.

Davey returned to the warriors, they had caught up with the rest of the band wending their way up the final sections of the defile, the air was still between the steep sides; no snow was able to penetrate into the pass, the volume of water which had been pent-up beneath their footway now flowed as a steady stream. Presently they emerged into a wide valley, beyond it high-peaks completely snow-covered towered in the distance. The sun had risen and shone weakly through the falling snow but it was slightly thinner than it had been during the night.

Several warriors were pointing to the place they were heading to; set between the peaks of extremely high mountains a smaller peak jutted upwards, its sides were approaching vertical, its top seemed as sharp as a thorn. Davey looked at Chacuti, "How can they live on that, what's the point of going there?" He raced over the valley and shot up the mountainside to the top of the thorn. There he beheld a sight which amazed him, "The hidden city!" he exclaimed.

Concealed upon the mountain-top was a miniature city; walls, houses, terraces, steps and storehouses, animals and carefully tended gardens all appeared before him. The thatched roofs on the houses had large eaves to throw any falling snow clear of the buildings below, people were already outside shovelling away the night's snowfall. The thickly thatched roofs allowed no smoke to escape from the fires burning within. To Chacuti's cry of, "Where is my mother and sister?" he moved inside one of the homes. Mother and daughter sat upon low chairs at an equally low table, the table was filled with food which had been carefully stored within the storehouses for such an eventuality. Chacuti wept as she saw them and heard her mother singing to Panqui.

*I have no joy, I have no gladness;
The earth does not fill me.
I have suffered sorrows in the world.
The earth has only been lent to us,
Tomorrow, or the day after,
The giver of life will beckon us to his home*

Davey's eyes were filled with tears when he had finished listening to the woman. He decided that Chacuti had seen enough. "It is time to return to your tale Chacuti, your family are all well and safe in the hidden city. It is for you that we must now work."

He moved his view away from the window, the images within it faded and disappeared. Chacuti had reached out her hand towards the glass, she withdrew it and looked towards Davey. Although he could sense she was more at peace knowing the fate of her family something still disturbed her. She moved nearer to him and in a voice barely more than a whisper told him her tale, it was a tale of terror. He listened spellbound, unable to drag his thoughts away from the slight voice which gripped him fast with this tale of giant men and strange evil happenings. It was only when the voice cracked and broke into a sob that the spell was undone.

"Something terrible happened. I cannot speak of it," she sobbed, "Richard fought to save me but it was impossible, he spared me from pain but they killed him, I saw heaven open itself and watched him enter. He held out his arms to me and called me to go with him but whatever is in me held me here. It keeps me until the Shaman finds me."

"Well that's not going to happen now is it, we're onto him. You wait and see, you've told me a lot, I'm going to go back and see my Uncle Paddy and we'll play this game through to the end. We'll beat this Shaman don't you worry."

"The old man showed me something and said that when the boy in the helmet came I should show him." She rose from her seated position and floated across to the window, in the deep recess in the wall into which the window was embedded she placed her hand over a certain area. "In here lies something which he said would be important to you."

Davey looked at the section of wall, it seemed exactly the same as the rest of the wall but remembering how the old man had used the helmet as a tool he used its flange as a chisel and chipped away. It was sandstone and offered

tough resistance to his efforts but he persevered, before long a small hole appeared and he realised that the sandstone was not a solid block but was a thin casing. He struck harder and the casing began to break up, soon he was able to use his hands to tear away the remnants. Within the wall was a small chest, he manoeuvred it out of the hole and held it in his hands. He was absolutely amazed, not just because he was holding the chest but because of the fact that any disbelief he might have still held about the reality of the white lady's existence had now disappeared. She had shown him something real and tangible, something about which he could not have had any prior knowledge whatsoever.

With trembling fingers he turned a small key and raised the lid. In the chest were gems; diamonds, rubies and emeralds. Bars of solid gold which looked like little chocolate bars were thrown in haphazardly amongst silver objects which were shaped like little animals. In amazement he lifted a small fortune in one of his hands. What the action uncovered shocked him even more, in the bottom of the chest lay a dagger. He recognised it at once, it was the Shaman's. Hurriedly he closed the lid and stammered to Chacuti that he must go.

"I'll come back, I promise, don't you worry now. I've got to talk to my uncle about this."

He ran from the house carrying the chest, it was very heavy but the helmet gave him the strength to carry it at speed. As he ran his legs wobbled, weak at the knees with the thought that in his hands he carried an absolute fortune.

CHAPTER 26

Treasure

"Jesus H flippin' Christ! We're rich! We're rich!" Paddy couldn't help but shout.

"Shush Uncle Paddy, she's downstairs," said Davey meaning Mrs M.

Paddy lowered his voice, "It's a fortune lad. Yer rich. Yer dad can buy that flippin' place by the sea he's always going on about, never mind about a little boat, yer could raise the Titanic with this little lot," he looked wistful, "remember when we took yer down to wave it off from the Pier Head? Yer were just a nipper, sat on me shoulders..." He delved deeper, "Hang about, what's this? Is this what I think it is?" he held the dagger by its jewelled handle. "How'd it get in here?"

"I've been trying to tell you Uncle Paddy. I've spoken with the girl, she's not dead, leastways not as we know it, she just hasn't got a body. The skulls are keeping her here. It's like she's trapped and the horrible thing is that she knows that the Shaman is somewhere out there waiting to get her."

Paddy managed to control himself but still kept running his hands through the rings, gems, trinkets and precious metals in the chest. Davey wasn't sure just how much attention he was paying to what he was saying but went on and told him the whole story of his visit to Carnatic.

"Yer've done good lad. Now we've got sommat to go on. We can use what the girl's told yer to help us. Told yer didn't I, I said that she'd be there needing our help. But I tell yer what this lot gets weirder and weirder, I mean she's been hanging around up there for four hundred years waiting for yer. If that doesn't take the biscuit I don't know what does."

"I'm going to go home and get me dinner now, me mam and dad will be expecting me home from work. We'll give it a go when I come back later on."

"Fine lad, don't forget the oil in the shed."

Davey nodded, he looked sad with the thought of the deception he was having to play but then he looked over at the chest and the fortune tumbling through Paddy's fingers and realised that as far as money was concerned they would never have to worry about it ever again. "See you later Uncle Pad," he smiled.

Paddy weakly clenched his fist which still dripped with jewels and punched the air, Davey saw the weak movement and felt sorry for the fact that in the old days one of Paddy's punches could have felled an ox.

Mealtime at Number 99 that evening was, as Hugh put it to Liz after Davey had savaged his meal and gone back to Paddy's, "Like the attack on Hill 42, what's got into him."

"His work must have given him an appetite Hughie," said Liz. "It must have been nerves like you said those first few days."

"Told yer girl, I remember when I started in Cammell Laird's, a riveter's mate I was, up there on the side of them ships catching red-hot rivets..." Hugh went on and on, Liz smiled, she was sorry she'd started him off, she'd heard the same story a dozen times before but the knowledge that Hugh was happy repeating the tale caused the corner of her lips to turn up slightly.

Davey and Paddy were becoming so obsessed with their missions into the past that they no longer waited for Mrs Murtagh to retire to bed. As soon as Davey entered his room Paddy was urging him to get going. The only precaution they took was to close the door and place a chair against it to delay her if they failed to notice her clumping up the stairs. The chess-board was out, a different position was set and then Paddy's hurried advice of, "Yer'd better let the old man know what the girl's told yer," and they were off.

The old man gave Davey similar praises to Paddy, "Well done boy. The Shaman will not suspect we have such knowledge. The ship you speak of that is to attack us, go to it, find out all you can, if I am to go onboard it then the captain may be a man I can reason with. He must be warned not kill the body of the Shaman. Water will only kill his body, his evil soul would then be freed to occupy another person. Perhaps one less deserving than Father Salamanga."

"I've got his dagger and some treasure," said Davey, "they were in the house with the girl. She said that you told her to tell me where the chest was."

"I cannot understand how this is to come about but come about it must. It seems boy that we move within the confines of our own consciousness, would that I could expand my gaze to become aware of all the activities of my own being."

"What's he harping on about now?" asked Paddy.

"I think he means that things are happening all the time of which we have no knowledge Uncle Paddy."

"Yer mean like last night, I don't remember goin' the lav but I must have done?"

"I think it's the sort of feeling you get that you've already been somewhere or done something before."

"Makes as much sense to me as marching a million men against machine guns."

The old man spoke, "This is good news boy, the sacrificial knife must get taken from the Shaman, he would never give it up."

"How come 'e can see us now lad? Where'd he get his bit of mirror from?" asked Paddy.

"He must have got it out of the hold. He's using it to keep a look-out for the snake."

"ang on then, I just want to say hello to 'im." Paddy leant forwards and with his face almost filling the mirror shouted, **"HELLO! CAN YOU HEAR ME!"**

"I hear you my friend," replied the old man, "you are the boy's advisor?"

Paddy tried to puff out his weakened chest but ended up coughing, *"Yeah, yer could call me that,"* he spluttered.

"We have an edge on the Shaman now, together we shall defeat him," said the old man.

"You bet we will boyo!" said Paddy, "if I could get in their with yer I'd give 'im what for I can tell yer!"

"I must return to my watch, go with the boy and find the ship which is to attack the Carnatic."

Paddy sat back, they looked at the old man studying the mirror, scanning the area all around him, the child remained quietly next to him.

"She's not had much luck has she Uncle Paddy."

"They reckon yer make yer own luck lad but nobody deserves some evil sod like this Shyman after 'em, we'll batter him now, you watch. Come on, get on the other ship."

In a flat calm without a breath of wind sat a schooner. It was fitted out for war, twenty-eight cannon with smoke pouring from their muzzles protruded from its gun-ports. Men were blasting away at a barrel with a flag attached to it. A sweating and bald-headed master-gunner was rushing from team to team as quickly as his wooden leg would allow. In a strong West-Country accent he was shouting orders and instructions, "Elevate it two points mateys! Bring it round! Quickly swab it out!" The noise was terrific, as each broadside was fired the ship slewed backwards sending great ripples out over the mill-pond surface of the ocean. A cheer went up as the barrel exploded from a direct hit.

"This must be the one lad! Look's like they're having a bit of target practice! Get in have a closer look!"

"There's the captain!"

On the aft-deck stood three men, two of the men wore stiff, blue naval-type jackets and tight white leggings, on their heads they wore triangular hats. It was very hot under the sun which stood directly over the masthead, even the sails which hung uselessly in the still air did not provide shade. The third man who stood with them wore similar clothes

to the men manning the cannons; a pair of stout breeches which extended down to just below his knees and his head topped with a turban.

"Look at 'im!" said Paddy pointing to the tattoos which covered the bare-chested man's body. "It's that tattooed feller. The one that got the Shaman!"

"You're right Uncle Paddy. He's here! But the girl's told me he's a bit dodgy."

"If it wasn't for him yer wouldn't have found out about stickin' them skulls in the water."

"Yeah but those skulls said they were going to work on him, upset his balance and all that stuff. Maybe they get him to go on their side."

They studied the designs etched into the man's chest. The fighting animals, the huge elephants and the strange balance scales chained to the signs on his palms.

One of the men in naval dress turned to the tattooed man, "Look O'Neill, Mr Dawson is a first-rate navigator, if he says this is the right area then it is."

O'Neill replied with an expansive shrug of his broad shoulders which sent the figures carved into them into different poses, "Well who am I to argue but if we're talking 'area' maybe that's the problem. Old Pedro's one for getting these things exact." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper which he unfolded by pressing it down onto a capstan. "Right, here it is," he read falteringly from the letter, "Tropic of Cancer, 23°27' latitude by 23°27' longitude."

Mr Dawson said, "And we are in that area, mid-way between the islands of Cape Verde and the Canaries."

"Forget area.. It's the exact position we're after!" barked O'Neill.

The navigator was becoming annoyed, he sighted along his astrolabe towards the sun and the horizon and replied, "Mister O'Neill, we are in the exact position specified by your friend. We arrived here two days early, now it is the exact specified time. What is the delay, in short, where is he?"

O'Neill dug his tongue into the roof of his mouth, he was becoming angry. "If Alonzo says he'll be somewhere then he'll be there. Don't you be worrying about that. He'll come, something must have delayed him, that's all."

"Captain Baker, would it not be wise to cut our losses, journey to the Gold Coast of Africa and load up with natives?" asked Mr Dawson of the tall, handsome, mustachioed man who stood alongside him.

"He must be this Richard bloke the girl was telling me about," said Davey.

They watched as he preened his moustache between forefinger and thumb.

Another broadside roared, the three men adjusted their footing as the ship lurched. "We wait another day!" shouted Captain Baker above the dying echoes of the blast. His answer left no room for discussion. "Please continue about your business."

O'Neill walked away with a half-smile upon his lips which brought a flush of anger into the face of Mr Dawson, he looked up at the sails, "Even if this ship of O'Neill's turns up, which I begin to very much doubt, we will be hard pressed to chase her."

"They can only get the same wind as us Mr Dawson, we'll run her down, have no doubt about that. Take command whilst I check our preparations."

On deck men were fastening ropes to grapnel hooks which would be used to drag the two ships together. Cutlasses, bows and arrows, muskets and weapons of every description were being located in convenient piles. The deck was covered with sand to prevent any wayward sparks from setting it alight. The captain went below, the deck was similarly covered with sand, over which fourteen cannon lined each side of the deck. "Mr Soames!" he shouted above the din. The bald-headed master-gunner limped towards him, smouldering linstock held in his hand. "Sir!"

"A golden-guinea to the first team to hit the next barrel."

Mr Soames shouted the prize to the hundred men scurrying round the cannons. A barrel was rowed out on each side of the ship and pushed into the still waters. The master-gunner waited until the rowers had returned then yelled, "FIRE!"

Six men and a boy to each team hauled on blocks and tackle, bringing their muzzles to bear, then made the finer adjustments with handspikes, the cannons were then corrected for elevation. Whilst the modifications in alignment were taking place ramrods rammed the charges home, the heavy fourteen pound shot was rolled down the barrel.

"STAND CLEAR!"

The gunner primed the touch-hole and applied his linstock. With a tremendous bang the cannon was catapulted backwards through the air leaving the deck with the force of the explosion that sent the iron ball battering over the surface of the sea. Two of the cannon hit the low beams of the deck before their tackle brought them slamming back down. They were firing at such a low trajectory that the shot bounced over the ocean for over half a mile before its

energy was depleted and it sank three miles to the sea-bed. The floating targets survived the first attack, "Swab out!" came the order as sponges cleared the muzzles of debris.

By the time the targets had exploded Richard had returned to the upper-deck.

"The men are not so proficient as they ought to be?" Mr Dawson questioned him.

"They'll be satisfactory Mr Dawson. If O'Neill's letter is to be believed they'll only need one shot and the Carnatic will be hauling up its colours."

"And should anything happen to this *Captain Alonzo*?"

"Then we've a fight on our hands, but the Carnatic's got no more cannon than us, a typical Spanish trick to fit it out with dummy gun-port's."

"Can we trust O'Neill? If a man may be judged by his friends then this double-dealing Alonzo indicates that we may be placing our faith in the wrong man."

"It is of no matter Mr Dawson. We've come too far now to do anything but see it through. A fortune in Inca gold. Would you trade that for a ship-load of slaves?"

The question needed no answer.

"I see now why old Pedro Alonzo was so keen to get out that port lad, it weren't just to get away from the pox, he's arranged to meet up with this tattooed feller."

"That'd explain the delay Uncle Paddy. But what if they don't meet up?"

"They do though lad. The girl's already said so, the helmet wouldn't 'ave taken you to this ship by coincidence would it, and they just happen to be talking about the Carnatic by name. No they'll meet up, sure as there's a nose on me mother's face."

Paddy and Davey both looked at each as at that precise moment Mrs Murtagh called up the stairs, "Need anything Paddeee?"

He thumped the floor once with his stick to indicate that he didn't. "She's acting strange lad," he said.

"I can't understand how come she hasn't let me mam and dad know I'm not in work, do yer reckon she know's what we're doing but wants us to help the girl?"

"Could be lad, could be, there's definitely some rhyme in her reason. Come on get back on with it. I reckon we've found out enough about this Richard feller. He's just another money-grabbin' git who'll sell his own mother for the price of a banana."

"Should we tell the old man that?"

"Naw, what's the point. Just zip it up to where the flamin' ships meet each other. I'm getting fed up with this, I need some action."

"Hold up Uncle Paddy, we're forgetting something, the old man asked us to find out if the captain of the schooner would help him when he gets onto his ship."

"Yeah, so what," said Paddy impatient to get going.

"Well this O'Neill knows Pedro Alonzo who knows the old man, maybe O'Neill also knows the old man?"

"Big 'maybe' lad, just get on with it will yer."

A brilliant star-lit night passed, the sun had not risen over the horizon when a freshening breeze caught the sails and slowly filled them. The ship felt as though a giant had breathed life into it, in his cabin Richard pulled on his clothes and went up on deck. O'Neill was on watch, "There she is Captain," he nodded casually towards the distant horizon. There, silhouetted against the rising sun was the massive sailing vessel, the Carnatic.

"Why did you not alert me!" shouted Richard.

"There's plenty of time till she gets here."

Richard ignored him, he shouted orders which rose the whole ship and reprimanded the man manning the crow's nest for not spying the vessel.

The alarm was given, "ACTION STATIONS!" Men scurried hither and thither as the first rays from the sun spread like a warm blanket across the dark surface of the deep ocean.

"It's going to be a good day," offered Richard to O'Neill when the ship had been brought round and picked up on the same breeze that brought their prey ever closer.

"Have a dekkko at the Carnatic, see what's happening 'eh?"

Davey raced over the ocean to the galleon.

On the poop-deck of the Carnatic stood Captain Alonzo, both he and Hernando were studying the schooner through telescopes. "It is a privateering vessel Sir, should I order the men to battle stations?"

"First we will try to outrun them, can you determine whether the schooner is built for speed or built for fight?"

Hernando returned to the telescope, "It will surely outrun us whilst we are laden down with the Inca treasures. Only by ditching our cargo would we be able to outrun them."

"Then we must pray that God sends us a miracle Hernando, perhaps the early morning will throw us up a fog-bank or perhaps the privateer will decide we are too heavily armed to tackle us."

"God has ignored us in our plight so far this voyage Captain."

"Not another man?" hissed the Captain hardly daring to ask the question.

"No Sir, not since the powder-boy was reported missing during the early hours. The man next to him saw something but was too terrified to move, even now he is too frightened to speak of what he saw. Father Salamanga is ministering to him."

"What! Take two marines and guard the man yourself Hernando. I order it!"

Looking questioningly back over his shoulder at Captain Alonzo as he walked away Hernando led the marines below.

Father Salamanga appeared at Captain Alonzo's side so quietly and suddenly that he jumped in fright, "Captain, I did not mean to startle you," smiled the priest, "I bring bad tidings, a young boy departed from our midst during the night, I have just finished tending to another man who had been deeply affected by the boy's disappearance. He too sadly passed away, I have taken the liberty of consigning him to the deep."

Trying not to sound alarmed Captain Alonzo replied, "Thank you father, to what do you attribute this, is it some other form of manifestation of the pox?"

"I fear not, there is evil present here. Sailors are always superstitious but some are saying that there is a devil onboard, 'from out of the mouths of babes comes truth', I begin to wonder whether they may be correct. If only the good brothers of Toledo were here we would quickly act to stamp this out. I am alone, but I shall endeavour to fight whatever may have come amongst us."

"It may be that the men will soon have thoughts upon other matters," said the captain pointing towards the schooner. The priest's eyes narrowed, "Such is fate my son. Such is fate."

Hernando returned, "Captain, the man is gone he..."

Captain Alonzo cut in with, "The good Father has informed me of this Hernando, the man has passed onto a better place than we know."

"Rightly spoken my son," said the father gravely.

"You will excuse me father whilst I attend to other matters?"

Father Salamanga bowed deeply and retired below.

"Hoist all the canvas we have available, bring the men up on deck, we shall test out this little boat that has chosen to cross paths with the might of Spain." Immediately that Hernando had relayed the order the captain whispered to him, "Hernando, you will remember that I spoke to you of a number of 'factors'?"

"Aye Sir."

"The good father is one of those factors, go to the carpenter, see whether the chest I have asked him to prepare for me is completed."

Looking even more questioningly at the captain Hernando hurried to carry out the instruction.

Far above his head headsails, topsails and gallants were unfurled and the stately galleon surged forwards, a knotted line was thrown alongside to record the increase in speed. By mid-morning the gentle swell of the ocean had increased with the strengthening wind until the galleon was sliding up one side of the swells and down the other. But the schooner was far more seaworthy than its quarry, it sliced through the swells and held a far-tighter course, steadily it reduced the distance between the two vessels. Most of the men from each crew were up in the rigging dragging on shrouds, tightening braces and splicing stays doing everything that could be done to catch the wind and force more speed from their ships.

"What's goin' on? I thought Pedro was doin' a double-cross?"

"I suppose he's got to make it look realistic otherwise his men will know what's happening."

Davey moved back to the schooner, his thoughts were confirmed.

"Why does he try so desperately to outrun us O'Neill?" snapped Richard.

"Wouldn't look right if he were to just sail up to us and hand over his cargo would it Sir," said O'Neill in a voice that had a slightly sarcastic edge to it, Richard chose to ignore him, the man was uncouth but he was serving his purpose. By late afternoon it became apparent that they would catch the Spanish ship but the fear was that this might not happen until nightfall. Under cover of darkness the Carnatic would be able to slip away. Richard stared up at the sails, every square inch of canvas available had been hoisted, even the jib sail had been replaced by a larger sail from the mizzen mast, the jib buckled and snapped as it coped with the extra demands. Orders were given to repair the damage but it cost valuable minutes. An old seaman crossed onto the aft-deck, "I be begging your pardon Sir but I think that we could do something to hurry us up a little."

"Yes what!" snapped Dawson.

"Well first off there's the question of payment, I reckon it'd be worth a double share, would it not Cap'n?" He looked towards Richard.

"Yes man!" he barked, "Come on out with it!"

"Dampen the sails, I saw it done when I were a nipper, give us a few extra knots it did."

"Why didn't you say this before!" cried Richard, at the same time giving the order.

Buckets of sea-water were hoisted aloft and thrown onto the canvas, it soaked into the cloth, swelling it and filling every tiny space that existed between the weave. The ship rushed forwards, a seaman called out the knots as the ship sailed faster.

"They'll catch them now for sure," said Davey, "I'm going to tell the old man."

He swept onboard the galleon but the shock of seeing the snake outside the hiding-place made him forget whatever he was going to say. He moved inside to where the old man and Chacuti sat in their damp hollow, the old man straightened as he too saw the animal.

"I'm here old man," said Davey.

The terror of the old man and child was horrible to see, Davey moved back out and watched as the snake began tearing strips of timber from the planking, spitting out great splinters as it bit its way forwards.

"It's just like the girl said it was Uncle Paddy!"

"Well check on the other ship! If the lass has got it right it'll soon be setting itself up for a shot!"

They moved out through the hull, there, just as Paddy had guessed, was the schooner; it's gun-ports were all open, it's cannon protruded threateningly. It had a ship's length to go before it overhauled the galleon. Even with its heavy cargo the galleon rode proud and high, causing it to tilt with every sea swell which rocked against its sides. The Spanish cannoneers cursed their unstable platform and sought blocks to place under the rear axles of their weapons in order to bring them to bear on the lower-riding English ship which knifed through the ocean in a flat plane.

"BATTLE STATIONS!" ordered Richard.

Men climbed into the rigging carrying bows, grappling-hooks and muskets; cannon were loaded, some with shot, some with chains which would wreak havoc as they raked their way across the other ship's decks, gouging out showers of deadly wooden splinters.

O'Neill was shouting to Richard, "Listen to me! It'll only need a single shot across his bows! He wants his share of the gold as much as we do. Half the gun-ports are dummies, look carefully, you can see for yourself!"

Richard peered through his telescope, he focused upon the name 'Carnatic' then, fighting to hold his arms steady against the adrenaline which flowed through them, he inspected the gun-ports. The ports that were active could clearly be distinguished from the fakes - they remained closed. All told the Carnatic possessed fewer cannon than the schooner.

"We must attack immediately!" shouted Mr Dawson with his eye upon the sun which was standing upon the horizon, soon it would sink and night would fall. The sky was a beautiful backdrop to the majestic ships, tinged with bright hues of red it cast a ruddy glow over the vessels.

"Fire across her bows!" ordered Richard.

Men began hauling on tackle, rapidly levering a cannon round.

"Here's the shot Uncle Paddy!" Davey passed back into the side of the Carnatic. He saw the snake's eyes peering in at the old man and child they were shouting and screaming.

"They're about to shoot! Stand back!" he warned the old man.

The snake began to put its head into the torn timbers, the old man stood up and placed the child behind himself, protecting her with his own body. At that same instant the whole ship seemed to explode, the timbers were rent asunder and erupted all around them. But for the protection the helmet gave them the old man and child would have been ripped to pieces. The galleon took the shot with barely a shudder but the shot had penetrated near its water-line,

as the first swell rose against its side gallons of water poured into the hold. The snake emitted a high-pitched scream and retreated.

Only by extending itself to its full length was the snake able to reach the trap-door which led to the captain's cabin. It constricted its body up from the hold then lay panting hard before it began to slowly return to the form of Father Salamanga.

"Come child!" called the old man. He lifted her out through the shattered hole and dropped down with her into the warm ocean, the ships were coming alongside as he swam quickly across the bows of the schooner and allowed it to pass by him, a rope hanging from its deck was their only chance to get aboard but it hung too high. As the vessel passed by Chacuti rose up from out of the sea and gripped the rope, pulling it down to the old man.

"What's that in the water?" exclaimed Davey. He looked down into the ocean until the whole of the mirror was filled with the sea, deeper they went and saw a huge white shark. Its body shuddered as it unleashed its power, it ploughed through the water heading straight towards the old man. Suddenly a streamlined shaped zipped through the sea and slammed straight into the shark's side. "It's the dolphins!" cried Davey. The shark dwarfed the mammals but they continued to charge into its thick body whenever it attempted to launch itself into the attack. Each time one of them struck home the shark's body appeared to buckle then it straked its rows of teeth through the water in an attempt to seize the dolphins, they were far too quick for it. Their smiling faces belied the fury with which they prevented the shark from seizing its prey.

The old man and child were unaware of the battle taking place beneath their feet, they were pulled along bouncing and skipping off the schooner's bow-wave. As soon as they were past the natural obstacle they swarmed up the rope and over the ship's gunwales.

"Yaagh!" yelled a marine raising his sword as he bore down upon them.

"HALT!" came a tremendous shout from the aft-deck, it was O'Neill.

"Phew, that was a close shave!" gasped Davey.

"Almost was lad!" joked Paddy, *"Talk of out the frying-pan and into the fire. If these two were cats they've used up their lives already."* They watched as the marine levelled his sword to guard them, *"Imagine the butcher of Dombey Street with one of them."*

Davey laughed at the image of the barber let loose with a sword, he was bad enough with a razor.

The old man didn't waste any time. He removed the helmet from his head allowing O'Neill to get a better look, "I thought it were you cookie!" he grinned, "what brings you aboard eh?"

"Fate throws us together again O'Neill, it has been many a year since you were last alongside me."

"Trincomalee harbour, if I'm not very much mistaken," said O'Neill, "and tell me, how is Captain Alonzo, is he aboard?"

"He is," replied the old man.

"The old man knows there's something going on between O'Neill and Alonzo, he's just let me know," said Davey.

"Well tell him to get going on sorting out the Shyman then!"

The old man began to speak to O'Neill but Richard interrupted, "She's running up her colours O'Neill."

"Didn't I tell you old Pedro wouldn't let us down!" cheered O'Neill.

"How come 'e's given up without a fight?" asked Paddy, *"isn't that making it a bit obvious?"*

"I'll shift it back and take a look Uncle Paddy."

Hernando returned to the captain, "Sir, the chest you speak of is ready but should we not order the men to battle-stations?" He looked across the short distance which separated the two vessels.

"Aye Hernando carry on." But as soon as Hernando had given the order the captain again spoke to him, "You will not understand what I am about to tell you but the ship you see over yonder is not our greatest danger, the devil himself sails with us."

Hernando drew in a sharp breath, "The men are speaking of this Sir, five men and a boy since we sailed. They fear whatever is aboard more than any English privateer."

"The priest, Father Salamanga, is possessed of a demon, do not ask me how I know this but I do, it is my intention to surrender. The crew have lost all heart for a fight."

The statement about the priest obviously stunned Hernando but he was a good enough officer to keep his mind on military matters, "If we lay to with the rope's end the crew will fight!" Both men ducked as they heard the first

cannon-shot, it smashed a hole into the side of the galleon close to the water-line. Craning over the gunwales to observe the damage they witnessed the old man and child drop down into the ocean. The captain turned to the first mate, "Take three men, assess the damage, if possible begin repairs immediately!"

"Aye aye Sir!" called a tarry-haired sailor as he gathered together the necessary crew.

"See Hernando, already we run the risk of losing not only the cargo but the whole ship. Fully-armed we might be able to give these English dogs a bloody nose, even under-armed as we are I might have considered it but the danger within is as great as that which lies over yonder."

Hernando saw the reality of their situation, "I'll give the order Sir."

Under normal circumstances to surrender without a fight would have caused a near mutiny but the Spanish sailors' whispers pointed towards their wishing to be able to share their fears with other men - be they English or whatever. "Men's men, devil is devil's," one of the sailors in the first-mate's party said as they made their way deeper into the hold. Each man carried a lamp and looked furtively around daggers drawn as they made their way towards the damaged hull.

Grapppling-hooks were hurled and the two vessels were dragged together. The schooner lay a lot lower in the water than its giant prize but an armed boarding-party led by Richard quickly swung aboard. It encountered no resistance and began to rapidly disarm the Spaniards.

"They don't seem to have any fight in them," Richard said quietly to O'Neill. "This Alonzo wouldn't have let his crew in on our little secret would he?"

O'Neill didn't seem too sure, "Something's knocked the fight out of them, that's for sure. There's Alonzo, on the poop-deck!" They ran across the deck and climbed up to the captain of the Carnatic.

"My sword Captain," said Captain Alonzo studiously avoiding even looking at O'Neill.

To cheers from his men Richard took the offered weapon gracefully. "Please return with me to my ship, and we will discuss terms," as the captain followed him Richard turned to O'Neill, "clap the crew in irons."

Captain Alonzo raised an objection but Richard assured him on his word as a gentleman that it was purely a safety measure and that as soon as terms had been struck they would be released. Alonzo acquiesced and indicated to Hernando that he should take charge in his absence. Night was falling so lamps were lit to illuminate the vessels. The work of shackling the Spanish crew began, heavy iron collars were hammered home upon the right-ankle of each man, a stout chain linked the collars together. Soon the deck was filled with a great line of men anchored to each other. One of the men screamed as he fought with his captors, "No, anything, I'll do anything, don't fasten that on me." The man next to him informed them, "He served in the galleys for five years." To screams of protest the metal was hammered shut, the imprisoned man sat pushing it down hard against his ankle as if hoping that the iron might widen and release him.

The old man was sent for and led down to Richard's cabin where he and Alonzo sat together, "I believe that you have something to tell me?" inquired Richard of the old man. Alonzo spoke, "I have made the captain aware of the present difficulty, the Carnatic carries, shall we say, not just a cargo in wealth but in death."

The old man grasped the situation, "You have traded your ship for gain. You will not get away with it Don Alonzo. I now understand your desire to sail, you had a rendezvous with this pirate!"

"Slowly does it cookie," grinned Alonzo, "who are you to talk, you, a deserter helping a child to escape from whatever crime she has committed."

"You know that is not the case Don Alonzo, the child escapes from the self-same devil that is killing your own crew."

"What is this?" asked Richard.

"It is nothing Captain," smiled Alonzo, "the old man exaggerates, come old man, there is no great danger is there?"

"There was no great danger in the harbour of Trincomalee when you made your first deal with the English dog O'Neill, forty good men went to the bottom that day."

"Name your price old man," said Alonzo, "what price do you put upon yourself?"

"The question is not of price but of **who** will survive this voyage, whilst you play at getting rich the Shaman of the Incas is murdering your men."

Richard slammed his hand furiously upon the table, "What is this you speak of old man? I want to know what it is that you refer to!"

"You have sown a fine plot Captain but into your plans has walked the Devil," said the old man simply but the effect of his words was great.

O'Neill entered the cabin, "O'Neill!" barked Richard, "Do you know what is going on here?" He looked questioningly at the old man, "Don't worry about him!" Richard yelled, "It seems he's the only straight talking person

around here," he glared at Captain Alonzo. O'Neill stared at his accomplice as if trying to find some sort of answer in his eyes, "We do not have much time! barked Richard.

O'Neill spoke, "We have the Carnatic, the Inca gold is onboard, by morning we shall have loaded it into our own hold then Pedro here can continue back to Spain. He'll get his share later."

"So the plot is as deep as Trincomalee's harbour," cut in the old man.

Richard held his hand up for silence. "I think we can agree on one thing before we go any further old man, the gold was stolen by Spain, if it should end up going elsewhere then that is perfectly satisfactory. Is it not?"

"You are right in what you say Sir but the work of Captain Alonzo here costs good men their lives."

"It was not I who led that priest onboard my ship old man!" shouted Alonzo, "half-a-dozen of my men have lost not their souls to your Inca devil!"

"We turn full-circle, and find that there is someone, or should I say *something*, on the Carnatic that ought not to be there. Now, let us put all our differences aside and decide what should be done."

All four men made gestures of agreement. Captain Alonzo spoke first, "I have the means of dealing with this priest prepared, my trap is ready, all that is required is someone to bait it."

"Your will not use the child. She has suffered enough!" said the old man.

"But she is what the creature wants, she can lead him into the trap, why else would he fall into it?" asked Alonzo.

"I don't know what's going on here, not fully, not yet," said O'Neill, "but if its devils and demons involved you can count me out."

"Then who is to bait the trap gentlemen?" asked Alonzo looking round and smiling at each in turn.

"He's as crafty as a cart-load of monkeys this Alonzo, don't yer reckon lad?"

"It's set a thief to catch a thief Uncle Paddy."

"Aye, but in this case it's set a devil to catch a devil. What do yer reckon the old man's going on about, Ceylon and Trick-on-me harbour? Does he mean Alonzo played a trick on him and his mates when they was there?"

"Seems like that Uncle Paddy, one thing's for sure it's just like the old man said, this Captain Alonzo seems such a straightforward bloke but he's far from it. If anyone can catch the Shaman it's him."

"Where is he now?"

"He's there," said Davey touching the mirror over where Alonzo sat.

"Not him yer daft bee, the Shyman."

In the hold of the Carnatic, hidden behind baulks of oak stood Father Salamanga. The first men from the schooner led by Mr Dawson were examining the treasures taken from the Incas.

"It's a fortune, it's like Aladdin's flipping cave, it's awesome." The men were stuck for words to describe their amazement as they ripped open chests, barrels and casks packed from top to bottom with indescribable treasures. One man lingered longer over one of the chests than the rest, into his pockets he furtively stuffed handfuls of pearl necklaces and gold coins. The Shaman slunk behind him, gripped him round the throat and silently carried out his wicked practice. Even as he absorbed the man's energy he hooked the body under his arm and carried it deeper into the hold.

"Clinton!" called one of the men, "look at this over here!" Their swinging lamps lit up gold objects which had been thrown into a heap in one corner of the hold. "They must have run out of containers," suggested one of the men. Mr Dawson shook his head, "Something doesn't seem quite right."

"Something's down here with us Sir!" exclaimed one of the men. All the men sensed a horrible presence.

"I think we shall go back," Dawson instructed the men as he began to retrace his steps. The three men behind him followed.

Father Salamanga barred their retreat, his dripping dagger was clearly visible in one hand, upon his hip hung the limp body of his victim.

"Eh, were'd he pop up from?" asked one of the men, "Clinton! Did this priest get past you?" he shouted not seeing his friend.

The Shaman advanced towards them. "Stop right there!" warned Mr Dawson. He moved his sword towards the priest, the other men levelled their weapons and circled the Shaman, he tossed his victim aside. The priest ignored the warning and kept walking towards them, his strength was terrific, with a back-hand swipe he knocked the navigator head over heels and grinned, his smile revealed two vicious curved teeth. "He's got a bit of a punch on him," said one of the sailors as he lunged in with a cutlass. The Shaman seized hold of the man's arm, pulled him quickly towards himself and bit him in the neck. The two remaining men were terrified. They dropped their weapons and ran screaming into the furthest recesses of the hold. As they stumbled deeper into the darkness they realised to their horror that not everything on which they trod was part of the cargo. The discarded bodies of the Spaniards who had repaired the damage caused by the cannon-fire sent them out of their wits.

Lit by their comrades lamps they witnessed the Shaman carry out his gruesome acts, then watched as he moved towards themselves.

"Flippin' 'eck, it's murder. Get the old man to do sommat!"

"We must act quickly Captain," said the old man to Richard. "Even as we speak the Shaman takes your men."

"WHAT! What is this Sha-man? Did you not say that he is a priest?"

"They are one and the same, quickly now, I will act as the bait," answered the old man.

"Very well then we learn who we are to fight, now, are you with us Captain Alonzo?"

Alonzo smiled, "I am ready, now what say we put our heads together and decide how we are to tackle this?"

CHAPTER 27

The Trap

The two ships were strangely quiet, groups of men moved around by lamp-light, no man went anywhere alone. All sails had been furled leaving the spars and masts as bare as trees after a forest fire. The schooner no longer bumped gunwales with the Carnatic, the deep boom as the two ships came together no longer echoed out over the dark depths. Pikes had been set lengthways between the two ships holding them together but far enough apart to prevent the Shaman from slipping from the galleon to its capturer. One by one the prisoners were released from their shackles, a rope was tied round them and they were hoisted up high into the air by men aboard the schooner, when they were over the ocean the rope was released allowing them to drop down deep into the black water below, only after they had struggled to the surface were they lifted up and onto the schooner's deck where they were quickly re-shackled. It was clear from the willingness with which the Spaniards were assisting in these measures that they would do whatever it took to rid themselves of the evil presence which had manifested itself to such an extent that it hung over both ships like a shroud.

"They're not takin' any chances are they lad. He knows they're after 'im now, look at 'im!"

The Shaman raced through the hold of the galleon, rapidly he ascended ladders and stairways towards the upper deck but at every access point groups of men stood armed with nothing but buckets of sea-water, they hurled gallons of the liquid towards the priest causing him to retreat.

"What if he climbs out of the gun-ports and gets up onto the deck that way?"

"He won't try it lad, he's too scared of falling in."

"He might just throw himself into the sea and then he can always get into someone else though," suggested Davey.

"I reckon that must use up a fair bit of his energy every time he takes someone else and them skulls wouldn't like that, I mean if it was so easy he'd have jumped into every one of them poor sailors he's killed on that ship and nobody would have had a clue who he was then would they."

"The old man thinks the same Uncle Paddy!"

From out of the hold came the cry of Father Salamanga, "Have I not delivered you from the pestilence, have I not ministered to you! I came neither eating nor drinking and you say 'he has a demon'. Yet have I not cast out demons that you may be saved!"

The old man stood on the deck of the Carnatic, alongside him were O'Neill, Richard, Captain Alonzo and Hernando, apart from the old man who carried a lamp each man carried two buckets of sea-water. "Begone Satan!" shouted the old man, "you cast out demons with the authority of the Devil!"

The group of men descended into the upper deck, it was clear of all men but the cow and goats stood huddled together in terror. "Take care, the animals may be a danger, the fiend knows no difference between man or beast!" warned the old man. Carefully avoiding the animals they continued down to the middle deck of the galleon. The light from the old man's lamp cast huge shadows from the cannon, frantically looking all around they entered a small room, within the room were the two halves of the huge chest prepared by the carpenter.

"Guard the doorway," hissed the old man as he put down his lamp upon the carpenter's bench.

Hampered by their buckets the men could do nothing to assist him as he struggled to stand each half of the chest up on end. Once he had done so he positioned them on either side of the doorway with their open sides facing towards each other. Beneath the ends of the chest he forced lengths of dowel so that the chests could roll quite easily back and forth.

"They're going to trap him in that!" cheered Davey.

"Easy said, not easy done," declared Paddy.

Turning towards the men the old man told O'Neill and Alonzo to stand behind one half of the chest and Richard and Hernando behind the other.

"What makes you so sure he won't realise what we're up to?" Richard questioned the old man quietly.

"He will come, the helmet will draw him here, he cannot resist its pull," he answered.

When all was made ready the old man blew out his lamp and stood within the doorway, when O'Neill witnessed him turn his back to the door and face into the room he whispered to Alonzo, "That fellers got more guts than I have."

"I haven't told the old man about O'Neill yet," said Davey, he carried on talking to the old man, *"the man with tattoos, we saw him grab the Shaman, he came out of the Shaman's mirror. The skulls all said it was the signs on his hands, they seemed to frighten him. And we've heard them saying how they're going to change him into a baddy."*

"I hear you boy," said the old man, much to the fear and astonishment of the four men within the room. "How are they to change him?"

"They've said they'll upset his balance, tip his scales or something."

"He bears them upon his body. They were cut into him by men in the East, strange men who say little but men who know much."

The helmet enabled him to see in the dark, from off the carpenter's bench he took a lump of tallow*with it he drew the same symbols that were upon O'Neill's palms on the inside of the chest.

"What are you doing?" asked Davey.

"The signs will keep him in boy," answered the old man.

The only light that filtered into the room was from the lights onboard the deck of the schooner, they reflected off the surface of the ocean and in through the deck's open gun-ports. The two ships rocked together on the ocean's swells; save for the lapping of water against their sides and the occasional splash as yet another man was dropped into the sea not a sound could be heard.

"He's wanting to know where the Shaman is!" exclaimed Davey.

"Find 'im quick lad!"

Davey swept their view around the ship, when they did not immediately find what they searched for, he concentrated, suddenly he cried out, *"He's right behind you!"*

The old man jumped forwards into the room yelling, "NOW!"

The twin halves of the chest slammed together, only the Shaman's hand which protruded outside prevented them being shut. The old man ran towards the hand, bent the fingers back and wrenched something from within its grasp.

"He's got the knife!" shouted Davey.

O'Neill attempted to force the Shaman's hand back into the chest but the talons seized him and pulled his own hand into the chest. "He has me! The fiend has me!" he screamed terrifically as suddenly his arm came free. "Aagh, he has it!" screamed O'Neill clutching his free hand around the end of his injured arm.

The old man looped a length of chain around the chest and fastened it together, the other men repeated the process with chain after chain. It seemed that their efforts were not needed when suddenly there was an enormous eruption which, if the chains had not been in place, would have ripped the chest apart.

"He dwells within as the reptile," said the old man. He took the turban from O'Neill's head and wrapped it tightly around the end of his arm to stem the bleeding. The other men stared at him; beneath the helmet, in the dark his face had a strange glow to it making him appear as though he might not be someone of this world.

"What takes place here old man?" asked Richard. "You have not told us all of this tale."

The old man answered, "Not all knowledge should see the light of day, Father Salamanga can only be dealt with by men who are learned in these matters," he turned to Alonzo, "you and your men shall continue to Spain, the men of Toledo will know what to do."

"The..men of Toledo.. the Inquisition?" said Alonzo, the fear in his shaking voice was clear. From within the chest came a high-pitched scream.

"They've got him! They've got the Shaman! That's it finished Uncle Paddy, I can go and tell the girl!"

"Not so fast young 'un. The Shaman's still alive, if yer can call it that. Till he's snuffed it yer can't count on anything. These feller's in Toledo are going to have to do the business on him first, seems like the old man isn't too sure about what to do."

"Why doesn't he just stab him with the dagger?"

"Now there's a good idea, ask him lad."

Alonzo and the other men were not sure whether the old man was replying to Alonzo's question when he said, "These are matters on which I do not have full knowledge, only men who have spent lifetimes studying the black arts will know how to end the life of this foul beast."

Richard was eager to get on with the purpose of his voyage, "We begin unloading!" he stated.

Hernando picked up a claw hammer from the carpenters bench, he raised it towards Richard, "You will order our men to be released Captain!" he threatened. From behind him Captain Alonzo clapped both of his hands hard over his officer's ears causing him to drop semi-conscious to the deck. "I believe that my share will be delivered to me Captain?" he said to Richard.

O'Neill was made of stern stuff. Still clutching his arm he answered, "I personally will deliver it to you."

"Off Cape Finisterre?"

"On the twenty sixth day of the ninth month."

The men shook hands as Hernando rose groggily to his feet. Captain Alonzo indicated that they should be tied up and both he and his officer were securely bound.

The intervals of the chest being battered became fewer until by the time the sun rose and a second shift of guards had been stationed alongside, the attacks had virtually ceased.

"I'm going to go up to Carnatic and tell her what's happened. "

"Hang about, there no point lad. "

"What do you mean?"

"Well you've seen the Shaman flying round outside Carnatic Hall, he came at you out the water didn't he. "

"Yeah.. "said Davey hesitantly.

"Well then he must escape mustn't he. "

"I'm going to contact the old man!" Standing against the gunwale of the schooner watching gold bars; silver caskets filled with diamonds and jewels and gems of every description being transferred from the Carnatic the old man looked extremely tired. The crew of the Carnatic were being returned to their own vessel down another gang-plank.

"Old man. "

"Yes boy."

"We reckon the Shaman must escape because I've seen him here in our time. "

"I fear that what you say is correct, the Shaman must be in your time. And yet without the helmet he could not fly. You said that when you saw him you had the helmet?"

"I was wearing it. "

"Then this is something I am unable to fathom, perhaps the Shaman has deeper knowledge which is not known to me."

Paddy looked at Davey as if to say, *"Told you so. "*

The old man continued, "One thing is for certain, the Shaman must possess a body to be able to retrieve the helmet. The helmet is in your time therefore the Shaman must have a body in your time."

"Well that makes sense to me, "said Paddy adding, "for a change. "

"So he must be alive now, which means he must escape from your trap!" exclaimed Davey.

"I fear that what you are saying is correct boy. The battle may take place over the centuries but the girl's soul depends upon our winning it," he paused then asked, "Did he hold the knife when you saw him?"

"No, he couldn't, it was in the wall in the house. Chacuti give it to me. I've got in now. "

"You have it! The twists and turns of fate are concealed to us, I hold the dagger here as I wear the helmet but they are to pass to you, surely the Gods themselves are involved in these matters."

"Will the Shaman need the knife to, you know, kill her?"

"He cannot absorb the energy from her soul and retrieve the power of the skulls without the dagger. Take great care of it boy."

"Ask 'im how come 'e's so sure about the Shaman needing the knife to kill the girl but doesn't know if it could be used to kill the Shaman."

Davey asked the question, the old man replied, "You have seen him yourself boy. The knife will surely kill the body and soul of man, woman and child, but the Shaman has taken many forms. Should we take the risk of losing him now that we have him trapped?"

"Well he's going to get away sooner or later, give it a stab!" shouted Paddy.

"I fear the child's destiny lies in your hands," said the old man, "Everything has come together in your time, the final battle will surely be played out by you."

"Couldn't agree with him more lad. It's us that are going to do the business, not these Toledo boys and yer old man, he's doesn't even fancy having a stab at the Shyman himself. I tell yer what if I was in there that feller'd look like a pin cushion. I'd..." Paddy took hold of the dagger and stabbed furiously backwards and forwards in the air with it until he collapsed on the point of exhaustion, coughing and retching and hovering over his bucket. Davey barely had time to shove the helmet beneath the bed quickly followed by the treasure chest before Mrs Murtagh came stomping up the stairs, "He's alright lad, leave him to me." She motioned for Davey to leave.

As he went down he could hear the coughing and spluttering from upstairs but although the sound upset him a smile was upon his face. He was rich now, as rich as the king of England. He could buy the best medicine that money could buy. Now they would all live happily ever after in their little house in the country.

"He's alright now lovey," said Mrs Murtagh. Carrying a bucket in the crook of her arm she went out into the back-yard, it was dark outside but she had performed the same routine so many times that she needed no light. Davey sat listening to her swilling the bucket and waited for her to return.

"Mrs M."

"Yes lovey."

"How come you haven't said anything to me mam and dad?"

She peered down her wart at him, "About what?"

"You know."

"Well let's just say that I'm an old woman who keeps herself to herself, that good enough for yer sunshine?"

Davey smiled, "Fine Mrs M. Fine."

She tousled his hair, "Go on with yer. Here take these biscuits up, he'll be peckish now he's had a clear-out."

As he carried off the biscuits Mrs M gave him that same knowing wink which left him a lot more unsettled than the words she had used.

"Here you are Uncle Paddy, tuck in."

"Thanks lad," he wheezed, "sorry 'bout that."

Feeling that it would be best to ignore the apology Davey said, "What's the point in us following all this lot now Uncle Paddy?"

"I know what yer mean lad. It seems that even the old man reckons that the Shyman probably ends up knocking around here. Hang about, what if he came in here. What would yer do?" Paddy laughed.

Davey couldn't see the funny side, "Please don't say things like that Uncle Paddy," he begged.

"I know what I'd do, I'd ask him to have a biscuit!" He said taking another bite.

"But what *is* the point Uncle Paddy. Shouldn't we just zip everything forwards, until we're in our time and find out what's happening now?"

"I reckon we may as well lad."

"I'll just check with the old man again before we do."

The old man lay in his hammock in the same cabin in which Chacuti had been placed. She was fast asleep clearly exhausted by her trials. The old man was slumbering but woke up when he sensed that Davey was watching him. Onto his head he placed the helmet.

"I am with you boy."

"Me and me Uncle Paddy reckon we should skip everything in the past and just get to where the 'last battle's' going to take place," said Davey.

"It would not be wise to do so," warned the old man.

"Why the flippin' 'eck not?" asked Paddy.

"The past gives form to the future. By watching and learning you will know what needs to be done. Think of it like this boy, if you had not seen into the past and you were confronted by the Shaman in your time you would have no knowledge of him. He would easily defeat you, he would easily take the girl."

"He's got a point Uncle Paddy."

"But we have seen the Shaman, we do know what he's about!" barked Paddy.

"You have learnt much but I counsel that there is far more to learn, why face the Shaman before you have witnessed all there is to see. Think! Already we have weakened him, we have caused him to leave the sanctuary of his temple, we now have him trapped, perhaps we can weaken him still more."

"So you think we should just carry on even though we know he probably escapes and ends up here?"

"Most definitely boy. It may happen that the men of Toledo will end the fiend's life, we do not know, if they succeed the child will be released from whatever holds her. Even if they were to only injure him it will aid us."

"Where will Chacuti go then?"

"When the power of the Shaman and the crystal skulls has been destroyed by his death the child will be free to pass to whatever place her soul desires. Perhaps the very gates of heaven will open for her."

"He's right Uncle Paddy. We'll stay with you old man and help as best we can."

"You act wisely boy. Now I must rest, watch over me and the child. Waken me should need arise."

Davey and Paddy sat on guard watching the cabin but they did not need to waken the old man for he never went to sleep. A sudden cracking and splintering sound as a squall hit the two vessels caused the pikes which separated them to shatter like matchsticks.

"All hands on deck!" came the cry .

Men raced through the bowels of the ships and up onto the decks, the warming air of the dawn had brought forth a tremendous blast of wind. After the wind had hit them monstrous waves, stirred up by its aggression, crashed against the vessels forcing them apart.

"Old man, you must return to the Carnatic before it is too late!" shouted Richard as he entered their cabin. They rushed up after him onto the deck but already the gangplanks had been tossed into the ocean. They stood braced together against the power of the blast and watched as Alonzo waved goodbye. The first strips of canvas were hauled aloft on the galleon as he sought to turn it into the wind.

"It seems that you are to remain with me," said Richard.

"Pray God that the priest is not freed by any man aboard that vessel," said the old man.

They watched as the Carnatic lumbered round to face the onslaught of tide and gale, the schooner responded more rapidly, even though the canvas had been slower in being raised it shook itself and faced into the teeth of the storm. For a time the ships stayed in contact as if bound together by some invisible force but the fury of the elements continued to force them to drift apart.

The crew of the Carnatic had not been sorry to see the Englishmen, had they not saved them from a fate worse than death. Many of them still remained in deep shock after learning that the priest who had saved their ship from the pox was also responsible for the horrible deaths of their ship-mates. It was Captain Alonzo roused them into action, the squall was increasing and every last drop of energy would need to go into securing the safety of the vessel.

High above the deck the tempest tore against the mast and stays. It screamed as the thin twigs cut through its bulk, it took its anger out against anything which had not been tied down. Great barrels were lifted from the deck, hurled bodily though the air and crashed into pieces against more strongly fixed objects or else were hurled into the sea. The galleon began dipping down so low at the bows as it fell into the troughs that it seemed in danger of submerging, waves rolled onboard sending men skidding about on slides of water. Below decks Hernando ordered the chest which encased the Shaman to be lashed down, stout ropes were added to the chains, the chest was laid on its side and fastened to hooks set into the deck.

From within the chest came a horrible squealing as whatever was encased inside realised the danger that the ship was in. Fearing that the priest might suffocate Hernando took hold of a carpenter's brace and drilled a hole into the side of the chest. "Leave it!" he ordered the men, as soon as the chest was secure, "get up on deck!"

The top-deck was awash with water, hatchways were battened down to prevent it making its way below. "The damage to the hold will not survive this storm!" yelled Alonzo, "You must go below and strengthen it!"

Hernando took a party of men with him. In the hold the temporary repair carried out by the first mate was beginning to give way. Before they could begin work they had to clear away the bodies of their fallen ship-mates. It was a horrible task but it had to be done. They then set to with hammers, planks of oak, and barrels of pitch to reinforce the area which bent threateningly inwards as wave after wave slammed against the vessels side.

Davey moved back across to the schooner and watched as the old man and girl returned to their cabin. The sounds all around her terrified Chacuti; loud slamming noises as the newly acquired cargo which had not been stowed left the deck then smashed downwards, horrible sliding sounds as it scratched its way through the hold. The wind added

its screams, echoing through companionways as it found its way into every nook and cranny. It lifted part of a hatch which battered up and down; rope hammered against wood, iron tolled like bells. The onslaught of the blizzard made the vessel feel like it would dissolve into the unrelenting fury of gust and blast.

There was a slight lull in the storm but this was only the prelude to even greater severity. The sea was whipped into an angry boiling maelstrom, to have gone aloft would have meant certain death, the few sails that had been unfurled were left to be shredded to pieces. Men lashed themselves to the masts and looked on in terror as the lights of the devil danced about the spars and rigging.

"That's St.Elmo's fire lad, those poor feller's are too superstitious for their own good, it's nowt but nature. "
"They'll be even more worried about it on the galleon!"

He soared above the violent seas to the Spanish ship. Heavy slabs of sea-water were being scooped up and flung against its high sides. In the hold Hernando and his men used their own bodies to help their patchwork repair remain in place. On the deck the men screamed in terror as the rigging lit up, Captain Alonzo hauled himself around the deck, clinging to a life-line, encouraging the men by his presence to remain calm.

A tremendous shout echoed round the vessel, it rose against the tumult so that every man aboard heard. It was Father Salamanga, "The Lord has sent a tempest to drown you, so that you may suffer for your sins. The Lord cries out for vengeance but I shall protect you. I shall ask the Lord God to quell the waves and calm His oceans. They you will know, you men of little faith, that I am wrongly accused."

Almost as soon as he had spoken the wind dropped and the waves ceased to slam against the vessel. The wind died to a breeze, the waves ebbed to a swell. The men looked fearfully at each other as the atmospheric effect continued to dance about through the rigging but it too soon expired. They began to unleash themselves praising God that they had been spared.

"Hernando, I sense there to be a danger from the men. In their present state they are stupid enough to free the priest, call them together that I may speak with them," Captain Alonzo said to his officer. As soon as the men were assembled he stood on the poop-deck and addressed them, all around was the wreckage from the storm but already the sea had calmed and the sun shone as though it had never even taken place. Not even a swell betrayed the fury of the elements they had contended with.

"I hold in my hand a letter from the old man, some of you know him, you sailed with him during our voyages to the East. He has been a trusty friend to most of us. The old man was part of the expedition into the Inca heartlands, it was during that expedition that he learnt of their evil ways and unholy practices. He himself was taken prisoner and suffered under their hands. But he escaped and saved the life of a child who was to have been tortured and sacrificed by these heathen people," he looked at the paper he held, "this is what he says:

To the men of Toledo, Holy Inquisitioners to His Imperial Majesty.

In the name of God I swear that I have witnessed the priest Father Salamanga transform himself from man to beast, to crawl upon the earth without legs. To squirm as a reptile.

I swear in the name of God that the good father was speared in the side by an Inca warrior only to rise again from the dead. I have knowledge that this took place through the power of the Incas holy man, known to them as Shaman.

I swear that to the best of my knowledge and belief it is the Shaman of the Incas who resides within the body of the good father. Father Salamanga having died from the spearthrust of the above mentioned Inca warrior.

I beg of the holy Inquisition to believe me, a common cook, for I am telling the truth. The matter must be investigated if the soul of the good father is not to rot in eternal torment."

The men looked at each other in awe as the letter was read out, Captain Alonzo shouted, "You have witnessed for yourself the priest cleanse the ship of the plague, how your ship-mates disappeared one after the other. How the priest has quashed the very oceans on which we sail. I ask you are these normal events for a common man of the cloth? We have lost our precious cargo but are our lives not more precious than gold? Let us take care and deliver the priest to the men of Toledo, they shall decide what is to be done with him."

From below came the cries of Father Salamanga, "Forgive them for they know not what they do. Vengeance is mine saith the Lord!"

The men followed their captain's advice, guards were posted around the chest, at regular intervals they were changed, sometimes they reported hearing furtive scratching sounds, other times the chest would suddenly buck and rise from the floor as if a titanic struggle were taking place inside. One man reported seeing a rat enter through the hole drilled by the ship's officer but the rat never came back out. It was the first of several such sightings.

"Ugh, do yer reckon that flippin' snake's munching on rats again?"

"Let's hope so Uncle Paddy, wouldn't do for him to starve to death in there would it."

"I tell yer what lad, yer getting tougher by the minute," remarked Paddy, "how'd you like to have rat for dinner!" he mimicked Liz, *"Davey come on in yer rat's going cold!"*

They both sat on the bed and laughed. The laughter stopped when Davey suddenly asked, "If the Shaman is here. You know, in our time, like now. Then he must have used this helmet to fly around Carnatic Hall."

Paddy chewed his lip, "Well that's what the old man reckons lad but I don't have much faith in him, I mean if he didn't know whether the dagger would kill the Shyman and he has to let these fellers in Toledo have a go at him then he doesn't know all there is to know does he?"

"You're right in what you're saying Uncle Paddy but I think the old man's right in what he's saying as well."

"Well look at it this way lad, who else could have used the helmet when you was up at Carnatic? Maybe me old girl slipped in here and stuck it on when we wasn't lookin'!"

They both returned to their laughter. "Yer'd have had sommat to be scared about then, watching her flyin' towards yer!" They broke out into fresh howls.

Next door Mrs Murtagh stood with her ear pressed to a glass on the wall, listening to their every word.

Davey was the first to calm down sufficiently to speak, "I'm going to go and see about getting some money on this treasure tomorrow Uncle Paddy."

"Yer may as well lad, it's not doing anything sat under the bed like that. Now, should we get our heads down and get some kip?"

"Are you feeling tired Uncle Paddy, if you're tired..."

"No, not me, I'm fine. Can't wait to see what happens next, never had so much fun since me Auntie Nelly sat on a cow-pat when we stopped for a picnic on the way back from Blackpool."

Mrs Murtagh smiled at the memory of the charabanc trip, Paddy had only been a little boy but it must have stuck in his mind.

"Here goes then Uncle Pad," said Davey as he put the helmet back on.

CHAPTER 28

Brotherhood of Toledo

The schooner was drifting past a tropical island; a coral reef fringed a lagoon filled with lapis lazuli water, the lagoon lapped onto a pink beach of sand formed from the eroded remnants of millions of tiny sea-shells, multi-coloured parrots 'kee-kecked' through the air and through the verdant undergrowth. On deck Richard, the old man and Chacuti stood gazing onto the image of paradise. Chacuti cried excitedly as the dolphins which coursed along on the bow waves of the schooner looked up at her, they appeared to be smiling.

"She's looking happier Uncle Paddy."

"She could do with sommat to cheer her up lad."

"I wish I was there."

"Nothing beats New Brighton lad, what yer complainin' about," Paddy joked.

The schooner threaded its way through a narrow passage in the reef and dropped anchor in the lagoon, the water was so transparent that far below they could see the anchor bite into tall upright columns of coral. Thousands of multi-coloured fish began weaving in and out of the anchor-chain seeking anything which might be edible. Even as they began lowering a boat to collect fresh-water the smells of the island undulated over the shimmering lagoon to their waiting nostrils; bougainvillea, hibiscus and citrus fruits.

Richard made a proposal to the old man, "I fear that for a Spaniard to return to England would be most dangerous," he told him, "would this not make a suitable home for one such as yourself, a man who has acquired an insight into the enigmas of life?"

The old man stood dreaming. No more being ordered about, no more preparing food for men whose only thanks was a grudging curse, to live in the Garden of Eden for the rest of his days.

"And what of the child?" he asked.

"I shall take care of her as though she were my own," said Richard.

"I have given my word to her father that I would do just that."

"Then is your word not carried out knowing that she will be in good hands. Consider the wealth I have taken from the Carnatic. I shall return to England a rich man, whatever the child desires I will be able to give to her."

"Let us go ashore that I may make a decision on this."

"What's there to decide!" exclaimed Davey, "he'd be mad not to stay."

Orders were given to furl the sails, high up in the rigging a man sang a sea-shanty to give the men the correct rhythm as they drew in the canvas;

Reef that knot
Reef that sail
Reef that kit-bag
Or yer lands in jail

A boat was lowered Richard, the old man and Chacuti climbed in and seated themselves, even with the use of only one hand O'Neill climbed nimbly down and sat upon the bow platform. Four other men took the two pairs of oars and sculled shorewards.

Chacuti dragged her hand in the warm translucent water and giggled as a dolphin emitted high-pitched clicks and playfully pecked at her fingers. Even the air had a delightful feel to it, they were in fine spirits as they watched the dolphins leap out of the water, turn a cartwheel and splash back in showering them all with cooling spray. After the gentle waves had pushed them up onto the soft sand the three passengers left O'Neill and the other men to pull the boat up further onto the beach whilst they began searching for water.

They made their way inland, chipmunk-like creatures chased each other, a family of monkeys gambolled across the velvety sward, one of them had a baby underneath its belly, "Look how it clings to it mother!" cried Chacuti. She was so taken in by the visions around her that her torments of the past weeks were all but forgotten.

Richard smiled, "Catch him Chacuti and you can keep him as a pet!" They laughed as she chased after the troupe which jumped up into low branches and swung themselves up to sit scolding her.

"The old man's thinking about the last time he went looking for water," said Davey. "You know with his mate Jésus. He says he doesn't know what happened to him that day, he said it's known only to the Gods."

As they passed into a band of tall palm trees the expressions on the two men and the child suddenly altered from smiling to one of deadly seriousness.

"What's up with them lot now?" asked Paddy.

Davey moved their view forwards and saw what they had already seen. A giant stone head stood staring down upon them, beneath it, reflecting the strong sunlight, shone a pool of clear water.

"It's that head we saw! We saw it in the Shaman's mirror, in the temple! How'd it get here?"

The old man answered, "What you saw in the Shaman's mirror was a future possibility, the skulls have already acted to change this fate. Look, there in the water!"

Davey gazed down into the tranquil depths. He remembered what had been embedded in its sandy bottom, *"The skulls aren't there!"*

The old man spoke, "Already the Shaman has delivered them back to their resting place."

"So he's winning then is he?" asked Paddy.

"The vision allowed us to learn of the power of water over evil, that knowledge has allowed us to trap the Shaman. Nothing is over until it is complete," said the old man. "You have the dagger and the helmet, without them the Shaman and the skulls remain divided."

At that moment O'Neill and the other men joined them, the old man and Davey both recollected the image of O'Neill hurling the skulls into the pool, they observed his injury, "Is the man not out of balance?" asked the old man. "Have his scales not been tipped by the evil skulls?"

They watched as the empty water-kegs were pushed underwater and listened to the bob-bobbing sound as they slowly filled. Each man carried a heavy kegs upon his shoulder back to the waiting boat. The giant head which loomed above them kept their voices down to a whisper and induced a state of awe upon the people below.

"Have you reached a decision old man?" asked Richard as they neared the beach.

"I believe my fate was to have been to remain in this island paradise," said the old man, "but events have already been altered, this dagger must pass from my hands to the hands of another, only then can I ensure that these matters take place as destiny has decreed. I must go with you, I shall protect the girl from the evil which stalks her."

"But has that evil not already been taken care of?" asked Richard, "will not these dreaded Inquisitors be able to perform the tasks you have requested of them in the letter you passed to Captain Alonzo?"

"The future is a myriad of possibilities, but one thing is for certain, the child will live with you for many years. I must be there to protect you both."

For a moment Richard's face showed an expression of sadness but it quickly passed, "Then let us be good company for each other old man. And if those years you speak of are good years then let us not worry, for the good Lord will have given us more than the next man."

"Uncle Paddy."

"Yeah what lad?"

"I'm thinking of something."

"Careful lad, yer look like yer about to lay an egg."

Davey smiled, "No listen, the old man reckons that the tattooed man has had his fate altered by the skulls, what I'm thinking is that if his future can be altered then maybe the Shaman won't even end up in our time."

"Yer using too many 'maybe's' there lad, yer've already seen him up at Carnatic Hall and that's that. But don't you start worryin' about him now. Not while Paddy Murtagh's around."

"I'm going to find out what happens to him."

"Who, Paddy Murtagh?" Paddy joked.

"No, you know who I mean, the Shaman!"

The crew of the galleon repaired the damage done to their craft and sailed North by East for Spain, it was in the port of Cadiz that their vessel finally hove to. Captain Alonzo ordered the chest containing the priest to be unloaded immediately, the port authorities were reluctant to oblige particularly in view of the loss of the treasure, it would not be the first time that the crew of a galleon had conspired with the enemy but as soon as they had read the old man's letter and learnt that the contents of the chest was destined for Toledo they hastily relented.

The chest was hoisted into the air and gently lowered towards a waiting cart, the two worn-out horses reared and would have bolted but for the fact they were on a short rein. Not until the chest had been securely roped down did Captain Alonzo take the reins himself - grateful for the opportunity to leave the port, the ship and his crew behind him.

"He's lookin' chuffed with hiself," said Paddy, "sold out his crew and expectin' a rich reward to boot, but I wouldn't be getting too comfortable if I was him, not with that thing at me back."

They watched the cart painstakingly making its way along a wide, tree-lined boulevard. They could hear cicadas chirping in the long grass and see oranges and lemons hanging in a small orchard. When the cart passed near to an orange tree Alonzo stood up and reached into the branches, he emerged clutching handfuls of the fruits.

"Wow, look at that. Real oranges, straight off the tree!"

"Keep yer hair on lad, where'd yer think they grew, on the recreation ground?"

Taking care not to put his fingers anywhere near the hole in the chest Alonzo placed a couple of segments into the chest.

"Best keepin' him fed lad, wouldn't do for him to starve to death would it," said Paddy, "Sure yer don't want to get yer head down, it's the middle of the flippin' night?"

"Listen! He's saying something."

"Thank you my son," said Father Salamanga. "To be imprisoned in this manner goes against God, I ask you to release me that we may discuss this like civilised men."

Alonzo guffawed, "Like you showed the men on my ship, *civilised*."

"There is another reason that you should release me," this time the voice was harsh. It had a quality to it that caused Alonzo to shiver. "I shall escape from whatever incarceration I am put into. I will follow you and rip out your heart, release me, I command you."

"And I command you to shut up!" shouted Alonzo hammering on the chest with his fist.

No more sounds came from the chest, the cart jolted and jarred its way over the cobbled road under the relentless Spanish sun.

"He must be gettin' warm in there."

Davey looked inside the chest, curled up, basking in the heat, the only movement made by the snake was the flicking of its tongue.

"Ugh, yuck."

"Snakes like the heat don't they Uncle Paddy?"

"Reckon they do lad, let's hope it's cold where he's goin'."

"Should I speed it all up so we get to wherever it is quickly?"

"Yer may as well lad, don't seem like there's owt happening here."

Through towns and villages they watched the cart pass; Seville, Córdoba, Linares, it climbed up from the fertile plains into the hot, arid mountains. Every night Alonzo would pass through the village where he intended to stop then steer the horses off the road into a thicket or grove of olive trees. Taking care that he had not been followed he would unharness the animals and lead them a good distance away where he they were tethered so that they were free to graze. Returning to the cart he took great care in camouflaging it with any available material so that to any casual observer it would be invisible.

"He doesn't fancy spendin' the night out in the woods with that thing."

"Would you Uncle Paddy?"

One night as Alonzo made his way from the cart a ferocious barking warned him that a dog, perhaps guarding a local farm, had scented or heard him. He could not move upon the dry brittle fallen olive leaves without them crackling. Slowly the animal was making its way nearer guided by the sound. It was not until he realised that the dog's barking would cover his retreat that Alonzo moved only when it barked. The priest had other ideas, "It is a hound of hell good captain, it shall feast upon your soul this very night!"

Alonzo turned tail and ran, he had put enough distance between himself and the dog and was able to reach the village unscathed, however, guided by the shouts of the priest, the animal found the cart. Its nose led it to the only hole in the chest, it placed its muzzle against the opening and sniffed. Whatever its animal senses told it lay within sent it scurrying away like a terrified puppy yelping for its master.

As soon as he reached the village Alonzo made for the nearest tavern where he quickly quaffed a tankard of wine, "A room for the night landlord?" he asked and was told that one was available. He remained at the bar, looking around suspiciously at everyone. Mostly they were travellers of the sort he had been passing and meeting all day. A small group of studious individuals occupied a corner of the room, unlike the other occupants they were not covered in a layer of dust thrown up by the road. Their laughter attracted him nearer, the stress of his venture was beginning to wear upon his nerves, he could do with some cheer.

One of the men was reading from a book entitled *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, Alonzo moved in closer and was offered a seat. "Come, sit with us, hear the tale," said a ruddy-faced man. He had a friendly disposition so that the captain happily sat down. "It's the latest chapter from the quill of Cervantes," smiled the man. Alonzo listened for some minutes until he too smiled, grinned and laughed at the adventures of the crazy knight and his poor, badly done-by squire. After a time he quite forgot the terrible cargo which he now carried but he was due for a rude awakening, the reader was quoting from a passage in the chapter called "Merlin's Speech", when he recited the words;

Twice fifty-thousand scrolls, occult and loathed
Some of my art, hell's black philosophy;
Then closed my soul within this boney trunk,
This ghastly form, the ruins of a man...

He hastily stood up and walked off leaving his drink unfinished behind him. "Come, don't leave us," cried the ruddy-faced man. Alonzo looked towards him, directly behind where he sat the wall was covered in tiles, something about them was not quite right. The place seemed to go silent when he looked closer, something was pressing from behind the tiles, he watched, an impression of a horrific face was being formed. He had seen enough and departed to bed where he lay in a cold sweat, starting at every sound until the rising sun cleared away the terrors of the night.

There was a fair amount of traffic the next day; carts and wagons drawn by teams of horses, mules or oxen, or pedlars prodding donkeys loaded up with pots and pans. Except for answering a greeting Alonzo made no attempt to speak.

"Since he gave the priest that piece of orange a few days ago he hasn't fed him. "

"Snakes can go months without eatin', he's probably quite happy stuck in there. "

The cart passed by a wagon drawn by a team of oxen, the great draught animals lumbered along, the huge humps on their hulking shoulders rolling from side to side with their steady gait.

"Ahoy!" called the carter pausing from sucking on a clay pipe.

"Ahoy!" replied Captain Alonzo without thinking.

"So, you'll be a seafaring man such as meself?" asked the carter.

Forced into conversation Alonzo replied as briefly as he could but gave his horses an undetected flick with the reins to hurry them on however the priest was alert to the potential of the situation. He cried out in a loud voice, "I am being held prisoner against my will. I am Father Salamanga, local priest of the province of La Mancha, I urge you to release me!"

The carter sat sucking on his pipe, "This is the province of La Mancha through which we do be passing," he blew a volume of smoke into the air, "So you'll be carrying a load much as mine," he said inclining his head towards the back of his wagon. The stench from the piled up manure, steaming in the midday sun, was terrific.

Alonzo tried to press the gold coin he had shown to the man into his hand as they passed. The carter held up his hand in refusal, "And a good day to you Captain!" he called as his wagon rumbled away.

Passing over the dry, arid plains of La Mancha the cart sent up a cloud of dust all around it, windmills cranked and creaked as their sails gathered the hot breezes and turned grain to flour.

"Come on then lad let's get him to these boyos!"

They soared over the plains of La Mancha.

The ominous entrance to the medieval fortress of Toledo loomed. Alonzo was filled with trepidation but the priest's threats of revenge made him more determined than ever that he must carry out the old man's instructions. He urged the animals across a narrow drawbridge and in through the twin portals, beneath the murder-holes and past the portcullis the cart rolled.

"Captain Alonzo of the Carnatic!" shouted a robed figure in announcement as the cart entered the fortress. The captain took fright and would have made a run for it but for the portcullis being dropped down and the drawbridge being drawn up behind him. He was caught. Would he end up the victim to these Inquisitioners, men drawn together by one compunction - the desire to eradicate evil from wherever it lurked. Alonzo felt his false heart being opened to the first set of questions they would put to him and trembled in terror.

"How did they know it was him?" asked Davey.

Alonzo sat and waited, surrounded by the huge, high walls into which were set a total of twelve towers he felt abandoned. It was to be some time before a group of robed, shaven-headed monks passed out of a doorway near to the base of one of the towers, they walked slowly down a set of steps then across the courtyard towards him. "Welcome to Toledo, I am the abbott," said the leader of the group, "we have waited for your arrival, many things are known to us." He patted his hand upon the chest. "The ways of men are not of our concern. The ways of the Devil and his hordes are the realms in which we operate."

The sigh of relief from Alonzo was audible, he was about to speak but upon looking closer at the abbott realised he was the carter who had so recently passed by him. It was only after much spluttering that he found the words, "I was told to come here by an old man," he blurted out, his fear caused his tongue to run away with itself, "this chest holds something which is deadly and diabolic," he remembered the old man's letter and withdrew it from inside his shirt, "this is a signed affidavit from the old man, it tell's you what he's seen, read it for yourselves. He's seen this priest in here (he banged on the chest) turn himself into animals and fly like a witch."

Father Salamanga cried out, "Release me good brothers! Release me that I may repudiate these malicious accusations and assist you in questioning this demon that is feeding you with his lies! Am I not a man of God. Have I not worked alongside you in former days?"

The abbott waved his hand towards the chest. His followers untied the ropes which fastened it to the cart.

"Do not let him out! He has murdered my crew, he is a danger to us all!" cried Alonzo. But his warning was not needed, more monks arrived and ten men carried the chest bodily through a huge arched doorway into one of the towers. The abbott told Alonzo, "Come my son." They followed the cowled figures.

As he watched them pass under the arch Davey saw inscribed into the stone;

"PETER THE ROCK UPON WHICH I SHALL BUILD MY CHURCH"

"They've got twelve towers one for each of the apostles!" he realised.

Inside the tower, shielded by its thick walls, the strength of the sun was unable to penetrate, further inside it disappeared altogether and the only light came from arrow slits cut into the fortification. Alonzo felt the heat being drawn from out of his body by the cold, damp walls. The men carrying the chest were buffeted against the sides of

the passageway as the chest was assailed with blows from within but the man who walked at Alonzo's side did not seem to even notice the commotion.

They watched as the men turned the chest onto its side to allow them to pass it through a series of narrower doorways hung with heavy doors.

"Come with me," the abbott told Alonzo leading him up a spiral staircase. After they had climbed until his thighs began to ache Alonzo was led through a narrow, arched doorway, then along a cramped passageway at the end of which was yet another arched doorway. Again they walked through and to his surprise entered a vast vaulted chamber, the height of two tall trees.

They stood on a platform which curled around the outside of the chamber following the curve of the tower walls. To protect against falling down into the chamber a guardrail followed the curve of the platform, leaning against its security, far below Alonzo could see the ten men placing the chest carefully onto the stone floor. Shafts of light cut in through the arrow-slits set high above, every movement echoed in the gloomy amphitheatre.

"Ready my brothers!" called the abbott as he unfastened a rope from the guardrail. The rope passed through a pulley set into the utmost top of the vaulted roof and ended in a heavy hook. He allowed the weight of the hook to pull the rope down to the men waiting below. Without a word they fastened the hook to the end of the chest.

"Have these men done this before?" asked Davey.

"Maybe they was just ready and waiting," suggested Paddy.

The monks retired from the floor of the chamber locking a stout door and several further doors behind them. They joined Alonzo and the abbott on the platform. At a given signal the men took hold of the rope, took up the slack through the pulley, then heaved. The chest rose from the floor, they continued to heave until the chest was suspended twice the height of a man. The abbott pushed his hand downwards and the monks let go. The chest crashed to the ground.

"Flippin' 'eck, bet that give him a headache!" laughed Paddy.

"The old man was right when he said to bring him here!"

The carpenter had done his work well. The chest was hardly cracked. The abbott raised his hand, the chest was lifted again, when it was three times the height of a man it was dropped. A section of board fell from one of the sides, through the gap crawled Father Salamanga. The rope was quickly hauled up out of his reach.

"Welcome good Father," the abbott's voice echoed down to the priest.

Father Salamanga's eyes blinked like an owl's, he scanned the surface of the vertical walls looking for handholds or purchase of any kind. It was clear that the walls were perfectly smooth and that escape by climbing was out of the question. Suspended in the air above him was a bell-shaped cage, he eyed it suspiciously.

"You have detected that this place has been prepared for you," said the abbott waving his arm around the chamber, "you will remain with us whilst we establish the truth of these matters." He held out the old man's letter and allowed it to float down to the priest. Father Salamanga walked across, looking up all the while at the observers above him, picked up the letter and read it. After he had finished reading he said piously, "My lord abbott, I have no other desire than to assist you in your quest for the truth. You will find that I am the victim of a plot which has allowed the man who stands alongside you to carry out the theft and robbery of the vessel to which he was given charge and responsibility. I ask you to detain him beyond the ninth month when he is to be reimbursed for his part in the piracy of the Carnatic."

"Quite so, quite so," repeated the abbott. Alonzo turned a shade of white but the abbott ignored him and spoke to the priest.

"The charge against you is that you are possessed of a demon. If this were the case it would be your earnest desire to remove that beast from yourself, would it not?"

"But of course," replied the priest.

"Then you will assist us in reaching a rapid conclusion to this charge, will you not?"

"But of course, have I not already stated such a desire?"

"These are matters which may cause you some considerable hurt and discomfort, are you prepared to undertake whatever measures may be necessary to root out whatever we may find?"

"But of course, but I assure you my soul is clean, my body is pure."

"You would be aware from your former work with us that if you had become possessed then you would not be aware that such had taken place?"

"I am my lord abbot but I assure you such tests are unnecessary. But to prove myself the sooner I will gladly undertake them and assist you in any way that I can."

"Then let the process begin." The abbot turned to one of the monks who stood near to a hand-wheel set into a lead pipe, "Flood the chamber."

Captain Alonzo watched in horror as the monk unwound the wheel and the first deluge of water showered from the mouth of a fierce, carved creature which glared down from the vaulted roof, "Wait!" he shouted above the spattering sound as the water dropped to hit the stone floor far below, "I must tell you something."

The abbot signalled that the water should be stopped, the hand-wheel was closed, the monk pulled back a lever, in the centre of the stone floor a thick slab of stone lifted and allowed the water to drain from the chamber. The monk replaced the lever and the stone set back into its niche.

Alonzo continued quietly to the abbot, "The old man has proven that water can kill the body of this creature, but his fear is that the death of the body will only release the demon inside to take another man. Take care!"

One of the monks spoke, "It is clear from the manner in which Father Salamanga has avoided the downpour that there may be some truth in what this man says."

The abbot smiled down at the priest who had moved closer to the chamber walls, "Father Salamanga it appears that we must test you using other methods. Please stand beneath the cage."

The monks pulled at a set of ropes which swung the bell-shaped cage into position above the priest, he looked up at it as it was lowered into place trapping him inside. The abbot called down to him as

the doors to the chamber were re-opened and a group of monks entered, "Please oblige the brothers."

Father Salamanga replied, "I shall do all in my power to serve you my lord, the readier that you may learn of the injustice of these matters."

The monks told him to lie down on the floor and extend his hands and feet through the bars of the cage, they then fastened a set of manacles to them. The rope with the hook on its end was let down and fixed to the chain which linked the steel bands around his wrists. After the monks had withdrawn from the chamber the bell-cage was raised. As soon as it was clear, the abbot indicated that the priest should be lifted and he was raised high into the air, so high that he looked directly across at the men on the platform. As the rope untwisted, the priest revolved slowly before them.

The abbot spoke quietly to him, "We shall set up certain equipment which it will be necessary for you to fix yourself to so that we may apply certain tests in safety, you will remember such tests?"

"I do my Lord Abbott."

"Observe the hand-wheel set into the piping. It releases water into the chamber. Should any of the brothers ever be endangered, someone will be on duty night and day, ready to open the wheel and send water cascading downwards."

The door leading into the chamber opened and four monks entered, two of them held a heavy gold crucifix the others carried a heavy chair. They positioned the chair directly beneath the priest and he was then lowered so that they were able to guide him into it. Immediately he was seated the monks slid thick bars between the arms of the chair trapping him upon it. As the bell-cage was again lowered trapping him inside the abbot said, "Thank you father, you are helping us..."

"As best as I am able my lord."

As soon as their brothers had left, three monks with their cowls pulled low hiding their faces, entered the chamber. Each carried a red-hot glowing iron, the heat from the irons was so intense that they appeared to singe the air as they were carried towards the priest. Father Salamanga shouted, "Is it not written, Revelation 9: they were allowed to torture, but not to kill, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion, when it stings a man."

"You are correct my son," replied the abbot, "and does it not also say: And in those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death will fly from them." The abbot spoke to Alonzo, "I wish to speak further with you upon these matters, please will you accompany me." He ushered him back along the platform. The irons were applied.

The priest's screams rang in the background as Davey followed the abbot and Alonzo down the spiral staircase and back across the courtyard.

"Bit rough in there eh lad?" said Paddy.

"Just a bit."

"Well if anyone deserves the treatment it's that feller."

"You're right Uncle Paddy. I just don't like that sort of stuff."

"Neither does he lad."

They watched the tall powerful figure of Captain Alonzo following meekly behind the robed figure of the abbot. Across the courtyard he was led and into another tower, over the arch were the words;

"JOHN FISHER OF MEN"

In a bare room save for two chairs which had been placed opposite each other the two men sat. The abbott wasted no time in putting his questions to the captain, "Tell me my son, the old man, to where does he go now?"

"He sails for England, Liverpool bound, my lord," answered Alonzo.

"He has done well, the brotherhood of Toledo have battled with the forces of the Inca for many years. The Shaman is the devil incarnate. Our astral journeyings revealed to us the possibility that he may fall into our hands. We never could have hoped that it would come to pass."

"So..." Alonzo paused, astonished by what the abbott had said, "you have known that these events were taking place?"

"Many things are known to men who pledge their lives to the pursuit of truth and justice. As one we have applied ourself to these matters and have fought battles such as our fellow men who tread the earth in blissful ignorance can have no comprehension."

"What will become of Father Salamanga?"

"He was given the task of accompanying the expedition by the brotherhood. He has lived and worked amongst us and was chosen for the mission to the land of the Incas. Salamanga had a certain flaw in his character which was bound to show itself as soon as he came into contact with the creature of evil. Once in the lair of the Shaman we knew he would be unable to withstand his influence and would ally forces with him."

"But how did this serve your purpose my lord?"

"Is the good father not the Shaman?" replied the abbott simply, "do we not now have him at our mercy? Never again shall he roam free to harm the innocent."

"This is amazing Uncle Paddy, these monks have known right from the start what the priest would be like!"

"Looks like they set the feller up to take a fall lad."

"But they've got the Shaman now so they did the right thing didn't they. And the old man, he did the right thing in sending the Shaman to them didn't he."

"Seems like they all know what they're doin' lad."

"But why is there the need to test the priest with iron and fire? What purpose does it serve?"

"The Shaman must be forced to reveal himself, only then will we be able to deal with him. We shall use his own weapons against him, the contest will be long, it may take years but eventually his energies will weaken and he shall show himself."

"The old man said that if he dies then he'll just take someone else my lord."

"The brotherhood shall take great care that this does not occur, neither the Shaman nor we wish to lose the body of Salamanga. It will be necessary for us to balance the measures we must take to drive him from the priest's body, into his original form, against losing him through the priest's death."

"I wouldn't fancy being the priest would you Uncle Paddy."

"Not for all the tea in China lad."

"I must return to my ship as soon as possible, am I free to leave?" asked Alonzo.

"You have no intention of ever returning to the Carnatic, your path no longer lies in that direction my son."

Alonzo looked shamefaced to the floor, "I have not acted honourably my lord but neither have the men who steal the wealth from those people."

"The Inca nation are corrupt, they must pay the price for their sinfulness," the abbott waved his hand to dismiss Alonzo, who walked to the doorway but then halted.

"My Lord Abbott."

"Yes," replied the abbott curtly.

"I wish to remain within these walls."

"Then let it be so," the abbott repeated his gesture. Alonzo walked from the room, out of the tower and into the courtyard.

"He looks like someone who's been told he's got the best job he ever wanted," said Paddy.

"It's hard to imagine him staying there."

"Aye lad, it sure is," he pulled back the curtains and peered out, "sun-up, they'll be sounding reveille soon." Davey grinned at the memory of his bugle-call rousing the street. "What yer want to do today? Carry on?"

"I'll go into town first with some of this," Davey reached under the bed and extracted the chest.

"I tell yer what lad, yer may be a mite too young to be acceptable to someone for changing that into cash. Leave it with yer Uncle Paddy, I'll go in and do the business."

"Do you think you're up to it Uncle Pad? I mean it's a long while since you've been out."

"Arr, the air'll do me good. I'm sick of lying in here like a great fat cow chewing grass. You'd be far better off going up to Carnatic Hall and doin' like yer said."

"I thought you said that there was no point?"

"Naw, I said that pound to a penny the Shaman'll get out. But the more the girl tells us the better off we'll be. Like the old man says it may help us when it comes to sortin' him out. And don't forget to tell her, if she changes her mind she's always welcome to stopover here."

CHAPTER 29

Carnatic Hall

"Well don't yer look grand!" exclaimed Mrs Murtagh as Paddy entered the kitchen.

"Don't start yer fussin'," said Paddy as Mrs Murtagh began straightening his collar and tie, drawing in the collar once filled by his bull-neck. "It's about time yer started gettin' out that room, lying there day after day ain't no good for no-one." Paddy coughed but his mother wasn't giving in, "And don't start makin' out yer not up to it yer great lump, look at yer." She stood back and admired him, he had put on his tweed jacket over a pair of corduroy trousers, both were now baggy, "A right gent yer look, I'm proud of yer." Tears began to well up into her eyes so she turned back to the sink, "Go on then out yer go. Why don't yer pop over to Hughie's?"

"Might do that," said Paddy. He walked out through the front door, on the way he picked up his small army knapsack which had been placed beneath the sofa cushions. It was evident from the way it hung down from his shoulder that it contained something weighty.

Mrs Murtagh watched him from behind the cover of the front curtains. He did not go over the road but walked slowly down the street heading towards the far off tower of the cathedral.

"Well who'd have thought it," she said to herself as he disappeared into Dombey Street.

"I see you boy," said the old man, "the girl is with you?"

"She is here," said Davey. Chacuti stood alongside him, they gazed into the window of her room.

"What you have told me of the Shaman is good news. The brotherhood will take his strength, they will weaken him, perhaps he will be weakened so much that he will not pose a danger to us."

"Take a look at what they're doing to him, it's horrible," said Davey.

"I have seen what takes place at this moment boy but I cannot do more, to do so would be seeing into my future. Even the helmet will not allow such insight."

"But the Shaman saw what was going to happen in his mirror."

"The mirror of stone was powered by evil, the crystal skulls aided his insight, even then what they saw was only possibilities, already some of those possibilities have altered."

"You mean like the tattooed man? Where is he now?" asked Davey.

"He journeyed back to England with us, but he left the ship as soon as it reached harbour. His share of the gold will keep him out of our way."

"Chacuti's already told me that he turns up again - like a bad penny."

"If and when he does we shall be ready for him." He walked to a small lead-lined window and looked outside, "See, down there, beneath the great trees, the child plays. Watch over her and ensure that her life develops safely. Return to me if danger threatens."

Chacuti watched as Davey took their view out through the window behind the old man, they found themselves level with the top-floor of a two-storey black and white manor house. Directly in front of them two great trees grew in a courtyard, on benches which surrounded the base of the trees sat Chacuti and another girl.

"It is my friend Annette," Chacuti whispered.

They watched the girls attempting to crochet patterns into small linen handkerchiefs which were stretched tightly over frameworks.

"I am embroidering Richard's initials, Annette is doing her father's," said Chacuti.

Davey looked at her, she seemed quite happy to be seeing such contented images of herself. He wished to know the extent of this beautiful manor and rose into the air. The courtyard was surrounded by the manor's four sides which were bordered with a moat; higgledy-piggledy black and white walls rose above the moat and were topped with roofs covered in pink fluted tiles, across the drawbridge spanning the moat extended a perfectly flat green. Even from the height at which he looked down at the manicured grass Davey received a shock when he saw the giant figure of a man striding over the turf.

"It is John, the Child of Hale!" cried Chacuti.

"He's a g-giant!" stuttered Davey.

He followed the giant across the drawbridge, two or three huge strides and he had covered its length. His great fist tapped against the iron studded oak door like a battering-ram. Davey saw Chacuti and her friend run to the door, "It must be John!" they cried. The great weight of the door prevented them from opening it. Two servants unbarred it and aided by a push from the giant it swung open.

"John!" squealed the children, "tell us a story," they begged.

Grinning from ear to ear the giant lifted them up onto his shoulders and walked beneath the upper-storey of the house into the courtyard. The sinking sun still shone down in one corner, there he lowered them and laid his great bulk down. They immediately leapt upon him and bounced all over his huge frame. "Alright, alright," he boomed giving a deep belly-aching chuckle.

"Where is this place?" asked Davey.

"It is Speke Hall," replied Chacuti, "it is where Richard took me when we first arrived in Liverpool."

"Before he built this house we're now in?"

"Yes, they were very happy times for us. Please, let me see more."

Davey gave her her wish.

The old man walked out into the courtyard, the sun had fallen casting the whole house into shadow. "That'll do for today little ones, it's too cold for you out here," said John rising from telling them the story. "Hello old man!" he boomed and clasped him by the hand. They were obviously good friends. The old man enjoined him, "Come John let us go inside and quaff a flagon of ale."

The children ran ahead of them into a great hall, its oak-panelled walls extended up to roof height, a minstrels gallery indicated the level of the first floor. Every wall was covered with arms of every description; swords, sabres, muskets, pikes, axes and maces, whole suits of armour stood beneath in several places. John towered almost twice the height of the suits of armour.

"My lord, my lady," the giant boomed in greeting as a finely dressed man and woman entered the hall through another doorway.

"It is Mr and Mrs Norris," said Chacuti, "they looked after me."

"Welcome John, it has been some time since you last honoured us with a visit. You have been to London I hear?"

The giant chuckled, "I went to London to visit the Queen!"

Mr Norris joined in, "And what did you there?"

"I frightened a little mouse under a chair!" the giant guffawed.

"Not such a little mouse I hear John, the Queen's wrestler had not been beaten before!" laughed Mr Norris, "but will you stay, we are entertaining this evening."

"Oh do say you will stay John!" begged the children.

"I don't really like keeping company, you know the way I am," he looked at the old man, "just popped in to see my friend."

"Oh do stay John," insisted Mrs Norris, "everyone is dying to meet the man who defeated Queen Elizabeth's finest wrestler."

John gave a grudging acquiescence, "I cannot argue with a lady," he boomed.

Satisfied the two children ran off. Mrs Norris reminded him, "We shall see you here this evening, you have given us your word mind."

The old man led John down to the kitchen, a huge haunch of ham was roasting on a spit which a large fat greasy lady was slowly turning, "Lock up your larders, it's John Middleton!" she squeaked.

John grabbed her round the waist and hoisted her up into the air, "Food woman!" he ordered playfully.

"Put me down you big bully or you won't be getting anything except a thick ear," she threatened brandishing her ladle. John sat down at a thick oak table opposite to the old man, huge chunks of meat were placed in front of him, he laughed at the old man who sat gnawing away at a carrot. "Get some meat down your gullet man. How come I've grown up to be so big and strong?" he laughed at his own joke.

"The heart that once beat in that poor animal told its body of its terror before it was slaughtered. Every bite you take John is a taste of that pig's fear."

The giant turned to the greasy lady, "Help me Hannah, he's preaching to me already!"

She just shook her head, "I'm mindful of him, but what he says does ring true I'll grant him that."

Undaunted John continued to tear his way through the flesh, his huge fingers tore off great gobs which he swallowed almost whole.

Chacuti begged Davey, "Please may I see where the children have gone?"

Hand in hand the girls walked through a number of bedrooms, the rooms were all linked to each other. In one someone was sleeping and the curtains were pulled around the four-poster to shield whoever it was from any disturbance.

"Shush, it is Richard," whispered Chacuti to Annette.

They passed into a room which was bare save for a small writing table and a big fireplace.

Annette told Chacuti, "Close your eyes, then when you have counted to twenty try to find me." As the counting began she ran to the fireplace, inside it, hidden by the mantelpiece was a small rope ladder, quickly she climbed up the ladder and withdrew it after her. "Ready!" she called, try as she might Chacuti was unable to find her, after some minutes Annette appeared behind her and gave her such a fright that she screamed.

The scream woke Richard who darted into the room, dagger drawn he yelled, "What is it! Who is here?"

The children were at first too frightened of his appearance to be able to answer which had the added affect of making him sure that an intruder was close by.

"I was hiding where the men of God go! It was me!" blurted out Annette as Richard stalked around with his dagger at the ready. He realised his mistake, "I am sorry children, come here," he sheathed the dagger and held out his arms, they gladly comforted themselves and rested their fears.

"Mummy and Daddy are having guests to-night, John is here, will you join us?" Annette asked him. "Say you will," begged Chacuti, "I'm going, aren't I Annette!"

"It seems like it is already decided," he laughed, "of course I shall join you, now run along whilst I sleep."

"Please show me what happened in the evening," begged Chacuti, "I can remember those days so well."

The great hall was host to around twenty people, many of them were acquaintances of Richard judging by the ease with which he struck up conversation, "And tell me," sniggered one portly gentleman whose nose showed the effects of his continual cider drinking, "what are your intentions now that you are a wealthy man?"

"Much the same as your own my lord!" joked Richard, "to eat, drink and be merry." The group around them howled at his response.

Disgruntled the gentleman muttered, "Humph," and swaggered off.

For their support Richard felt he should provide those remaining with an explanation, "My own home, which I have named Carnatic Hall, in honour, and thanks, to the great vessel which enabled me to build such a residence, will shortly be finished. It is then my intention to both live and conduct my affairs from there."

The group clapped politely, "Well said Sir," said one man, voicing the sentiments of the rest. A lady asked, "And is it true what they say about this child, that she is a princess?"

Mr Norris interrupted, "Later, later, but now I must direct your attentions to another great achievement," he called out and one of the minstrels in the gallery above blew a clarion. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have here tonight two men who have triumphed against all the odds, Mr Richard Parker, who you all know, has lived here under my roof

since his audacious capture of the Spanish galleon. Stand up Richard." He stood up to cheers and claps from the assembled guests, even after bowing and resuming his seat some of the claps still continued. "And we also have here with us tonight a perhaps somewhat more retiring gentleman, "Mr John Middleton!" An uproar of clapping and cheering broke out. John, who sat quietly with the old man by the huge fireplace raised his flagon of ale in thanks to Mr Norris, his benefactor.

"No, you don't get away with it that easily John, come on out here." To cries of encouragement John was forced into the centre of the room to stand at Mr Norris's side. "This man here!" cried Mr Norris making an attempt to pat John on the back but couldn't reach, "this man has returned to us, champion of all England! Even good Queen Bess's men cannot hold a candle to our John." More cheers and cries interrupted so that he had to raise a hand to ask for quiet, "but tonight I intend to put him to a real test, come John." He led the man-mountain to the wall alongside the minstrels gallery, on it rested a huge double-handed sword. "Not since the knights of old has any man had the strength to wield this weapon, I challenge John to attempt it."

John smiled and stepped forwards, "Not so fast," said Mr Norris halting him, "you have to first receive a slight hindrance."

John raised a giant eyebrow but grinned broadly when two servants staggered into the hall carrying a keg of ale. "There's your disadvantage John!" The crowd cheered.

The giant lifted the keg in his huge hands and removed the bung, amber liquid poured forth and he lifted the keg it so that it flowed down his throat. Quart after quart was swallowed as the guests cheered him on. Not until every last drop was drained did he stop then he threw the empty barrel to the servants who staggered backwards under its weight, much to the amusement of the guests.

"Right, where's that sword!" he boomed wiping the back of his hand across his frothy mouth. But the alcohol was speeding round his vast bloodstream, he took only one pace before he suddenly slowed.

"Problems John?" laughed Mr Norris. The guests were as inebriated as the giant, to screams of laughter he staggered around, one table was trampled beneath his great feet as he sought to remain upright, the guests scattered as he reeled towards them but he managed to gather his wits, shook his head and mumbled something about cooling off. Everyone followed at a safe distance as he reeled out of the hall and into the courtyard, where he tripped and fell flat on his face.

"That would have flattened the Queen's wrestler!" shouted a joker.

"That's exactly what he did do!" retorted another wag to general uproar.

John hauled himself to his feet and tottered beneath the upper floor of the house to the doorway which led to the drawbridge, with one huge heave he opened it, weaved out onto the drawbridge, stood bobbing for a moment then plunged headfirst into the moat. He did not come up for some minutes. The guests began to crane forwards.

"Is he alright?" questioned one.

"He's been down too long!" shouted another.

A general panic began to ensue, "Get him out! Stand back!"

Richard started to take charge, "Make way let..."

Suddenly the giant dragged himself onto the drawbridge, he was covered from top to bottom in pond weed which clung to him like slimy green cobwebs, he looked terrifying. The women and the two children screamed, the women started running back into the hall on the heels of the children closely followed by John who gave chase adding a series of deep bellows to his startling appearance.

Richard and the other men who remained with him laughed heartily then followed the runaways back into the great hall where John had them penned into a corner. In one hand he held the double-handed sword, he was swinging and flailing it round like a child with a stick. The old man had remained at the fireside throughout and sat calmly supping his ale, chuckling to himself as he watched his giant friend terrifying the guests.

As Mr Norris re-entered the hall and saw that he had been outdone he clapped, the men with him followed suit, hesitantly at first the women and children joined in. Only then did John return the huge weapon to its place and stood chortling as the frightened women took out their anger by pummeling his giant stomach with their little fists.

Davey looked at Chacuti, she appeared to be laughing, perhaps the first time for hundreds of years he thought to himself. He too had been laughing but his face became deadly serious as he considered how on earth she could be rescued from the state she was in.

"Was it not a celebration to remember?" without waiting for an answer she asked him, "please may we see my horse, Axa?"

"I can't do that, it would mean taking too big a jump forwards."

"Please, take me to him, it would mean so much to me," she begged.

"I suppose it'll be alright, I mean the old man did say that what had happened to you had already happened."

Davey moved rapidly through the years, they saw her, a young woman, racing across the grounds of Carnatic, the stallion's mane blowing in the wind. Past the front of the house with its neat-kept croquet lawn then down the length of a large field the horse galloped, it took a ditch which divided the field in its stride. *"I can jump that ditch,"* said Davey, recalling his chase by Lurch. But the girl was not impressed, her attention was solely upon the powerful animal which tore without pause through the grounds of the estate. Down the lane by the lake, across the bridge and alongside the stream it powered along. Davey was surprised by how neat and tidy everything was but as the girl reined up sharply in about the same place where there now stood the railway bridge he found out why.

"Morning Ma'am," said the overseer of a group of eight men. One of the men held the bridle of the spirited animal, it whinnied in its annoyance at having to stop running.

"Morning Mr Holt," she replied, "Master Richard said to ask if you would be so kind as to cut back any branches overhanging the lane."

"Aye missy, that'll be to make sure none of the ladies lose their wigs tonight!" he joked. The men about him also laughed. "Well we'll see, first there's the leaf-clearing needs doing, then the hedges need clipping."

Chacuti played Mr Holt's little game, "Please Mr Holt, you know how much the ball means to Richard." The stallion pranced about, chomping at the bit, eager to get going. "Steady," she said patting his neck.

"Might be able to fit it in if we're lucky."

"Thank you, I'll tell Richard," she touched her whip lightly to the haunches of the animal. It shot off up the lane.

Davey was interested to see where the lane went to in the opposite direction to the one he had taken from the railway, he watched as the animal galloped on for some time until it reached two stone columns set on either side of the lane. Two iron gates hung between the columns barring the entrance, the deep-ruts cut into the earth outside the gates told of the regular comings and goings. As he looked closer at the gates he saw the image of a sailing ship, wrought in iron, decorating their centre. Above the ship was written something but it was back to front so he found it hard to read. Leaning slightly further forwards he took their view outside the gates and spun it back so that he could read whatever it said, the words **CARNATIC HALL** paid testament to the galleon of that name.

Chacuti was urging him to follow the horse, it was as if she was getting as excited watching the magnificent animal as she had when riding him. Back down the lane it raced for a short distance then veered off on the right, the grassy track it ran on lay on top of a natural embankment, Davey realised why the railway engineers had chosen to lay their rails in that particular place. She followed the embankment for some time then veered off to the left through the area which Davey knew was now overgrown with rhododendrons, shrubs and trees but Chacuti rode along a wide path through well-kept gardens; flowers of all kinds burst forth all around; trees, fetched from all corners of the globe helped form this arboretum.

It was late afternoon as she trotted behind the house, the horses hooves rang out on the paving stones, under a sandstone arch they passed to where the regular floor was replaced by uneven cobbles, the horse disliked the feel of these under his feet and naturally slowed as they neared the stables. Unlike the rest of the house which was built from sandstone the stables were constructed from brick; above them was living accommodation for the grooms and stablelads, green painted doors opened to the stalls themselves, they were well-tended with full mangers of oats and grain. A groom hurried from one of the stalls carrying a horse-blanket but Richard arrived first. He helped lift Chacuti from the mount then after the groom had unsaddled the stallion he took the blanket and placed it upon the steaming animal. "Did you enjoy your ride?" he asked.

"It was wonderful Richard," she said shivering in the cool evening air. He took off his jacket and placed it over her shoulders, then escorted her into the house.

"Was he not the most caring man?" asked Chacuti of Davey. He nodded, although he was getting used to this world that the helmet had allowed him to enter he still sometimes found it hard to reconcile himself to the fact that these things were actually happening and were not just a part of a huge dream and one day he would wake up. Or, he grinned to himself as he thought how Paddy would put it, *"Wake up in the nut-house."*

"There is the old man's room," said Chacuti, pointing up to one of the rooms above the stable block. Davey looked inside, the old man sat upon the floor in a cross-legged position, on his head was the helmet.

"I hear you boy," said the old man, "it has been long since we spoke, much has happened during that time."

Davey was flustered, "You mean I shouldn't have rushed forwards to where you are now?" he asked guiltily.

"It was not wise boy. But the child is safe, she is living her life in happiness, no sight nor sound of the Shaman has interfered these years past."

"I'm with her now."

"Never leap forwards again boy, it is far too dangerous. You have had the luck of the innocent, next time we may not be so fortunate. You must continue to inform me what you see." He repeated his previous admonition, "Watch over her boy, for this is surely the calm before the storm. Richard has spoken to me of strange happenings and against my advice has taken the man, O'Neill, into his employment.

"Why would he have done so if you warned him against it?" asked Davey.

"The man was down on his luck, his share of the gold was used up and his injury prevented his finding work. Richard felt unable not to take him under his wing."

"But the girl has already said that he's a danger!" exclaimed Davey.

"We are but pieces in the machinery of fate, we can be take action as opportunity presents itself."

Across the marble-tiled marble floor Richard and Chacuti made their way further into the house, he asked, "And Axa's right fetlock, is it better?"

"He didn't limp even the slightest, walking him through the cold water has taken the swelling down."

"Good," he patted her fondly on the back, "well my dear up you go, I know how long you take to get ready."

Chacuti pecked him on the cheek and ran up the sweeping staircase, she passed round a magnificent glass chandelier upon which, although light still entered from the domed window above, numerous candles had been lit bathing the area with their warm, soft glow. Through a doorway she passed into her room. The room was heavily decorated with emerald green wallpaper, a band of vermilion red border passed round the walls at waist height. The ceiling was baroque plasterwork which formed fruits of every type and description; apples, pears, pomegranates and grapes all hung down looking real enough to eat. Chacuti's four-poster bed was covered with white silk drapes which hung elegantly. At the end of the bed a chaise-longue provided seating. Davey recognised its position as being the same in which he had first seen her sitting when he had looked down upon her through the hole in the ceiling. A hidden doorway, decorated the same as the rest of the room led into Chacuti's wardrobe. Davey couldn't help but exclaim, *"Your wardrobe's bigger than my bedroom!"*

Chacuti began to undress, embarrassed he sensed that she too did not wish him to see her taking off her clothes.

"Err, there's going to be some kind of party isn't there?"

"Yes," she said, relieved, "please can we see it."

He moved outside the room and stood waiting on the landing, the candles burning down on the chandelier indicated the length of time she took in getting ready. But it was worth waiting for, when she appeared she wore a sweeping white ball-gown, her jet-black hair was styled by a heavy gold clasp which held it to one side like a raven's wing. Round her neck hung a gold necklace consisting of three concentric loops which hung low over her bare chest, against her bronzed skin the necklace looked striking. Her bare arms were decorated with gold wristlets and bracelets, even the dress-shoes she wore were golden.

Richard sat in his study smoking a pipe, his face was creased with worry but as Chacuti entered the pipe fell from his mouth, "My dear child, you look ecstatic," he declared. Chacuti twirled around showing off her sweeping dress and the accompanying finery, "Positively ecstatic," he repeated, quietly he said to himself, "my little Incas princess." They heard a carriage roll up over the cobbles to the stables where the coachmen would remain whilst the ball was in progress, almost simultaneously the bell at the front door was rung. "That will be the Norris's they said they would come early!" They jumped up and ran to the hallway where a servant had already admitted them, "Welcome! Welcome! Welcome!" he shook each in turn by the hand. Annette immediately walked off linking arms with Chacuti, "Look at them," remarked Mr Norris, "they've outgrown us all already!" It was quite true, the two girls were as tall and slender as poplars and walked with such poise and grace that as Mr Norris put it, "They'll break the hearts of some poor young men."

Chacuti spoke to Davey, "Thank you for coming back, you are very brave. I wish to see more but please be careful, do not endanger yourself."

Davey smiled but he was scared, only Uncle Paddy's re-assurances over the power of the helmet had convinced him that he would be safe returning. "I'll just check how long we've got till it starts to get dark," he said. He opened the window through which they were viewing the images and peered out, the sun was still high in the sky, they would have several hours before it began to sink. He looked over the field and saw movement, the helmet allowed him to zoom in. It was a young courting couple, they sat together on a fallen-log, looking up towards the old house. Davey recognised them, they both lived in Micawber Street. The helmet enabled him to listen in to their conversation.

"It must have been beautiful in its day," said the young man.

"If only we could have even one room to live in," said the young woman.

"Well, as Mr Micawber said, *'Something'll turn up'.*"

"I hope so Charlie, I can't wait to get married."

"Don't you worry girl, you wait and see, I'll buy yer a place like that one day," he promised vainly.

"They are in love?" asked Chacuti.

"Seems like it," he replied.

"Have you ever been in love?"

"What me. No, well I do fancy a girl called Aimie Toohey."

"I have been in love," sighed Chacuti, she became very sad so Davey quickly asked, "Would you like to see a bit more or should I go?"

"Let me see the ball, it was beautiful."

Walking hand in hand through the hall two lines of ladies and gentlemen undulated in time to the sound of a variety of woodwind instruments. "Their sound used to remind me so much of my home and family in Sit-Nalta," said Chacuti wistfully.

Davey listened to the melody; the flutey, reedy sound was similar to the pan-pipes he had watched and heard Chacuti play, it seemed like so long ago, high upon the mountain-side when the Shaman had first appeared. He remembered the death of the runner, Hotchas, and shuddered. Was this to be the fate of the woman at his side?

They listened in to the conversations of the guests:

The women were not so gracious, "She was a Spanish slave." "Look at her dress, it is far too revealing." "She has no bearing, a commoner born and bred."

But the men were far more appreciative, "I hear tell she is an Inca princess." "She was rescued from the galleon Richard captured." "She is the most beautiful creature that has ever walked God's earth." "A veritable angel in disguise."

Chacuti expressed annoyance and then pleasure in turn.

They watched the dance end and the guests resume their seats. Richard had an announcement to make and a small man with a thunderous voice shouted out, "My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen pray be up-standing for Mr Richard Parker!"

The guests rose to their feet, Richard spoke loudly and clearly so that all assembled would have no problem hearing him, "I have asked you here today to help me celebrate my good fortune. By good fortune I do not refer to the magnificent house which my new found wealth has enabled me to build, no, I refer to something that money cannot buy."

One of the guests whispered to her husband, "Well if his money cannot buy it then it is not worth having."

He continued, "Many of you have heard of her, some of you may have seen her but is she not truly delightful. In the words of the bard;

Shall I compare thee to a Summers day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May
And Summers lease has all too short a date

The guests clapped and cheered, Chacuti stood, red-faced but radiant as all eyes fixed upon her.

Richard went to her side and stood holding her hand. Whilst they were still enjoying the applause O'Neill went quietly to Richard's side and whispered in his ear.

O'Neill was wearing a black and white suit, a bow-tie all but concealed the tattoos upon his body, only the tip of a tiger's tail could be seen. Davey grew nervous as he moved the images back and focused in upon O'Neill's mouth. "The person you have asked for is waiting in the study Sir," he whispered with a heavy emphasis upon person. Richard waved to the orchestra to resume playing, they struck up a lively jig and he was able to make his way from the dance unnoticed.

Davey followed him in to the study where the old man who sat in Richard's chair, turned out to be the person that O'Neill had referred to. Davey realised that the old man wasn't wearing the helmet and knew that he would be unable to speak to him.

"Thank God you are here!" in his excitement Richard shouted.

"What have you seen?" hissed the old man.

"It may be nothing but I cannot..."

The old man interrupted and repeated his question, "What have you seen?"

"This afternoon, as I sat where you now sit, I lit up my pipe. As I sat looking out upon the fields waiting for the return of the child from riding I observed that candle (he pointed to the right of the mantelpiece) lit of its own accord and then went out."

"Your are quite sure of this?" asked the old man.

"Most definitely, O'Neill also saw it happen. I thought that it must have been a trick of the eye but bearing your warning about him in mind I waited until he had left the room then rose to investigate. I felt the wick of the candle, it was still smouldering."

The old man stated, "He is moving."

"Who, O'Neill?" asked Richard alarmed.

"The Shaman is with us as we speak!" hissed the old man.

Davey was shocked but did not wish to cause Chacuti any upset, "It would be best for me to get going now, it'll be getting late soon and I don't want to get caught out in the dark."

"I never knew this was happening," said Chacuti, "we danced until next morning, I thought Richard was enjoying himself as I was."

Davey kept retreating from the room, "Don't worry, everything's going to be alright, I'll come back."

He rushed from the house and ran as fast as the helmet would allow him to.

CHAPTER 30

My name is Legion

As he made his way at speed back through the estate Davey was fearful that at any moment the Shaman might appear. He had put his trust in the helmet but perhaps the old man and Paddy had got it wrong. A horrible scratching sound right next to him terrified him but it turned out to be a squirrel scrabbling up the trunk of a pine tree, adrenaline surged into his veins and boosted his speed still further.

As he neared home the amount of men passing by on foot, returning from queuing or working at the Docks, told him that it was knocking-off time. He disappeared into the Murtagh's shed, covered his hands and face with oil, specked the helmet behind a crate of stout, then walked round to Number 99.

"Hi there lad," said Hugh, "had a good day?"

"Yeah, not bad."

"Well I know how hard it is when yer first start work but tomorrow's Sunday, first day off eh son, I'll bet you're needing it after this week."

Davey nodded, the lying was proving hard for him.

"Your mum's down the wash-house, she'll be back in a minute, can I rustle yer something up while you're waiting?"

"No, I'll just go and wash myself down Dad."

"There's a block of carbolic under the sink, that'll tear through that lot."

Davey went into the kitchen and re-appeared scrubbed and clean. He looked at his father sitting in his favourite chair by the fireside and decided to ask him about the helmet, surely he had noticed something about it. Just as he started to ask the question his mother walked in the door.

"Here she is. Hiya love, Davey's home."

She was carrying an armful of washing; ironed, pressed and rolled up in a big bedsheet. Like most of the women on washday her hair was fastened up in a scarf. "Davey!" she cried hugging him and freeing her hair from the scarf at the same time. "I'll bet you're starving, I'll put you something on."

After she had disappeared into the kitchen Hugh said quietly to Davey, "Are you going to go over to Paddy's tonight lad?"

Davey tried to sound disinterested, "Thought I might."

"It's just yer mum, yer know how women are, she's starting to miss you a bit that's all. You know, want's to get up and make breakfast for you, that sort of thing."

"Should I stay over then?" asked Davey, a million thoughts running through his head on how he could carry on with helping Chacuti if he had to stay home.

"No, I think it'll be alright for tonight, but try and make sure you're around tomorrow, she's talking of asking you if you fancy going over to New Brighton, what d'yer think?"

"Yeah sure Dad, that'd be great."

As they sat eating their meal Davey made a point of saying that maybe they could have a day out together tomorrow. Liz jumped at the idea, "Why don't we go over to New Brighton?" she suggested, "we haven't been there for a while have we."

Hugh and Davey smiled at each other, "Good idea girl, what do you think lad?"

"Sounds good to me," smiled Davey.

The promise of the day trip enabled Davey to leave for Paddy's without too much attention being paid to him but as soon as he was with Paddy he told him of his fears, "Me mam and dad are getting a bit niggly about me coming here all the time, me dad says me mam's missing me but I reckon he's also starting to wonder what's going on. He's clever Uncle Paddy I think he knows we're using this helmet."

"Naw, I grant yer Hughie's one of the smartest men yer ever likely to meet but I reckon yer jumpin' to conclusions. I mean even if he knew yer had the helmet he'd never dream what was going on with it would he."

"He wore it in the war, it saved him and you, he must know it's special."

"He might know it lad but he can't accept it, you've heard him yerself. I mean he finds it so hard to believe what you were saying, he thought you were headin' for the nut-house remember."

"You may be right, I hope so, but even so they've said they want to see me tomorrow so we'd better get cracking. I've seen something bad today, up at the Hall."

"Not the girl, she's safe isn't she?" Paddy panicked.

"Yeah, sorry Uncle Pad, didn't mean to give you a shock, it's not her. Me and the girl watched the old man talking to Richard but we started to see something nasty, the old man said the Shaman was in the room with them."

"WHAT! he's got out of prison already? How could he have, yer'd better stick the pickle on lad."

"Oh yeah, there's something else, O'Neill's working in the house for Richard."

"Well we could see that one coming lad. Hurry up!"

Davey went downstairs and fetched the helmet, when he returned Paddy said, "Before we get going lad, there's sommat I want to show yer." He got off the bed and, knees cracking, bent down in front of the dressing table, underneath it, taped to the bottom drawer, was an envelope. Carefully he extracted it.

"Know what this is lad?" he asked, delving into the envelope and pulling out a small blue-book.

"No."

"It's a bank-book. Open it."

Davey opened the book, Paddy squinted down his nose as he endeavoured to read the figures, "Do yer know how much that is?" he asked.

"ONE HUNDRED POUNDS! You got it went you went into town today!"

Paddy grinned, "Yer partly right lad but look at which column it's in."

Davey saw the columns were headed units, tens, hundreds, thousands. "It's in the thousands column," he said weakly, barely able to speak.

"That's right lad, not one hundred pounds, one hundred THOUSAND pounds!"

Davey dropped backwards onto the bed.

"Come on lad, no time for that, there's work to be done!" he laughed as he helped Davey to sit upright.

"The Shaman is with us as we speak!" hissed the old man.

Davey turned away from the mirror, "This is where I saw up to, the old man and Richard where in this room in Carnatic Hall and this is what the old man said. Chacuti didn't know anything about it, she was dancing and enjoying herself."

"Probably a good thing that lad."

"Look!" said Davey, "the old man's pointing at something."

"I cannot see anything but whatever it is lies over there," said the old man.

"It appears to be on the far side of that writing desk," replied Richard, it was evident that he was having to fight to restrain himself from every impulse which told him he should run.

"It grows cold!"

"The candles are burning with a reduced flame. What is it old man. Is it the Shaman. Should we go to Chacuti?"

"Stay here, I am not sure, let us observe that we may learn."

"He's a cool customer ain't he lad. I'd be out of there like a shot."

"He hasn't got the helmet on, he's in danger. Look at their breath, it's freezing in there!"

"It begins to move," said the old man.

"Although I cannot see it I feel as though I can," said Richard struggling to remain calm.

"It is a powerful presence. Observe it as it passes from behind the writing desk."

"And crosses the floor towards us, what should we do old man?" Richard was clearly becoming frightened. His long hair was standing up at the back of his neck.

"Let us leave this room." They backed away from the presence through a doorway.
 "It follows, do something old man for I sense it is looking at me as I am looking at it."

Without saying anything to Paddy, Davey took their view into the fortress of Toledo. Fixed to the chair within the bell-cage sat Father Salamanga. His body was battered, his cassock hung in shreds, the stains all around told of the treatment he was receiving. Two hooded figures stood forcing horrific implements of torture between the bars of the cage.

"Jesus, what they doing to 'im? Why've yer come here?"
"If he's dead the Shaman will have left him!" He moved in and stared at the priest's face. One of the implements was applied and the priest let out a weak cry.
"It can't be the Shaman, he's still alive!" Davey returned to Carnatic.

"The presence grows weaker!" cried the old man.
 "I feel it fading, soon it shall be gone."
 The men's postures visibly relaxed as the spirit left the room.
 "What was it old man? Has the Shaman returned to plague us?"
 "Stay with the child, when I have the answer I will return."

"He's going to get the helmet."
"If it's still there lad, I didn't like the look of that thing. If I'd been able to see whatever it was that is."
 Davey was unnerved and shot ahead of the old man intending to go to his room above the stable. But as he passed through the doorway he saw O'Neill disappearing down the hallway.
 "I reckon 'e's been listening in," Paddy said voicing both their thoughts. Davey moved their view backwards and their fears were confirmed, with ear and eye alternating to the keyhole O'Neill had witnessed everything.
 Davey swept back to the old man's room, immediately the old man entered he put the helmet on.
 Davey didn't waste any time, *"I don't know what it was! The Shaman's still in Toledo, they're doing terrible things to him! And O'Neill was spying on you just then!"*
 The old man thought about what he had been told, "The Shaman may have decided that he is losing too much energy preserving the life of the priest's body. When a point is reached where it would be less of a loss for him to leave the body altogether and occupy that of another person he may allow the body to die."
"But what was it in the room with you and Richard?"
 "Perhaps the Shaman's thoughts are already seeking-out a new victim."
"So it was just his thoughts that were walking round the room?"
"Tell him to pull the other one," interrupted Paddy, *"it's got bells on it."*
 "I must return to Richard," said the old man, "he will be fearful."
"Keep the helmet with you."
 "I will keep it with me at all times now boy. You can be sure of it."
"Tell Richard about O'Neill," said Davey.
 "Did he see everything?" questioned the old man.
"Everything."
 Without another word he hurried off, *"I'll check out the Shaman!"* said Davey.

An ear-splitting scream echoed around the chamber.
 "He can't survive this for much longer Uncle Paddy."
 "Well, when yer reckon how much the Shark-cutey girl has grown, I mean she's no Spring chicken anymore, the Shyman must have been stuck in here for flippin' years."
 "I don't like it. If they kill the priest's body the Shaman could turn up as anyone. I think we're better off with the Devil we know than one we don't."
 "Yeah but he'd be a lot weaker though, that's what the old man reckons anyway, isn't it?"
 "That's what he reckons but all the same I don't like it, not one little bit. I hope these monks know what they're doing."
 "Monks, more like monkeys, the way they're playing around torturin' people. What are these feller's doing anyway. Haven't they heard of turnin' the other cheek and all that sort of stuff?"

The door to the huge chamber creaked open, the abbott entered closely followed by Alonzo.

"Look! He's one of them now!" exclaimed Davey.

Alonzo wore the robe and vestments of a novitiate.

"They're trainin' 'im up to be a monkey!" joked Paddy.

Davey tried to ignore him but couldn't help letting out a laugh, "Leave off Uncle Paddy, this is serious business." "Sorry lad."

Davey glanced at Paddy, his chastened expression was so comical he couldn't help himself but burst out laughing. Paddy immediately joined in. Davey heard a faint scratch against the wall as Mrs Murtagh removed her glass and restrained herself from laughing by biting onto the bed-covers. Davey spun his head to the side and peered through the wall into her darkened room.

"What is it lad? What yer doin'?"

"Nothing Uncle Pad," giggled Davey returning to the mirror.

A bucket of water was thrown over Father Salamanga, he looked up furiously.

"Water still remains a threat to you good Father," said the abbott, "and yet you have endured much. So much in fact that the brothers begin to lose heart."

"I assure you my lord, I am but a simple man, a man who but for the fates could well be occupying the self-same position that you now hold."

"And would you aspire to such a position?"

"I seek only to serve my Lord God in all humility."

"What would you wish us to do to help you in your present circumstances?"

"Only release me my lord but I know that is not possible."

"I am afraid not, however you have shown you have a strength not normally found in men, either your faith strengthens you or the Devil stands with you. We have been unable to determine which. These matters must be brought to a head one way or the other, they cannot be allowed to carry on indefinitely." He turned to Alonzo and told him, "You may wish to leave, you are as yet untried in these matters."

"I wish to stay my lord. The evil in this man must be driven from his body."

The abbott turned to the hooded monks and issued two simple words, "Rack him."

The rods which held the priest in the chair were withdrawn, he was then forced to lie down upon the stone floor and extend the chain manacles beneath the bars of the cage. Ropes were passed through pulleys on opposite sides of the chamber then fastened to the chains. By means of a complex arrangement of pulleys the ropes led up to the platform upon which stood a group of hooded men. As one they heaved on a lever which, using a ratchet mechanism, tightened the ropes. With continual cries from the priest the ropes tightened to such an extent that his body was lifted from the chamber floor and suspended horizontally in the cage. The ratchet locked into position allowing the monks to rest their grips, they stood watching as the questioning began.

"What is your name?" asked the abbott.

Father Salamanga laughed a devilish laugh. The abbott nodded to the men in hoods. Again they heaved on the lever, the ropes creaked as the pressure upon them increased.

"WHAT IS YOUR NAME?" yelled the abbott. His voice echoed authoritatively around the chamber.

The priest replied, "Is it not written: My name is Legion for we are many?"

"I command you to leave this man. Begone Satan!" shouted the abbott.

Father Salamanga's tongue took on a life of its own and he replied, "gibarteur fydgig ejocav ertigoakjef..."

"He talks in tongues! OUT! OUT DEMON!" screamed the abbott. "Increase the load!" he commanded.

The men in hoods had to hang with all their weight upon the lever in order to be able to advance the mechanism another click of the ratchet. It locked into place.

An evil voice sounded from the mouth of Father Salamanga, "Fools! You think you can interfere with the workings of the Gods. The child has stolen my power, she shall not keep it. I shall deal with you all. You shall all suffer one hundredfold what I have endured. Do you think these bonds can hold me? I can release myself whenever I will."

The abbott spoke quietly to Alonzo, "Satan is within him, it is now our task to cleanse him." He looked towards the hooded men. Outside night had fallen, the chamber was lit by flaring lamps which cast huge, terrifying shadows of the men onto the curved walls of the tower. "Pray continue until Vespers," the abbott ordered then turned and walked to the chamber door, he tapped a sequence of taps agreed upon entry with the guards outside, hearing the correct sequence they opened the door and allowed him out.

"Well lad, it seems like they know who's hiding in there."

"I think they've known it all along Uncle Paddy, it was just a question of time until they got the truth out of him."

"Well never mind getting the truth out of him, now they've got to get the Shaman to get out of him."

"How can they do that?"

"No idea lad but yer can bet yer last shilling they'll give it a good go."

"Why doesn't the Shaman escape like he said? I mean he could turn himself into the snake and get out of those chains any time he wants."

"Yer right lad, but he couldn't get out the place quick enough for that monkey on guard duty not to see what he was up to and give him a flippin' shower."

"I'd better let the old man know what's going on."

The old man sat in the armchair in Richard's study. Davey asked, "Have you told Richard?"

"I await him boy," replied the old man.

Davey told him what he had seen, *"They've made the Shaman admit he's inside the priest, now they've got to get him out."*

"I hear you boy," said the old man. "But all is not what it seems, things are becoming dangerous for the child, the brothers of Toledo have met their match. I fear the outcome as I fear the involvement of this man O'Neill. There are things at work in these matters which are beyond knowledge, it was no accident that O'Neill carried those signs, it was no accident that the skulls have turned him." As if speaking to himself he continued, "It makes me wonder whether the men in the East were aware of these eventualities all those years ago."

"What can we do?"

"I shall journey to Toledo, the helmet will enable the brothers to accomplish their work."

"What about Chacuti?"

"It will be safer for her to remain here than to join me on the road."

"It could take weeks for you to get there, what if the priest dies in the meantime and the Shaman comes straight here? I mean you've already said that his thoughts might be having a look around."

"There is no other alternative boy. I should have done this long ago, but you are right, I will take precautions so that even if the body of the priest were to die the Shaman will not enter this house."

"How can you do that?"

"The signs which O'Neill bore, carved into the wall of the house they will keep the Shaman at bay."

"But that means Chacuti will have to stay in the house, she'll be like a prisoner."

"Better that than to suffer her fate at the hands of the evil one."

Richard entered the room, as the door opened the sounds of the last guests leaving the ball could be heard above Chacuti's laughing farewells. The old man motioned for Richard to come nearer then said quietly, "O'Neill was watching us, he saw whatever took place in this room this night."

"You mean he was spying on us!" said Richard outraged. He ran from the room and after a short time returned with O'Neill. The old man rose to his feet and stood with them as Richard spoke to O'Neill.

"You sailed with me on the schooner and received your due share, did you not?" said Richard.

"Aye Sir," he replied addressing Richard as he might on board ship.

"And when you had squandered your share on gambling and drink did I not offer you work in my own household and give you board and lodging?"

"Aye Sir, you have been most kind to me."

"And the share that was due Captain Alonzo, I understand you made no attempt to deliver it to him as we had arranged?"

By way of answer O'Neill held up the stump of his arm.

Richard snapped, "It would not have prevented you taking ship for Finisterre! It was something which I was prepared to overlook in view of your misfortune. You struck the deal with Alonzo It would have been for him to deal with your duplicity and yet my sources tell me he is cloistered within the walls of a monastery - such are the turns of fate."

"Where he has no need of worldly possessions," grinned O'Neill.

"Do not be smug with me man. Have you not repaid my kindness by eavesdropping and spying upon me?"

"I think you must be mistaken on that Sir," O'Neill's grinning countenance suddenly altered.

"I think not. You know not." Richard drummed his fingers on the back of a chair, "I was warned against you but I ignored those warnings - it seems at my own peril. You have left me with no other alternative, you must leave my household, take this, it will tide you over until you get on your feet." He tossed him a pouch which O'Neill caught deftly with his good hand.

O'Neill did not say anything but opened the draw-string around the neck with his teeth, positioned the pouch upon his maimed arm then emptied the contents onto his palm. He grinned wickedly when four diamonds rolled out and settled in the sign of the two interlocking triangles, "Thank you Cap'n, you always were too generous," he gave a mock salute and rolled in a sailor's gait from the room.

Davey followed him out of the front door before returning to the study.

"There is more to concern us," said the old man, "I must travel to Toledo, the Inquisition need all the help that I can give them."

"But the child?" exclaimed Richard.

"I leave at first light," replied the old man, "but first I shall take steps to protect her."

"I didn't like the look on O'Neill's face," said Davey.

"Yer right lad, if them skulls have got to 'im then he mightn't leave so quietly."

They followed him round behind the house to the stables.

"Eh, eh, come on then, there's a good boy," said O'Neill as he opened the gate to Axa's stall, the stallion began to prance and dash its hooves against the cobbles as he entered. He lifted a bridle from where it hung and tried to place it upon the stallion's head, "Come on now..." But the stallion was having none of it, it reared up slightly on its hind legs. "Take it easy!" shouted O'Neill trying to slip the bridle over its head. The horse moved against him, pressing him against the divide which separated Axa's stall from the one alongside. "Get off, you damned animal!" O'Neill punched hard into the stallion's side but it had as much effect as hitting a log. The horse stood stock still locking him into place. Bracing his back against the divide and pushing several times with his arms he managed to move Axa back a short distance, quickly he flung himself over into the next stall. He landed on all fours in a heap of manure, rising to his feet he attempted to slash the bridle across Axa's back but the stallion bared his teeth and he moved away uttering oaths. Apart from the manure the stall he had landed in was empty but the one next to it was occupied by a gentle mare. Axa urged it to put up a fight but the mare was too gentle to argue with anybody. Hampered by the lack of a hand O'Neill cursed as he struggled to bridle and saddle it. As soon as he had completed the task he led the mare out to the mounting post, climbed into the saddle then rode off after the carriages whose lights could be seen wending their way down the lane as they ferried the guests homewards.

"Should I go with him and see where he goes?" asked Davey.

"It's up to you lad, maybe he's just off to trade in his diamonds."

"Maybe, I'll see what the old man's doing to protect the girl. I can always come back here and find out what's going on."

The old man was with Richard in Chacuti's bedroom, he was hacking a hole into the wall next to the window using a hammer and chisel. Once past the hard outer surface of the sandstone the chisel cut more easily. Richard took turns at cutting the stone until soon they had carved out a deep hole. "This should be large enough old man."

He rose from sitting upon Chacuti's bed and examined the cavity. From off the floor where they had left it, he lifted a thin slab of sandstone which he used to cover the hole, then scored around it with the edge of the chisel. Richard set to work cutting the hole to match the slab. Before long they had produced a perfect fit.

"It shall suffice," said the old man, he withdrew the Shaman's dagger from his belt. Richard walked to the foot of the bed and picked up a small chest. Returning to the old man he opened the chest and said, "This is the only treasure still remaining which has not been smelted down or sold off. Should any harm come to me Chacuti will always have this to fall back upon."

The old man lifted the gems and gold within the chest and placed the dagger beneath them, "There will come a time when this will pass into the hands of someone who will help the child, till then it shall rest undisturbed." He locked the chest and put it into the recess then hammered the slab into place so that their work was undetectable, "Fetch the child."

After Richard had left the old man spoke to Davey, "Is the chest in exactly the same position as you found it boy?"

"It is but you must tell Chacuti to tell me, the boy in the helmet, exactly where you've hidden it."

"I shall do so. Is the knife still safely with you?"

Davey opened the top drawer of the dressing-table and took out the dagger. "Guard it well boy!"

Richard returned leading Chacuti by the hand. "She is here old man," he said. He stood behind her with his hands upon her bare arms slightly above her elbows. She looked beautiful as she stood tall and elegant in her ball-gown.

"Beneath this spot," said the old man showing her the exact location of the chest, "we have placed a chest which contains gold and jewels, should you ever need them you will know where to find them."

"But why, why am I being shown this?" asked Chacuti. "Is something bad going to happen Richard?" she turned around and faced him.

"Don't worry my child, you will be alright. But we must take..."

The old man continued for him, "We must take precautions, what is in this wall is important to the boy, the one you saw when we were onboard the Carnatic."

"Who is he? What is important to him?" she asked.

The old man told her, "One day he will come to you, you must show him where this chest lies, he will be wearing this helmet," he tapped his hand upon the helmet.

Chacuti was alarmed, "You're not answering my questions, if nothing is to happen to me why will I need his help?"

The old man spoke more sternly, "Chacuti, the power of the skulls is in you, we must take care."

"Everything will be alright, don't worry," said Richard stroking his hand across her head.

She turned to him and forced herself to smile, the old man said, "That's better child. In the morning I am going away, whilst I am away Richard and I wish you to remain in the house, you must not leave it under any circumstances, when I return and then you will be free to do whatever you wish."

"Tell me one thing, is it the Shaman, has he come for me?" asked Chacuti.

Richard looked kindly at her, she hugged close to him and cried.

"Poor lass," said Paddy.

"Uncle Pad."

"Yeah lad."

"Thanks for helping me with this and for listening to me. I know now that we've done the right thing trying to help her."

"Arr don't start lad or I'll be needin' me hanky."

The sun was barely lighting the sky when the old man went outside the house and began cutting the strange shapes and patterns into the base of the walls using the hammer and chisel.

"Are you sure they'll keep him away?" asked Davey, "maybe it was something else about O'Neill which the Shaman was frightened of? Maybe it was because he was trapped in all that stone."

"We cannot know what O'Neill's fate may have been without the interference of the skulls but one thing is definite, did the skulls themselves not say they feared the signs he carried."

"You're right," said Davey, "it was when he put them on the Shaman that he nearly managed to kill him."

"The wise men of the East, up in the hilly ghatts in the South-East of India, they see much. Nothing escapes their gaze. These signs have reached us in a strange way but without them we could not protect her." He continued to chisel into the sandstone, "When these signs are in place the Shaman will be unable to pass into the house in body or soul."

"What about his thoughts, will he be able to go in there again like you and Richard 'saw' him?"

"Thoughts go whither they will boy, nothing can stop them, they are of the realm of the Gods. But thoughts cannot harm anybody except their thinker."

Richard walked round the front of the house to where the old man was cutting the final signs, he led a palomino pony by the bridle, it's golden hair with a white mane and tail made it appear dovelike. "A horse for your journey old man."

"That is no horse," said the old man eyeing the beautiful animal appreciatively, "that is a mount fit for the Son of Man himself."

"And here is his staff," said Richard passing the old man a stout length of stick. As the old man went to take it Richard moved nearer, "A quick twist of the handle," he demonstrated, "and you free the blade." He extracted a razor sharp sabre from within the stick. The old man took the weapon and slashed the blade through a number of strokes, it whistled as it sliced through the air.

"I have packed the things you will require for your journey exactly as you wished," Richard patted the saddlebags and the rolled up groundsheet across the horses rump. "Take this, should you become lost it will aid you in finding your way." Hanging from a lanyard around his neck was a ship's compass, housed in a brass case. He lifted it over his head and placed it over the old man's.

"It is a valuable gift. I head South, this shall guide me."

"I have jotted down a course you can follow." Richard unrolled a small scroll on which was depicted a basic map of England, he had scrawled a route and notes over it, briefly he went through them, "Follow the river, the Weaver which runs close to Speke Hall. It will take you to a Roman road known as Watling Street, the roads in these parts cannot compare with the time you will make following its course."

"To where shall it lead?"

Richard pointed to the various towns through which it would pass and the notes alongside their names; Market Drayton, (near to) Telford (stopover the night with the Willoughby's of Weston Park), Tamworth (you may be able to stay over at Drayton Manor), Lutterworth, Towcester, Dunstable (turn off right onto the Icknield Way). "Each of these stages will take a day's travel. Once you are on the Icknield Way follow it for maybe half a day then head due south, you will have to find a place to cross the River Thames then if you continue to head south you will reach the sea."

"And then a boat to France."

Richard took him by the arm, "Do you wish me to join you old man, this journey will not be without its dangers. You still speak with a strong Spanish accent, these are dangerous times for men from your country. War with Spain is in the offing, rumours abound."

"I do not intend to stay anywhere, the stars will be my roof, my mouth will be sealed. No, you must stay with the child, she will need you. Where is she?" he asked looking around.

"She is already carrying out your instruction to remain in the house, see, she watches from the upstairs window."

Dabbing a small lace handkerchief to her eyes Chacuti waved to the old man.

"I hope I shall not be gone long Richard, take care of the child whilst I am away."

"You know I shall lay down my life for her old man."

The old man shook his hand, he mounted the horse and cantered away from the house.

"What should I do, what can I do to help?" Davey asked the old man as he cantered down the lane.

"Until fate takes its turn there is nothing that you can do. Soon events will come together and the unexpected will occur, it is then that you will prove your worth."

"What's 'e goin' on about now?" asked Paddy.

CHAPTER 31

The Journey

Davey and Paddy sat together in the quiet of the bedroom. The light which glimmered in from the street light outside was extinguished when the light-man turned off its supply. Davey picked up the matches from the dressing-table and lit the lamp above Paddy's bed.

"I tell yer what lad that helmet's handy. If yer could make them yer'd make a fortune, think of it, nobody would need to spend money on the gas. They could just go round wearing helmets."

"And it would protect you from being blown-up if there was a gas leak," joked Davey.

"Yer having me on now aren't yer."

"Uncle Paddy," said Davey in an enquiring tone.

"Yeah what?"

"How do you think this helmet ended up in the German trenches?"

"No idea lad, maybe yer should ask yer dad."

"You know what he'd do - send for the men in white coats."

They both laughed. "Seriously Uncle Pad, how on earth did it get there. I mean the old man had it, we know that, then me dad got it but..."

"Sommatt must have happened to it in the meantime."

"Yeah, but what?"

"Well the only way yer goin' to find out is by gettin' on with it." He looked at his clock, "It's gettin' on for midnight. In the mornin' yer going to have to go out with yer mam and dad." He stuck his hand under the mattress and pulled out a wad of banknotes.

"Uncle Paddy!"

"Shush lad, yer'll wake her up. Take this lot and buy yerselves sommat. There's plenty more where that came from."

"But they'll want to know how come I've got it."

"You've got a point there. Tell yer what tell them that it's yer first week's wages."

"That's more than I'd earn in the first five years, never mind the first week!"

"How about this then, tell them yer've got a magic helmet, a ghost from the past told yer to look inside a wall and in it yer found some treasure."

"Don't be daft," said Davey pretending to pound his uncle's arm.

"Well tell them that I've received a war payment for all me injuries and this is a present from me."

"Naw, they'll never believe it, we're going to have to think of a better story than that."

"What d'yer think we should do for now then? Get some rest?"

"No way, I'm dying to find out what happens. Like the old man says events are going to come together soon."

"Get on with it then me old son," urged Paddy.

Leaving Speke Hall were two riders, from a distance it looked like a man and a boy but when Davey zoomed in for a closer look he saw it was the old man on his pony. Alongside him rode John Middleton seated on the back of a lumbering cart-horse. The two men rode close to a winding river heavy with brown, mud-laden water from the Autumn rains, within its swirling muddy mass could be seen leaves, dropped from overhanging trees, which tumbled and tossed along. Over muddy fields, across deep ditches and through huge hedgerows, the riders slowly made their way. The difference in height made it difficult for them to talk but occasionally one would shout a few words to the other, mostly they joked or bantered about something. It was light-hearted humour and much appreciated by Paddy who remarked, *"Them two could do a turn up at the local club, Little and Large,"* he guffawed.

"They'd certainly make a sight for sore eyes Uncle Pad."

"If they didn't want to attract attention to themselves I reckon they're goin' the wrong way about it somehow."

They watched as the pair passed by a farmer tilling a field. His plough, pulled by two oxen, was harnessed to him as it was to them. He stared across, tripped and was dragged along a furrow.

"Ha! Look at 'im, fell tip over top!" jeered Paddy.

The two riders chortled at the antics of the ploughman. Towards day's end they crossed a flat field dissected in its centre with a roadway which was wide enough for two carts to pass by next to each other. The horses stepped up out of the boggy ground on the road's stone surface and shook themselves as though shaking off the memory of such hard going. The road soon rang to their hooves. John's carthorse left a trail of great clods of earth, both horses were as chatty as their riders and never stopped nuzzling each other and whinnying in delight at being ridden.

It was Autumn, evening drew in early as they approached the first town they would have to pass through. The old man peered at Richard's list, *"It's Market Drayton John."*

The finely dressed stone road gave way to a higgledy-piggledy arrangement of cobblestones, the weary horses disliked the uneven, slippery surface but settled themselves to it with words of encouragement from their riders. It wound into the town; black and white wattle and daub houses overhung the road, smoke filtered through thatched roofs and trailed into the darkening sky. The smell of wood-burning stoves and the meals simmering away upon them brought groans from the giant's stomach. *"What ho?"* he said as they saw a group of white figures crossing the road and making their way into a tavern.

"Ghosts!" cried Davey as he zoomed in to look at the spooky figures, shimmering white in the twilight.

"It's salt lad. They're salt miners," Paddy laughed, *"the ground down there's full of the stuff."*

"Hey up there! It's a flippin' giant!" shouted one of the men turning towards the sound of echoing hooves. The other men joined him in making fun of John, "Which one's the horse?" shouted one. "You've got it the wrong way round mate, you should be carrying the horse!" "And don't think you're getting away with it 'helmet head', going off to war are you!"

"I don't reckon them feller's know what they're dealin' with lad."

"Why doesn't John get down and flatten the lot of them. I would."

"Me too."

But John had heard it all before, he didn't even turn his head as they passed the men.

"I think we'll avoid passing through towns except under cover of the night my friend," said the old man.

"The gnats are still troublesome even at this time of year," replied John.

They continued the rest of the way through the town unmolested, the darkness was drawing in as they found a grassy meadow. They dismounted and led their relieved mounts through lush knee-deep grass. After they had hobbled the animals they got a small fire going.

"You've done this before," joked John as he saw how expertly the old man brewed up a meal.

"It seems like another world, another lifetime ago John. So much has happened, so much has still to happen."

"Will we save the girl old man?"

"Her fate is wrapped up with that of the Shaman. It is upon him that we must focus our efforts. Only time will tell whether we are to be successful."

After they had eaten their bedrolls, wrapped themselves into blankets then took out their pipes and lay chatting and puffing away.

"This helmet," John's deep voice rumbled in the darkness, the dying embers of the fire illuminated his huge torso, "tell me, why do you wear it?"

The old man took off the helmet and passed it to the giant. "Put it on John."

The giant shook his massive head and its mass of shaggy locks, "It will never fit this."

"Try it."

The helmet fitted his head perfectly, John was clearly astonished. "How can this be?"

"Speak with him boy."

"Hello," said Davey.

John leapt up from his reclining position and swung his great paws through the air, if anybody had been near him they would have been decapitated.

"Calm yourself John. Do not be afraid."

"I fear no man."

"Then listen to the boy."

"I'm Davey McCann," said Davey.

"I am John Middleton," said the giant hesitantly. "From where does this voice come old man?"

"Near to here in distance but far away in time."

"Should the witchfinder learn of this we would burn at the stake."

"The evil man we seek was in possession of this helmet. We take it to men who will use its power to defeat him."

"Is he a witch?" asked John, taking the opportunity to remove the helmet and pass it carefully back to the old man.

"More than a witch. The souls of thousands; men, women and children, provide him with his evil energy. He must be destroyed."

"And this boy? What is he? A white witch?"

"No, just a boy."

"Like the boy David, the one who slew Goliath?"

"Just a boy John but he sees more than we are able. Let us rest now, tomorrow will be another long day."

They lay in the darkness listening to the sound of the horses tearing clumpfuls of grass. It was a long time before John stopped twisting his head round quickly at every sound.

"Don't make any jokes about slings to him lad or big as he is I reckon he'd die of shock."

"I'm going to speed this up, I mightn't get the chance to do anything tomorrow when I have to go to New Brighton."

"Be careful yer don't go too quick lad or yer might miss sommat."

They watched the giant and old man move rapidly down Watling Street; they witnessed them carefully scout around darkened villages and towns, avoiding people. At Dunstable the riders missed their turnoff onto the Icknield Way and had to retrace their steps in the darkness until they found it. The road was less well-preserved than Watling Street but it still provided good-going for the horses. Half a day passed in the blink of an eye as they turned off the Icknield way on a bright Autumn afternoon, heading southwards, following the sun high in the heavens.

"Hold it a mo' lad, just got to nip the lav'."

Davey took off the helmet but as soon as Paddy had left the room he couldn't help himself but replaced it and followed the speeding images through. The two riders were approaching a wide river, Davey realised from Richard's directions that it was the Thames. As they reached its banks the wind began to howl. Soon it had increased to such a force that the old man undid his groundsheet and fastened it into place across his body with the same straps which had been used to fix it to the rump of the horse. The giant appeared to be impervious to such a distraction. The clump, clump of Paddy returning up the stairs saw Davey saying, "Just put it back on Uncle Pad, look, it's blowing a gale."

The wind was blasting the surface of the river sending spray high into the air, the sky darkened and ominous black clouds rolled in.

"Do you wish us to find shelter for the night old man?" asked the giant.

"It is not a night fit for man or beast to spend in the open John but first let us cross this great stream."

They came to a cluster of thatched cottages which congregated around a crossing point. Floating at the water's edge was a flat-bottomed ferry boat, it was hauled across the river by means of an overhead cable. The ferryman hailed them through a shower of hailstones, "I were just about to pack in for the day when I saw you gennermen, are ye for crossing?"

The horses took some coaxing but once they had settled themselves onto the barge they stood stock still. With the hailstones dashing into his face the ferryman hauled out into mid-stream, John lent a giant hand.

"Thankee kindly, are ye from these parts?"

Aware of the dangers of the old man's Spanish accent John did all the talking, "Close enough."

"And where may that be?"

John ignored the question, "Is there an inn hereabouts where we might be able to stay the night and dry ourselves out?"

"That be Medmenham," said the ferryman pointing back at the thatched cottages, "Like as not ye could've found rooms there for the night." He thought about it for a moment longer, "Soon as we get the bank follow the river downstream, ye'll come to the parish of Hurley, there be the Bell Inn there, ye'll get a warm welcome there."

Davey said to the old man, *"I'll go on ahead and see what it's like."*

He moved down the riverbank for some distance until he came to a manor house surrounded by a number of dwellings which bordered a road leading to the inn. Its huge black oak-beamed frontage, lit up by coachlamps around the doorway, stood alongside the rain-soaked road. Davey looked inside through a window shaped like a spy-glass and saw a huge log fire burning. *"The ferryman got it right Uncle Paddy when he said they'd get a warm welcome. It looks so cosy in there I wish I could get into it."*

"Why don't yer have another try lad?"

"Naw there's no point, we've tried hard enough, I'd only break the mirror. Here comes the old man."

After they had ensured that their horses would be well looked after the giant led the old man inside. He had to bend almost double under the low-beamed ceilings, even then he banged his head so forcefully that the building itself seemed to tremor. The bang received a loud raucous cheer from a group of men sitting together around the fire.

"Don't mind them, they be travelling players, the plague's drove 'em out of London," a barmaid called cheerily.

As John and the old man removed their soaking outer garments the mention of plague caused them to look at each other warily. John led the way to the bar, "Two flagons of your best ale there missy."

The girl pumped the handle and filled the flagons, "And would you be wanting rooms for the night?"

John was busy taking a drink, the beer flowed down his throat and he steadily tilted his head back until he drained the last drop. One of the men had arisen from the fireside, he was a stout, heavily-muscled fellow, "Hey Titus Andronicus!" shouted one of the players after him as he walked to the bar, "I'll have a cider and mead!"

Drink had flushed the man's face, it lent his vicious nature false courage, as he reached the bar he deliberately knocked into John sending the remains of his drink pouring down the inside of his collar. Slowly John replaced the flagon on the bar. "Will ye be paying for the gennerman's drink?" asked the barmaid of Titus Andronicus.

"O monstrous! What reproachful words are these?" shouted the actor. The other members of his troupe sensed the bad vibrations which the confrontation had sent out, they rose to their feet.

"I'll have to be asking the landlord to ask ye all to leave," said the barmaid meekly feeling the tension rising as the men approached.

"These words are razors to my wounded heart," said Titus.

One of the men vaulted over the bar and seized hold of the buxom barmaid, "Lord Titus, by your leave, this maid is mine." The girl screamed as the man produced a theatrical dagger, its point was real enough as he warned, "A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes, would make such fearful and confused cries." The girl held her tongue.

The old man felt a slight tug at his waist and turned to see one of the players brandishing his bag of gold, he held it up and taunted the old man, "Know that this gold must coin a plot, Which, cunningly effected, will get, A very excellent piece of villainy."

"Return the gold and unhand the girl, then we will be on our way!" shouted the old man.

Upon hearing the old man's distinct accent one of the actor's cried, "Dismounted from your snow-white goodly steed, a barbarous man of Spain, the Queen shall have notice of this."

Apart from a hunching of the massive muscles on top of his shoulders John did not move, the faint click as the old man turned the handle of his staff was the only sound heard as he swiftly withdrew the blade.

Titus shouted, "Keep your dancing blade by your side, or have it glued within its sheath, Till you know better how to handle it."

The old man flourished the sabre, the men around backed away from him but shielded by the body of the giant Titus stayed. John punched him in the ribs, it was not a wild swing, he simply drew back his fist a short distance then punched it forwards; it was not a fast action but the incredible power the blow unleashed sent the man flying along the bar, knocking over three or four of his fellows to collapse in a heap. The old man pointed the tip of his sabre at the man with the barmaid, "Unhand her!" he ordered. The man vaulted back over the bar, dagger at the ready. Other members of the troupe had drawn weapons.

"They appear to have a certain skill in these matters," said the old man as they watched the men fan out around them. A golden-haired player with brawny arms brandishing a stool, rushed at John, " With this, my weapon drawn, I rush'd upon him, Surpris'd him suddenly, and...."

John seized the stool and wrenched it from the man's grasp, as the man was jerked within punching distance he tapped him on the head with his knuckles, the man collapsed to the saw-dust covered floor. "How now? Brown cow!" joked the giant.

The atmosphere was anything but joking. The travelling players were intent upon overwhelming their opponents.

"Look out!" exclaimed Davey as one of the men lunged at the old man. The sabre whirled and slashed, it dispatched the life of the man.

Seeing that one of their number had been killed the players became infuriated, they leapt for any long-range weapons they could lay their hands upon. From the walls of the inn various farming implements were snatched and brandished; a scythe carved through the air; chains, used for attaching a wooden yoke to oxen, were also swung, they collided with John who barely flinched as he dragged their wielder in for a knockout blow. Slowly, back to back, John and the old man retreated out through the door to the inn. The icy wind outside went unheeded as the battle continued in the soft glare of the coach-lamps.

Whilst some of the players kept the two men at bay with sudden charges more of their number fetched fence-posts, mattocks and rakes, anything which could be wielded from out of range of the giant's club-hammer punches and the old man's sabre.

It was taking an awful lot to raise the temper of the giant however, slowly but surely, he was losing his calm.

"The steam's started comin' out his ears now lad, won't be long before he blows his top!"

As one of the men turned to receive a vicious mattock from one of his fellows John bent down and seized him by the ankle. His hand clamped like a vice as he heaved the man up and swung him round, clearing a great circle around himself and the old man. The man's head connected with the body of one of the players, sending him crashing to the ground clutching his ribs. John flung the man into a group of the players and then he and the old man made off at a slow trot.

The actors were not giving up easily, they ran along a footpath hemmed in by dense hedges which led them back to the river, along its bank the chase continued. Occasionally the old man and John stood and fought but as soon as there was a lull they again continued their retreat.

Outnumbered and with only the old man's sabre against such superior odds they both knew that sooner or later one of the players would get lucky and strike a blow.

"John, we must get out of this, much depends upon our successful mission!" shouted the old man.

Davey swept ahead of them and saw the means of escape, *"There's a boat up ahead, near to a weir, hurry up!"*

The old man told the giant, together they ran for it and barely scrabbled into the lugger before they were caught by the players. A slash of the sabre freed it from its moorings, a powerful push from John sent it out into mid-river.

The players sent stones accompanied with fierce shouts winging after them, " I have dogs, my lord, Will rouse the proudest panther in the chase."

Titus shouted, "And I have horse will follow where the game runs like swallows o'er the plain."

He flung a stone which in the darkness could not be seen by John, it would have struck him but the old man caught it and flung it back at its thrower. Titus collapsed to the ground clutching his head.

"Nice one," said Paddy, *"but it sounds like them fellers are goin' to chase them."*

"They'll be wasting their time Uncle Paddy, look at them go!"

The boat was caught in the whirls and eddies which led to the weir where the water dashed rapidly down a steep ramp. The lugger was dragged towards it and flung down the ramp, the giant and old man clung to the gunwales as it rushed down with its keel grating on the bottom. It hit the deep water at the bottom of the plunge then bobbed back up before plummeting on in the strong current.

"We'd best trim the boat John," said the old man as soon as it had settled into the steady flow of the current. They placed the mast and sail which lay in the bottom of the boat to one side then carefully they manoeuvred John into the

stern. The old man retrieved a set of oars and sat amidships. The bow of the boat tilted upwards with the weight of the giant but the old man seemed satisfied. He rowed on.

"I'd forgotten how strong that 'elmet made him lad, look at him."

The old man sat on the thwart, bending and straightening his back into each pull. He was heaving the boat along, its bow rode high out of the water helping it to plane along. Downriver they raced; past a stately abbey where bells tolled for morning prayers, through a sleepy town where hardly a light betrayed the inhabitants, past a tiny hamlets where only the far-off barking of an old dog indicated life. A herd of fallow deer creeping down to drink at the water's edge were startled by their sudden appearance.

The river widened and the rising sun brought with it a fresh breeze, from the hull they lifted the mast and fastened it into place with two stays, a triangular red sail was unfurled and as the giant sent the boat onto the correct tack the sail filled and pushed them along, the old man placed the oars in the boat.

"That's made for an easier life John."

John grinned, "Did you see that fellow who I rapped on the head, I only wish it had been Titus Andronicus himself," he jested. From far off they heard the sound of a hunting horn and turned to look at each other, "Fox-hunters, most like," said John.

As the sun continued to climb the countryside gave way to majestic buildings with wide beautiful lawns. The lawns decreased as the buildings increased in amount and grandeur; castles, cathedrals, churches and theatres were passed, great stone towers and keeps overlooked each tack they took. By mid-morning their tiny craft was lost in a mass of vessels of all shapes and sizes so that John had to be constantly on the look-out ready to send them onto another course. The old man replaced the oars in their rowlocks should they need to perform any sudden manoeuvre, "There is a fine stench to this place," he said.

John wrinkled his huge nose, "It comes from the water itself I fear, should we land and continue?"

The old man took out the map Richard had given him, "If we continue we can sail out into the sea, then by following this coastline (his finger traced the route) to here, we will be in position to cross the Channel. It will save us days!"

"And our feet."

On either side of the river buildings of every type and description crowded to the water's edge. They sailed beneath the arches of a stone bridge but as they passed through Davey cried a warning, "*Look out!*"

The old man gave a powerful flick of the oars as, in the same spot where their boat would have been, a woman plummeted into the river from the bridge above. Her black skin and the inflamed buboes around her armpits sent a shout from the giant, "BLACK DEATH!" They stared at the body as it floated slowly downstream in their wake.

"Ugh, did you see her Uncle Paddy. It was horrible!"

"'orrible ain't the word for it lad."

They turned a bend in the river, ahead of them a large fleet of warships was assembled. Some vessels were tugging at their anchors out in mid-river, others felt the pull of the tide upon them as they rode at the quayside. Schooners, frigates, long-bowed slender ships, all had their gun-ports open revealing men working away at the cannons shipside.

Jolly boats, ferries and shore boats swarmed all around. Gantries and scaffolds teamed with men hauling on ropes and swinging great nets filled with bundles and packages, stores and provisions out onto the ships waiting below.

"Seems like Richard was right John, they make ready for war with Spain."

"It would be well for you not to return here old man but not all these vessels are for war." As they sailed past a flotilla he pointed towards the flagship, *Jesus of Lübeck*. It carried the royal standard of England proudly at the masthead, beneath it fluttered the captain's crest - a negro bound with cord.

"It is an evil trade John," said the old man observing the lines of black slaves who were being taken below. The smell from the vessel was enough to cause them to move away but to ensure they did so a marine pacing the deck of one of the warships levelled his musket towards them. John jerked the tiller and sent the lugger heading beneath the arch of another bridge.

The clamour and din of the city was a stark contrast to the tranquillity of the countryside; carts and horses, men and women shouting and yelling, the sounds of people toiling away at their day's work added to the sounds of the docks, of cargoes being loaded and the hum of the African slaves crammed into the holds of the ships.

It was to be a long time before either John or the old man spoke, in fact it was not until the city had been left behind them and had been replaced by a wide expanse of murky water flanked by green fields and Autumn trees devoid of

leaf that the first of the giant's deep warnings came, "Ready about," he warned, the yacht jibed and he added, "Lee ho," as the boom swung across the boat forcing the old man to duck.

Out past mid-channel surrounded by a heavy swell, under a black sky broken by only the faintest starlight the tiny craft continued seawards constantly tacking to the east. Late into the night the old man consulted the compass Richard had given him, "We have now reached the position from which we are able to sail due south," he stared at the particles suspended in the water and by watching them as they sailed past was able to gauge their speed, "This north wind combined with the southward flowing tide will take us around the coast and out into the Channel, it will be but a matter of hours before landfall."

"I'm no sailor myself," joked John trying to sound cheerful.

"The conditions will ensure a calm crossing, have no fear."

Southwards the wind pushed the tiny craft, occasionally the old man asked the giant to correct their position by applying force to the tiller. Not once did they need to tack but sailed smoothly onwards over the flat sea. The only sounds that could be heard was the rush of water beneath the hull and the screech of sea-birds telling each other of their positions in the night.

"We make good time John," said the old man as he used his helmet to scoop sea-water from out of the bottom of the boat.

By mid-morning the coastline could be seen as a ribbon strip along the horizon. Under the old man's directions John kept the craft headed straight to shore, heaved up by strong rollers they ground upon a wide, flat, deserted beach. "It has served us well John but there'll be no coming back this way for it," said the old man, he pushed against the bow of the lugger and sent it bobbing out amongst the waves, "Richard will need to repay the owner for the mischief we have done him."

They began the long walk from the sea to the land. No locals were about as the strange pair walked inland along a deserted road where for mile after mile the wind swept sand pounded against their ankles.

"Boy. Do you watch?" asked the old man.

"Yeah, we're here."

"Go to the child, stay with her, watch over her. John and I can take care of whatever comes our way."

Davey did as he was asked, Chacuti sat in the library, upon her lap was a sheet of paper upon which she was using a charcoal stick to draw a sketch of Richard as he sat reading a thick, leather-bound book. "What is it that you read Richard?" she asked looking up.

"It is the tale of a man who suffered much for his beliefs, it is called 'Pilgrim's Progress'."

"Richard." The tone in her voice caused him to close the book to signify that he was giving her his full attention. She asked, "Will the Shaman come here?"

"You know that you should not talk of such matters. The old man has told you not to worry has he not?"

"He would never leave me unless it was absolutely necessary. I have to remain in..."

In the distance a glint attracted Davey's sharp eyes. "Did you see that Uncle Paddy?" he swept across the lawn and down the field towards a clump of trees.

"There it is, up there. It's a man!!" They moved up to the top of a tall young oak, as Davey zoomed in he recognised the man who, due to the lack of leaves, was only partially concealed by the branches. "It's O'Neill!"

"What's he doin' up there?"

As he swayed backwards and forwards in the breeze he held a telescope to his eye and swept the grounds of the estate.

"I've an idea he's looking for Chacuti. She'd normally be out riding if the old man hadn't told her to stay in the house."

"Well I reckon whatever he's doing he ain't up to any good. How'd he get up there anyway?"

Davey scanned back down the branch he sat upon, deep cuts had been freshly hacked through the bark forming a set of steps.

"I've been up them steps when the toughies caught me!" exclaimed Davey.

"That tree's been around some time then lad. But yer right, look, there's the chopper he used." At the base of the tree propped against the trunk was an axe. "Question is, why's he bothering to spy on her or anybody for that matter. One thing's for sure, he's up to no good, unless he just likes sittin' in the top of trees with a telescope."

"I'll track him back and see what's led to him coming here should I?" As Davey spoke a huge bird glided close to the man in the tree, he cried out in alarm, warded it off with his arms and began to quickly climb down. As soon as his feet hit the ground he picked up the axe and ran off.

"Flamin' 'eck what was that thing?"

"Some kind of giant bird. Something's going on here Uncle Paddy." He moved back to the night when O'Neill was dismissed by Richard. They scanned through the old man sitting in the study waiting for Richard; saw Chacuti standing with Richard at the doorway to their home saying goodbye to their guests. The guests made their way out to gleaming carriages drawn by prancing horses, the wheels crunched back and forth over the gravel as the spirited animals waited.

"Thank you, do come again," said Richard to a gentleman and his lady.

"And she's so beautiful," said the lady to Richard as she kissed Chacuti goodbye.

"I remember that old cow saying Chacuti was a commoner Uncle Paddy!"

"Nowt wrong with commoners lad, salt of the earth, that's us."

Leaving Chacuti to say their final goodbye's Richard entered the study, the old man motioned for him to come nearer then said quietly, "O'Neill was watching us, he saw whatever took place in this room..."

"We know what happened next lad, get up to where O'Neill's nicked the horse."

Their view swept above the lane, it was crowded with carriages. Each carriage carried a lantern swaying from the top of a pole. It was a cheery sight, some of the ladies sat singing the words to the songs played at the ball, over their knees they had thick woollen rugs to keep out the cold. The pleasant evening was destroyed when O'Neill caught them and charged past, yelling oaths and urging the mare ever faster. The carriages blocked his path and he was forced to ride beneath overhanging bushes which tore at him as he rode past thumping its rear with the stump of his arm, holding the reins in his other hand.

He left the gates to the estate behind him and galloped over a well-beaten trail which cut across a gorse and heather common, Davey soared high above looking down upon him. The trees were joined with buildings, some of which Paddy recognised. *"He's heading into the city!"* he said as O'Neill rode swiftly along *"This is amazin' lad, he's riding over our house, if it had been built four hundred years ago that is. There's King John's hunting lodge on Lodge Lane, eh up he's going to it."*

O'Neill dismounted outside the lodge and tied his horse onto a rail. He ran nimbly up the steps to the door and tugged on a bell-pull, deep inside the house they heard the dull tones of a bell and the heavy bark of a large dog. An aged gentleman answered the door, he wore his night-clothes over which he had thrown a heavy blanket to shield himself from the cold, behind him strained a mastiff which was endeavouring to get past his legs and attack this unwelcome visitor.

"Yes! What do you want at this ungodly hour?" snapped the man.

"I'm sorry your honour, I have certain information to impart to you," replied O'Neill.

"Shut up!" snapped the gentleman to the mastiff, the animal slunk away but sat eyeing the man who was ushered into its home suspiciously.

"Certain information which concerns a Mr Richard Parker," continued O'Neill in answer to the gentleman's enquiring look.

"Be quick man, I do not take kindly to interruptions!"

"I was told that certain information was always, if your honour will pardon my saying so, appreciated," he stressed the word 'appreciated'.

"As the witch-finder of this area it is in my power to decide whether a small reward should be paid," the gentleman agreed.

"Shall we say that this matter concerns," O'Neill looked all around, then at the dog which growled back at him, then back at the witch-finder, "concerns witchcraft!"

"You have evidence?" barked the witch-finder.

"The evidence of mine own two eyes your honour."

"Speak!" the witch-finder was eager to listen, "out with it, quickly now man!" All the tiredness of his heavy sleep had disappeared.

"You know Carnatic Hall?"

"Ahem, the chap who captured the galleon. What of it? Is there a witch there? Who is she?" His eyes peered fiercely from beneath hooded eyebrows, "Give me a name and you shall be well rewarded for this night's work."

"There is a young woman there, known as Chacuti, came from the land of the Inka. I sailed on the schooner which took the galleon, some of me ship-mates says they saw her walk on water. I didn't mind them but when my share of the loot from the galleon ran out this Richard Parker he gives me a job working for him. And I tell you I've seen some strange goings-on in that place."

"And so you reward his generosity with treachery, but it is of no matter. He has consorted with the witch?"

"I don't know about that, but he certainly has, shall we say, a tender spot for her, that much is certain."

The witch-finder sat down at a desk and picked up a quill, he dipped it into ink and began to make notes. "Your name?" he wrote it down then ordered, "Now, tell me what you have seen."

"Well like I said me mates saw her walk on water," he waited whilst the witch-finder scratched away, "and I saw a candle, watched it light all by itself and then go out," the quill scratched, "and I saw Richard Parker and some strange old man who lives up at the Hall talking about someone being in the room with them but nobody was there. Right frightened they was."

"This is most interesting," said the witch-finder blotting the ink, "this has all the classic signs of witchery."

O'Neill gave a wretched smile which disappeared from his face when the witch-finder said, "However, we shall require further evidence if we are to be able to issue a warrant and burn out this cancer."

He reached into his desk and from a velvet lined tray picked out a number of coins. He passed them towards O'Neill who opened his hand.

"What is this sign?" shouted the witch-finder, grasping hold of his hand. "Such symbols are known to the Devil!"

"Ha! That'll learn him!" exclaimed Paddy, *"The shoes on the other foot now, look at his face."*

"It were when I was a young man, your honour. Voyaged to India, up in the hills we went, thought nought about it at the time, just some tattoos, had them done like you do..."

"SILENCE!" roared the witch-finder. The mastiff edged nearer, growling. The witch-finder spoke sternly, "I am deeply suspicious about your motives this night. I charge you to obtain further evidence concerning your report or else a warrant shall be put out for your arrest on the charge of incitement of witchcraft." The witch-finder then spoke perfectly calmly, "Your address?"

O'Neill was thrown, he began to stutter and whine.

"Do not attempt to leave this district on pain of death!" threatened the witch-finder. The mastiff escorted O'Neill to the door, its teeth clacking shut at his heels, hurrying him on his way.

"I'd better let the old man know about this!" said Davey shocked.

The old man and giant followed the same road; occasionally as the day had worn on they had passed various travellers but both had kept their heads down, their eyes averted and their mouths shut and although they made a strange pair, they did not receive the same harsh treatment to which they had grown accustomed as they travelled through England.

"O'Neill has been to see a judge."

"I fear the skulls have tipped him far to their ways, his actions are miserable," said the old man.

"He says that Chacuti's a witch, says he's seen her walking on water, and that candles have lit on their own and other strange things have happened in the house."

"Did the judge believe him?"

"He give him some money and told him to get further evidence. We've seen him in a tree, spying around with a telescope, he's up to no good that's for sure."

"I cannot return to assist her, you must do something boy."

"What can I do? I can't speak with her. Only when you wear the helmet can I speak to you."

The old man frowned, "The fates are in motion, what is unformed will soon be formed, what is in turmoil is taking order. Stay with her boy!"

The Well

"Where's that weasel gone then?"

Davey concentrated and their view moved into Carnatic Hall. *"He's in the house!"*

They found O'Neill walking down a narrow length of corridor which came to a dead end. He did not hesitate but put his back against one side of the corridor and braced his feet against the other.

"He's doing what I did!" exclaimed Davey, *"that's how I got up there!"*

"Up where lad?"

"There's a hatch up there, he's going up into the attic."

"Why's he want to do that?"

Silently he closed the hatch shut behind him, the roof tiles were in perfect repair so that not the faintest trace of light entered. He took a candle from his pocket, lit it then melted wax onto the peak of a cloth cap, as soon as there was enough wax to set it into he fixed the candle to the peak and placed the cap on his head.

"Clever stuff," said Paddy.

Cautiously, taking care not to place his feet onto the plaster, keeping to the beams, he made his way across the attic. Where two beams ran close together he lay down, took the candle from the cap and set it onto one of the joists.

"It's Chacuti's room! It's beneath him! That's where I met her."

"He's up to sommat lad."

From his pocket O'Neill removed a spike of metal, a wooden handle was across one end, the other was a pointed spiral tip.

"I've got one of them in me tool bag," said Paddy, *"it's a gimlet, I'll bet he drills a hole with it."* They watched as he began twisting the tool into the plasterwork, *"Told yer!"*

As he drilled he lifted the gimlet out several times and blew away the plaster which had collected around the tip.

"Why's he doing that?"

"He doesn't want the plaster falling down into the room, it'd be a bit of a giveaway, you know, a load of snow indoors."

Davey went down into the room below and watched as the gimlet broke through the heavily decorated ceiling to emerge between a pear and a bunch of grapes. The hole was quite invisible.

They could look up into the hole and see O'Neill's eye pressed to it as he lay waiting.

"We can't do a thing about it Uncle Paddy, he's going to spy on her!" He went back down to the library where Chacuti was completing her sketch, she sat down alongside Richard on the settle and handed it to him.

"Marvellous, it shall have pride of place," said Richard pointing to an area of wall alongside one of the racks of books, he held the sketch up as he examined it, "but I feel it does rather more than justice to me, I'm not as young as I used to be."

"You grow more handsome as you grow older Richard."

"And what would you be after now my little princess," he joked.

Chacuti laughed, "You have been so kind to me, I have been happy here with you. I do not want for anything."

Richard ran his fingers through her raven hair, "You have deserved everything that I have been able to give to you, without you this house would have been barren. I wish you to have it all when I am gone."

"Gone? Why? Are you going as well. Please don't leave me alone here."

Richard tutted, "Don't be silly, I'm not leaving you. I mean when I'm older and greyer than I am already, when I pass away."

Chacuti sighed with relief, "That will not be for a long time, you are the silly one," she picked up a cushion and playfully hit him with it. Richard begged for mercy but when she didn't desist he grabbed her and wrestled her to the ground. Chacuti lay, staring up at him, laughing.

"Speed this lot up lad, yer'd think these two were in love or sommat."

It was late evening when the housemaid entered Chacuti's room and prepared it for her. Candles were lit, a bowl of hot water was poured, towels were placed. O'Neill watched intently as the maid drew back the curtains surrounding the four-poster bed then folded back the covers. When she was satisfied that the room was ready she glanced around then helped herself to a good spray of eau-de-cologne from the dressing table. It was shortly after she had left that Chacuti entered. O'Neill stiffened as he watched her moving about in the pale candlelight which illuminated the room.

"We've got to do something Uncle Paddy!" shouted Davey.

"Well unless she's got a helmet of her own ain't much yer can do."

Davey moved frantically between the attic and the bedroom.

"Wait!" he exclaimed, *"he's not even watching her!"*

O'Neill was leaning on one elbow, staring back behind where he lay. "Who's there?" he hissed into the darkness. No sound came. But he appeared to be convinced that he was not alone, "Who's there?" he repeated but this time more loudly. He lifted up the candle and held it towards his feet, the glimmering light cast dancing shadows as his hand shook.

"He's got the willies lad."

Trying desperately not to cry out for fear of alerting the target of his deception he rose to his knees, the candle virtually vibrated as he lost his nerve. He screamed, "No keep back!" and ran away from whatever was behind him. The plaster gave way and he plunged in a shower of lath, plaster and dust down into the bedroom. Chacuti was seated upon the chaise longue brushing her hair, the fright as the man crashed to the floor and his terrified screams caused her to jump into the air, she did not fall back down. "He has found me Richard!" she screamed.

As O'Neill rose from the debris he looked towards her, she remained in mid-air, hovering above the chaise longue. Backing away from her and keeping his eyes upon the hole he had made in the ceiling as if expecting that at any moment whatever was up there would come down, he made his way out through the doorway.

"He's got his further evidence now lad."

"But he can't prove it can he, it's only his word against her's."

"And who do yer reckon the judge is goin' to believe?"

O'Neill ran from the house but the uproar had alerted Richard who burst into Chacuti's room, he looked at the damage and saw her sitting, hugging her knees and rocking backwards and forwards in shock. He put his arms around her and tried to console her with assurances that everything was alright but his words had little effect.

"I am done for Richard," Chacuti said.

"Do not worry child, it was not the Shaman. It was a man, a man of flesh and blood. The Shaman would not have just left you would he? Think, it was merely a man. Did you see him? Did you know him?"

"He was covered from head to toe in dust, I do not know who he was," she broke down sobbing.

"Come now, you will be alright, calm yourself."

"What if it was the Shaman? I'm going to check on him," said Davey.

Father Salamanga's persecutors had left him to attend evensong, the sound of their chanting echoed into the chamber through the thin arrow-slits where a weary hooded novice kept watch and guarded the water-valve. The priest sat slumped forwards in his chair a dishevelled wreck. His beard was matted to his face, his hair hung lank and dead over his brow, beneath it Davey noticed something and closed in. *"It's a black cross."*

"Looks like it's been burnt into his skin to me," said Paddy.

They did not have any more time to discuss the matter, *"Eh up here's Alonzo."*

"Raise the cage!" he shouted to the monk upon the platform.

"The Lord Abbott has instructed me not to..."

"Raise the cage! I command you!" yelled Alonzo.

The monk drew in the rope which was attached to the cage, the pulleys tightened as they took the strain, immediately it was high enough Alonzo ducked beneath it.

"You demon from Hell!" he screamed, he seized hold of Salamanga by the hair and jerked him upright, he was shouting with such force that he seemed to spit the words out. "You should rot in this place but the carcase you have chosen to inhabit was already yours. Begone from here and take this priest with you, the Lord watches over us all. His net will surely close upon you."

Father Salamanga scoffed, "Another 'fisher of men'; Captain Pedro Alonzo, late of the Carnatic, the man who betrayed his ship and crew to the English. Have you examined your own soul for the demon within Alonzo? Did not Christ say, 'remove the beam from your own eye before you seek to remove the splinter from another's'."

Alonzo reached into his cassock and withdrew a heavy pestle, of the type used for grinding corn, he raised it over his head.

"Don't kill him! What's he doing?" cried Davey.

The guard above cried out for Alonzo to stop but it was the stern, authoritative voice of the abbott which delayed the downwards strike of the pestle. "Hold Alonzo!" he yelled as he entered the chamber.

"Do it, strike fool! STRIKE or are you not man enough now you wear the frock?" goaded Salamanga.

"HOLD!" ordered the abbott.

Alonzo lowered the pestle, his hand opened weakly and it dropped to the floor.

"I fear you grow stronger, not weaker," said the abbott to Father Salamanga, "the brothers begin to lose patience with you. Your presence causes unrest. Tomorrow I shall personally become involved in your treatment, you can be sure that my mind is of tempered steel, a blade that shall wheedle and cut until you leave the body of the good priest and allow us to destroy you."

"I hear you monk," came an evil voice from the mouth of Salamanga, "but words are easy to say. Soon I shall leave you - as the victor - not the vanquished."

"You demon, you dare to speak directly with me, a representative of the Lord Almighty. You shall surely perish, the heavens themselves have shown us a sign."

"Would that be the rising of the star in the constellation you call Cassiopeia?" the priest's lips did not move as the harsh voice rasped from the body.

"DEMON! How could you have seen this from your entombment?"

"The secrets of heaven are known to me and mine," rasped the voice. "The portents of the star of which you speak are not those of *your* master...but of mine."

The abbott was clearly shaken, he turned to Alonzo and indicated that they should withdraw. Together they walked towards the doorway, there they halted whilst the abbott whispered to him, "I fear it will be necessary for us to release this devil from our midst, he is a danger to the whole brotherhood, we are not strong enough in spirit to withstand his satanic ways."

"We cannot release him my lord abbott, should we perish in the attempt we must continue our work with him."

"Is it not written, 'Fear the man that would kill thy spirit, not the man that would kill thy body?'"

"But my lord, this is no man. It is the devil incarnate. When I seized him just now I felt the bumps upon his skull, the first outgrowths, the living proof of what lies within the priest. The horns of Lucifer."

"Then why would you wish to slay him?" asked the abbott.

"A moment of madness uprooted by the first touch of those buds upon the palm of my hand, we must not fail."

"Very well my son. Your strength is testimony to the Lord's will. We shall take the good father and..."

The snake wrapped rapidly around the abbott's torso, its weight caused him to fall to the ground, he lay in its coils.

"The water! Release it!" shouted Alonzo to the monk above. The monk jumped to the water-wheel, turned it and sent the first deluge showering down.

Salamanga had transformed. The whole of his body, apart from his head was that of the reptile. It was an evil voice which issued from the mouth of the priest, "STOP! or the abbott shall slowly be crushed to death. LOOK upon him!" The coils constricted forcing the face of the abbott to redden as the blood was forced away from his body.

"Kill him," gasped the abbott then slumped lifeless.

"What purpose will this serve you, demon?" shouted Alonzo. "You are trapped, there is no escape, only the abbott knew of the correct sequence of taps upon this door which would allow you to leave. Release him that he may tell you of them!"

The priest appeared to consider Alonzo's observation, "Stop the water!" he hissed, the reptile's tongue slipped back and forth as he spoke.

"Stop the water!" shouted Alonzo. The young novice had been joined by other monks who had been alerted to the danger, they closed the water-wheel. A small pool collected in the centre of the floor of the chamber.

"There may be another way in which we can resolve this matter," hissed the priest. "Order the drain to be opened."

"First release the abbott," replied Alonzo.

"Observe!" The snake tightened its coils, they slid around each other like bands of steel, cramping in spasms over the body of the abbott, the pressure forced his mouth open, in the silence the air in his body could be heard being expelled.

"Open the drain," threatened the priest.

Alonzo hesitated but as the abbott's tongue began to protrude he gave in, "Release the water!" he ordered. The monks above hesitated, "OPEN THE DRAIN!" he roared.

The bearded face of the priest gave a horrible smile as the slab of stone was lifted from the floor, the water rushed out. Still maintaining its grip upon the abbott the reptile slid across to the drain, Salamanga's head was absorbed and replaced with that of the snake. Its scaly eyes looked all around the chamber before it placed its head into the opening.

"Release him!" shouted Alonzo.

The snake continued to enter the drain keeping its hold on the abbott until the very last moment when the last of its coils let go and the animal darted down into the drain.

Alonzo rushed to the abbott, his rib-cage had been crushed but the release of the pressure allowed him to breathe, "He shall live!" he shouted.

"The Shaman's going to get out! I'd better let the old man know!" said Davey. Even as their view began to sweep away from the fortress of Toledo they witnessed the priest, pounding along with blinding speed over the road to Madrid. Davey zoomed in towards him and watched as he raced past the traffic upon the road, people barely turned to look.

"He's shiftin' some lad!"

"I don't think those people can even see him the speed he's going."

"Couldn't do much about it if they could."

"I'm going to the old man!"

"I have expected this, do not fear boy, we shall be ready for him," said the old man. He was labouring with the giant, carrying a length of timber from an abandoned house. The house was one of many derelict properties clustered together around a well.

"He's on his way, running for all he's worth, never seen anything like it, he's faster than he was when we watched him chasing you..."

"Steady on lad, yer runnin' away with yerself."

"The helmet will draw him to us, the strands of fate are coming together."

"And there was something happened back in the house! O'Neill has got his evidence - he's seen Chacuti floating in the air."

"Tell him that sommat frightened him lad."

"Oh yeah, it may have been the Shaman's thoughts getting into the house but something terrified O'Neill!"

As Davey spoke they watched the giant climb down the well with a plank of timber resting, end on, upon his shoulders, the free end scraped against the sides of the shaft as he descended. At one point he slipped but his powerful hands dug into the shaft and supported his great weight.

"Are you alright John?" the old man called down. John grinned up out of the darkness and carried on. When he reached the water he grappled with the plank until he was able to wedge it into position across the well. "Ready old man," he called up. The old man lowered down a rusty old saw, John used it to saw away at the centre of the plank until the timber was so thin it barely supported itself. He then climbed back up.

"It is ready."

"Good, let us work swiftly now, the devil will soon be upon us."

"I hope they know what they're doing Uncle Paddy. I'm going to check on Chacuti. What if he flies over to her?"

"Can't lad, you've got the helmet remember."

They left the old man and giant busy filling an old cart with rocks, rubble, and other rubbish.

"She's not in the house!" exclaimed Davey as he raced around it's rooms, *"she's down at the lake."* He said the words as their view swept across the lawn and fields.

A small crowd of people were gathered, the men wore small, three-cornered hats and black tunics with a brown scarf hanging around their necks. Upon their feet were clog-type shoes with bright silver buckles. O'Neill stood to one side leering. There were women in the crowd, they were screaming, inciting the men to carry out their tasks. "Shame, burn the witch, test her with flame." The atmosphere was violent, only the authority of the witch-finder, dressed in similar fashion to the men, kept the crowd in check.

Upon the lane were five carriages, to one of their wheels Richard was fastened. He strained at his bonds but the point of a sword was prodded into his back by the men guarding him. The mastiff was leashed to another wheel, it barked fiercely at the end of its tether as it tried to reach him.

"If only the old man and giant were here!" cried Davey.

Chacuti looked beautiful in her white dress, the material was a rich satin which had been etched with chemicals to give a spidery effect, "Bewitching!" cried the women as they watched their men's eyes fasten upon her. "Harlot! Jezebel!"

"Take her, bind her fast, the law demands that she be given a fair trial," yelled the witch-finder, "she shall be tried by ordeal."

The crowd shouted their displeasure, "She don't deserve no trial!" "Have done with her!" "Where's the eyewitness?" O'Neill slunk into the bushes bordering the lane and watched the proceedings from their safety but a scurrying sound behind him sent him scuttling back to the crowd. "There he is," screeched an old hag, she jostled him to the front and pushed him before the witch-finder.

The witch-finder quelled the crowd into silence, "Brethren! These are serious matters that we are called upon to investigate, this man (he indicated O'Neill) has laid several serious charges before me that this woman (he indicated Chacuti) is in league with the devil; that she practices the black arts and has placed her spells upon this man (he indicated Richard). How speak you to these charges witch?"

"You call her witch before your mockery of a trial has even begun!" roared Richard.

"Silence in court!" shouted the witch-finder. The men guarding Richard forced a rag into his mouth and tied a gag above it to hold it in place. He breathed savagely down his nose.

"How speak you to these charges witch?" repeated the witch-finder emphasising 'witch'.

"As Christ is my witness, I am innocent." Chacuti said.

"Enough! Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain!" the witch-finder shouted angrily. His manner excited the mastiff which surged forwards towards Richard but was again pulled up short by its leash which strained to hold back the heavy dog.

"You shall undergo trial by ordeal. You shall be bound hand and foot then thrown into water (he indicated the bridge), a period of time shall elapse during which it will be seen whether you float..."

"GUILTY!" roared the crowd.

"...or whether you sink - in which case your innocence will be proved."

Three men lifted Chacuti horizontally and walked with her onto the bridge, she made no attempt to struggle.

"She has been seen to walk upon water and to rise in the air, should she float the eyewitness is proven authentic, should she sink the eyewitness must be questioned for perjury. Take hold of him!"

O'Neill screamed in terror as rough hands seized him.

"Never thought that feller would turn into a chicken as well as a snitch," said Paddy.

"He's not whoever he was Uncle Paddy. I think he's lost control of himself," replied Davey.

The men carrying Chacuti looked to the witch-finder for the order, "In with her!" he yelled impatiently. With a splash she landed, she let all the air out of her body but the energy of the skulls forced her to the surface.

"SHE FLOATS!" roared the crowd.

The men guarding Richard walked forwards to witness the sight for themselves. Richard took the opportunity to set to work, urgently scraping the rope around his wrists against the rim of the carriage wheel, the mastiff's barks were ignored by the men as the ropes began to fray.

"She floats higher than a cork," shouted an onlooker.

Chacuti lifted up her head and breathed.

"She is a witch, we have our proof!" shouted the witch-finder.

Realising that she could not argue her innocence Chacuti tilted herself, her body swung up so that it was in a sitting position, she laughed at the crowd who drew back in fear. "It will be a blessing for me to leave this world with all its evil, to leave the sight of foul and wicked creatures such as yourselves whose only happiness is to wreak harm upon others. Take me and have done with it for I cannot wait to join my loved ones."

Her words incensed the crowd, a barge-pole was used to drag her to the lakeside. "Burn the witch, burn the witch, burn the witch..." the chant began. Over and over came the words, quietly at first but increasing in volume. The mass of people forced her to cross the field but they stopped when the setting-sun silhouetted a silver-birch. Its glowing red shadow fell upon the crowd, the witch-finder yelled, "It is a sign, He has spoken. The bush shall burn!"

Chacuti was forced to stand and watch as the crowd gathered anything combustible; leaves, branches, twigs, dried pine-needles, dead heather and heaped them against the tree. Before long a pyre had been built. Willing hands led Chacuti to the pyre, willing hands wrapped the ropes around her which would hold her to it as the flames engulfed her.

Richard severed his bonds, he snatched a sword from the man nearest to him and slashed him to the floor. Immediately he did so three other men attacked him.

"It's like we saw Yacq against them guards Uncle Paddy. He won't be able to beat them all."

Richard however did not attempt to fight but charged across the field with the men in pursuit, the crowd heard the commotion and the deep ferocious barks of the mastiff as it jerked repeatedly at its leash. As one they cleared a path before Richard's flailing sword, allowing him through to Chacuti. She was fixed to the birch, the ropes wrapped round her body would hold her upright, already the first faint licks of flame were beginning to catch alight. The witch-finder stood holding a rolled up strip of the turpentine rich birch-bark, it burned in his hand, drops of flame fell to the ground as he backed away from Richard's sword.

"Villain!" yelled Richard, "this child has harmed no-one, she is a victim of life's events, she has suffered more than any man or woman here." He stamped out the licks of flame.

"Keep back!" he warned as men within the crowd sought the opportunity to catch him off-guard whilst his attention was diverted. The guards chasing him forced their way through and stood, rapiers pointing at him.

"Richard!" screamed Chacuti, "Leave me. Save yourself!"

Richard's answer was to swipe and lunge so ferociously towards the swordsmen that they stepped back.

"Who amongst you will throw the first stone? Who among you will light this pile?" he questioned.

The crowd were in no mind to give in, they had hunted down their prey and would not allow it to escape. They gradually closed in upon him making it impossible for him to turn and cut through the ropes which wrapped her.

"Is there not one man amongst you who will see his error and stand with me?" he beseeched the crowd.

The witch-finder, now he had three swords between himself and Richard felt emboldened enough to speak, "The witch has been tried according to prescribed methods and due processes. She has been found guilty, I order you to leave this place. If it were not for your good servant here who has stated that she has cast her wicked spells upon you you would be charged with being an accessory!"

Richard lunged towards O'Neill, the swordsmen were unwilling to risk themselves for the sake of a man who would sell his own soul for silver. Richard lined up the point of the rapier, the crowd drew back awaiting the death-dealing blow. Richard hesitated. O'Neill ripped open his tunic revealing his tattoos, the balance arm of the scales had dropped lower down towards his remaining hand. He moved towards the sword-point. The look in his eyes urged Richard to strike. Realising that the blow was not to be O'Neill seized hold of the blade and plunged it into his own breast, the point impaled the dragon, slowly he sank to the floor muttering, "I am released."

"Go Richard, you cannot save me!" screamed Chacuti.

The mastiff had snapped its leash, it barged through the crowd bowling over whoever got in its way, Richard only became aware of its presence by the cries of alarm as the dog tore its way through the mass of people, the speed with which it left the cover of the group allowed him no time in which to bring his sword into play, the weighty animal leapt forwards and gripped him by the thigh. He shortened his sword by holding it near to the point in his free hand and ran the mastiff through but the crowd moved in swiftly, he withdrew the weapon and cried out, "Better to die at the hand of one who loves you than at the hands of these murderers!" and turned to Chacuti.

"I can't look at this anymore Uncle Paddy," cried Davey taking off the helmet.

They sat quietly together for a few minutes before Paddy spoke again. "What d'yer say we get our heads down, have a kip and forget it?"

"Forget it? How can we? She doesn't die Uncle Paddy. She can't die. We know she's still up in Carnatic, there's got to be something we can do."

"I reckon we've give it our best shot lad but I think we should just forget about it now. If yer'd managed to get the girl to come back here that would have been sommat but..."

"I'm going back to the old man, he'll know what to do."

Paddy didn't answer.

"Why did she have to die like that, one moment she was enjoying herself and the next..."

"Ypres, the Somme, Passchendaele, Vimy Ridge. I tell yer what lad doesn't take a moment and we're gone, snuffed out like lights." Paddy clicked his fingers.

"But what's the point of it all then Uncle Paddy?"

"Who knows, who cares. Just some flippin' general wants to stick medals on his pigeon chest."

"But what about the girl? Don't you want me to carry on Uncle Pad?"

"I reckon we've done our fair share lad. Seems to me that's as much as we can do. I'm goin' the lav."

Davey listened to Paddy clumping down the stairs. He sat without the helmet on staring at himself in the mirror but something prompted him to snatch it up and place it back onto his head. He intended to tell the old man what had happened, but the mirror misted over. The mist swirled and clouded, in panic Davey reached up to remove the helmet fearing that at any moment the face of the Shaman would appear. Suddenly the mists gave way to the star-like triangles whose tattooed image O'Neill had carried upon his palm. As he stared the star began to spin, faster and faster it rotated then it slowed. Now that it was moving more slowly he could see that the three sides of each triangle, although still linked together were in the shape of a [show a "half-swastika"] the two shapes overlapped forming a strange shaped cross. As he watched in amazement the star tried to reform and break up the cross but it was unable to do so. The other tattoo from O'Neill's other hand appeared, it too spun rapidly then slowed. This time the two small circles within the larger circle swung higher and nearer to each other, the outside circle altered shape and filled black. A skull, the head of death was formed. As he started to lift the helmet off his head an eagle flew into view, it landed on a nest on top of a mountain and surveyed the lands beneath it, around it's neck hung the cross, upon its forehead was the death's head. Davey was frightened but knew he must watch. In the eagle's left claw were skeletal figures; men, women and children. In the eagle's right claw was a name, THULE.. The name sent a shiver down his spine, he knew that he was viewing his destiny.

As Paddy came clumping back up the stairs the image faded, dissolved and then disappeared.

"So yer carryin' on then lad."

"Thought I better had," puffed Davey, "I won't bother if you don't want me to though Uncle Paddy."

"I'm a bit tired that's all."

"I've just..."

"What lad?"

"Nothing. I've just tried to find the old man again that's all."

"Any luck?"

"Not yet."

Dawn was rising as Davey speeded up the images and found the old man and John in hiding, laying under ferns beneath the cart they had been filling with rubble when he had last left them. "Chacuti and Richard and O'Neill. They're all gone!" Davey blurted out.

The old man was stunned, "Events have moved rapidly boy. Far faster than I could ever have envisaged."

Hearing the tone of sadness in his voice John asked, "What has happened old man?"

"We fight to preserve the soul of the child John. Her body has left us."

A great tear rolled down John's face as he remembered the happy days of the two little girls bouncing around on him and the surprise in their faces at his stories. "Do we not waste our time here old man?" he asked, "I wish to wring this Shaman's neck, whoever he may be, but his death will not bring back Chacuti, will it?" he added his last two words almost pleadingly.

"She is not even dead as we understand it John. The power of the crystal skulls will keep her here until this fiend is able to retrieve it. We must finish him, only then will she be released. She will pass on to a far better place than this, you can be sure of that."

John did not look convinced but his desire for revenge had overcome all thoughts of what might be, he lay beneath the cart with his head resting upon his huge hams of hands and clenched his knuckles so tightly that they cracked loudly.

"That giant's getting peeved again, but he'll have his work cut out to sort out the Shaman," said Paddy, "He might be able to flatten the Queen's wrestler but that Shaman's a sneaky devil."

"He's close to them!" exclaimed Davey. He swept away from the cart, above the derelict houses which surrounded the well, across the flat countryside moving away from a hill in the background.

"That's flippin' Hill 17 up there lad. Look!" exclaimed Paddy. The ugly mound raised itself, black against a dark background. "We're in the flippin' war zone here lad!"

"Is this where you got shot Uncle Paddy?"

"Round here somewhere lad, I caught a bullet and yer dad caught me!"

Beneath them they spotted a village, Davey zoomed down to where a road, lined with deep hedgerows snaked across the flat countryside before meeting the village. There was a signpost standing starkly at the village entrance, its name had been carved into it but could not be read, painted over the name in tar was a black cross, beneath it, hanging on a placard was written the words, **INFECTER DE LA PESTE**.

"What d'yer reckon that means? Some kind of warnin' about pests? Maybe they was expectin' the Shaman to turn up?"

"I reckon that there's plague around here Uncle Paddy," said Davey scanning around and sensing the desolation.

"Eh up, talk of the Devil." Leaving the cover of the hedgerow, Father Salamanga crept past the signpost.

"He's on his way to you!" Davey told the old man. "He's not wearing the helmet!" he exclaimed as he realised the old man had not heard him. "How can he fight the Shaman without wearing it!"

They watched the priest walk slowly towards the small hamlet where the two friends lay in wait.

A ring of deserted houses caused him to move furtively, his eyes flicked warily around as he made his way between the houses to the well. Peering through the darkness into the depths of the shaft he glanced back towards the houses.

"It is a trap!" he hissed. He appeared to be listening to a voice.

"He's talking to the skulls! Should I go and listen to what they're telling him?"

"Don't bother lad, time yer get there and back it'll all be over!"

A white light seemed to shine from the Shaman's eyes as he probed the darkness of the well. The sun had not yet risen enough to send light into the shaft, the darkness was absolute.

"It is above water," said the priest as he climbed over the low stone wall surrounding the well and began to stealthily descend, "As soon as it is in my power nothing shall destroy me."

Davey scanned down into the well, "There's the helmet! The old man's put it on that plank! The Shaman's going to get it! Why's he done that?"

"Bait lad. Like cheese in a rat-trap."

The old man and giant crawled from beneath the cart, slowly they began to push it towards the well. They had covered most of the short distance when one of the cartwheels let out a sharp screech. The old man and giant looked at each other, nodded, then began to push the cart as hard as they could. The Shaman, alerted by the sound, scrambled back up the well, his talons gripped the sides allowing him to ascend rapidly. He vaulted back out over the wall, John and the old man saw him and stopped pushing. The heavy cart rolled slowly towards the well where it stopped dead.

"Move away from this place!" rasped the Shaman to the old man, "Take this man with you."

"Bossy little character isn't he old man!" joked John, but his face was not smiling.

"Without the helmet you are nothing. Move away!" ordered the Shaman.

John did not agree, he walked towards the Shaman who held up his hand and squeezed it into a tight fist.

"He's doing what he did to Lord Axa!" shouted Davey.

John gasped, "Touch of wind today old man," and patted his huge stomach.

The Shaman twisted his fist, John let out an almighty belch, "That's better." He charged at the Shaman and gripped him around his throat with his huge hand. The power of his grip would have taken the head off a normal man. The Shaman stood staring hard, trying to draw John's gaze into his own.

"Do not look on his face John!" shouted the old man as he ran in to help. The Shaman's talons, protruding from the hands of Father Salamanga raked into John's face. The old man seized them and prevented him inflicting any more injury. "To the well John!"

Together they manhandled the Shaman, he was struggling, snarling and spitting like a wild animal, at times they almost tumbled to the floor and but for John's great weight they would have done so.

"Force back the fiend's head if you are able! His eyes are the danger!" shouted the old man.

John bellowed like a bull and put all this strength into the hand around the Shaman's neck, "He's a might strong for that old man," he grappled the Shaman closer intending to place him into a bear-hug, a hold which had proven too much for all who had come against him in the prize-ring. "Don't leave go of him John!" warned the old man, "Look

on his mouth!" The teeth of the snake were protruding from Father Salamanga's gums, the mouth gaped open, ready to strike. John saw the teeth but also saw the eyes, they fastened him with their deadly stare.

"The eyes have got him! I can't tell the old man!" Davey was frantic.

The old man saw the danger and released his hold upon the talons, he grabbed hold of the priest's head, placing his hands over the eyes and heaved back towards the well. The Shaman was forced to stagger back, as John recovered his wits he realised what had almost taken place and redoubled his efforts. As they neared the well he shouted a warning to the old man, "Release him old man!"

As the old man let go John gave an almighty effort and in a wrestling throw flicked the Shaman from the floor and flung him headfirst down the well. He screamed as he shot downwards towards the water, he hit the plank forcefully and it gave in the centre where John had weakened it but it did not snap. Screeching in pain the Shaman lifted his feet and an arm out of the water and immediately began to ascend the sides like a great cockroach. He was screaming in rage as he scuttled rapidly upwards.

"The cart John!" yelled the old man taking a rock from it and hurling it down the shaft, the missile slowed the Shaman.

"Stand back!" bellowed John, he ran behind the cart and seized hold of the back axle, then with an enormous heave he tipped the cart straight over onto the well. The low stone wall crumbled and added itself to the mass of rocks, rubble and debris which crashed down the shaft, battering the Shaman into the waiting water.

Davey looked through the earth and saw him underwater, screaming. His hand had hooked itself into the two holes in the back of the helmet but it was no use. John and the old man were compacting the material above him, jumping upon it, pressing it down. The body of Father Salamanga gave a few final efforts which caused the debris in the shaft to lift up towards the men above but under the great weight of John it was thumped back down.

Davey looked down into the rocks, rubble and water which entombed the body of the priest. He was suspended underwater, face downwards, the weight of the helmet acting like an anchor for his body.

"They've done it!" exulted Davey. *"They've finished him off!"*

Another cart-load was emptied upon the top of the first load, it compacted the debris beneath it. Soon nothing remained of the well. The stone wall which had encircled it had been kicked into the shaft. John's huge boots were pounding the material level with the surface of the ground. A broom of twigs totally concealed the position so that even if an inhabitant of the village had survived the plague they would have been unable to accurately locate it.

"In there he lies," said the old man.

"And in there he shall stay my friend," said the giant.

"Boy," said the old man, "I can no longer speak with you, the helmet is gone, it provided the means of snaring the Shaman. I shall return to Carnatic and inform the child that she is saved, the Shaman is no more."

"I'm hearing what he's saying Uncle Paddy but if he the Shaman never gets out how come I saw him flying around up at Carnatic?"

"Must have been just been his thoughts lad."

"When it was his thoughts we couldn't see him, neither could the old man or Richard, or O'Neill for that matter."

"What yer worrying about lad, the old man reckons that he's finished him off so he must have done. Go up to Carnatic yerself and check if she's still there if yer not sure."

Davey took off the helmet, "I'll go up there as soon as it gets light Uncle Paddy."

"Hang on a mo', what about yer mum and dad, yer meant to be going out with them. Yer can't keep ignoring them can yer."

Davey thought about it, "You're right, I'll go up to Carnatic after we get back home."

"Well at least yer won't need to worry about the Shyman flyin' round after yer lad. He's been well and truly sorted."

"Yeah," said Davey. His voice lacked conviction.

"Yer don't seem too sure lad."

"It's just too easy. I don't reckon that the Shaman could be beaten so easily." He paused, thinking, "And remember what he said when he was on the beach."

"Sommat about the earth opening its mouth and swallowed the serpent."

"Yeah, but then getting out and making war on everyone!"

"Naw, yer jumpin' to conclusions lad. The old man hasn't put a foot wrong. If he says the Shaman's had it, then had it he as."

Davey still didn't look convinced.

"Come on, I'm jiggered, let's get a bit of kip should we."

Reluctantly Davey agreed but he lay in the darkness with his eyes open for a long time before whispering, "Uncle Paddy, you still awake?"

"Aye lad," came the sleepy reply.

"How come we've got the helmet now if it's stuck fifty feet underground?"

"Must be a diffrent 'elmet lad, come on now, let's get some kip eh."

CHAPTER 33

The Final Chapter

"All ready then Davey?" asked Liz as Davey appeared smiling and beaming in the kitchen.

"Ready and raring to go Mum. Where's me dad?"

She strained as she sucked in air between her teeth, "He's not feelin' too good yet, just woke up, you know." She patted her chest with her hands to show the cause of the problem.

Davey could hear Hugh coughing harshly upstairs. He decided the opportunity was right to introduce the money, "Mum, Uncle Paddy's got back some cash from his war pension, said I should give you this, we could buy me Dad medicine with it." He held out the wad of notes.

Liz reeled as she saw them, "I can't see how...what's he got that for?" Her reaction, instead of being one of pleasure, was one of anger. Davey realised how much the pressure of having his father unwell was telling upon her.

After much tutting and wringing of her apron Liz said, "Let's go over and see how come that Paddy's got so much when your poor father's got nothing. Listen to him up there. And I haven't heard Paddy cough much lately have you!" she scolded.

Davey realised that she was right, Paddy did appear to be getting better.

"And I saw him heading into town last week, all tarted up. What's he playing at? Come on."

Still wearing her apron and with a scarf tied in her hair she walked down the lobby and out into the road. The street was still cold and damp from the night but there was a promise of finer weather as faint rays squinted from behind the cathedral's dark mass. Straight into Paddy's she marched, Davey followed close behind.

"What's the matter? What is it?" Mrs Murtagh sputtered.

"Look at this! How come the war department is sending your Paddy money but my Hughie's got nowt? Where is he?"

"He's gone out."

"Out. Again?" Liz was surprised.

"Yer've just this minute missed the rascal. I called him to tell me where he was off to but he'd gone, without so much as a word of goodbye. Did he say anything to you Davey?"

Davey's look of surprise was all the answer they needed.

"I'm goin' to have words with him when 'e gets home I can tell yer. A sick man like him out gallyvanting. And if that war department have ignored your Hughie I'll be writing in to complain on 'is behalf. If anyone's got a pension coming to him it's a family man like 'im."

Liz sobbed, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to barge in like this."

"Don't you be gettin' yerself upset dearie. I know what yer goin' through with yer man coughin' fit to bust. Every time I hear my Paddy it cuts me to the quick." She remembered her previous annoyance. "I'll give him what for when he gets in I can tell yer, not so much as a by yer leave, just waltzes off."

"I'd best be getting back, we're supposed to be going out today," said Liz.

"I just want a quick word with the lad before 'e goes, left his stuff in a right mess he has," said Mrs Murtagh.

"Make sure he tidies it all up. I know how bad he can be, soon as you've finished Davey..."

"I'll be straight over Mum."

As soon as Liz has gone Mrs Murtagh produced two sheaves of paper from her apron pocket.

"Know what these are lad?" she asked.

He opened them.

The first was entitled, BILL OF SALE: CARNATIC HALL.

The second was entitled, NOTICE OF DEMOLITION: CARNATIC HALL.

Mrs Murtagh explained, "They fell out his pocket as he rushed off, cheeky blighter, standing there I was shouting at 'im, just ignored me as if I weren't there."

Davey had gone quite white.

"Yer not lookin' too good lad," Mrs Murtagh said, "need a glass of water?"

Davey heard her voice as though it was faraway. "Got to go upstairs," he mumbled. He ran up the stairs and into Paddy's bedroom, a glance under the bed told him what he feared - the helmet had gone. Frantically he opened the top drawer of the dressing table, the dagger had gone.

Mrs Murtagh appeared at the doorway to the bedroom. "It's not 'im is it lad?" she questioned.

Davey started and jumped round.

"It's not 'im is it." This time her voice was softer and had a crack in it.

"What do you mean?"

"I saw it in the cups... with Mrs Fegan and yer mum. Sommat weren't quite right. Seen it since as well. Where's my Paddy gone lad?" she sobbed.

"It..can't..be," faltered Davey. "I've got to speak to the old man."

"He might be able to tell yer sommat lad. After all it was him that saved my Paddy."

"No, I don't mean me dad," said Davey but realising that she didn't understand what he was saying added, "yeah..I'll go over and see him."

He virtually tumbled down the stairs as Mrs Murtagh cried after him, "Do what yer got to do lad! Do what yer got to do!"

Hugh was getting ready to go but the manner in which Davey burst in caused both him and Liz to stare open-mouthed.

"DAD! You have to tell me something, it's important. It's about that helmet you brought back from the war. Where did you find it?"

"Eh come on son, it's just a helmet, calm yourself down."

"Dad. Tell me where you found it. I have to know!"

The earnest plea told Hugh this wasn't just a half-hearted question, he hesitated for a moment then said, "Deep in the German trenches lad, near Hill 17."

"It's not possible!" blustered Davey, "it can't be!"

Thinking that he was referring to the location of the helmet Hugh provided further information, "'fraid so lad. Damn near drowned when I found it I can tell you."

"And Uncle Paddy, where was he?"

Hugh had got over the shock of being asked such questions, he began to revert back to his usual reticent self. "No point upsetting yerself with this stuff lad, I've told yer, when yer older I'll tell you all about it. That Paddy been fillin' your head with it again has he?"

"Dad!" shouted Davey. "Tell me, where was Uncle Paddy? It's very important to me," he begged, "please tell me!"

"I'd left him for dead lad, it was a miracle, even the medics said it, how he survived I'll never know, tough as old boots that one."

Davey ran out the door.

Hugh was angry, "That Paddy, I'll give him what for, he's meant to be looking out for the lad not filling him with rubbish. I've never seen the poor kid in such a state. And he's only been at work a week!"

"I told you!" scolded Liz angrily, "I told you not to be letting him stay over there. That Paddy's nothing but trouble, always was, always will be!"

"Well now what are we going to do, the lad's shot off. Bang goes the day out, and look, the sky's brightening up."

Liz looked out, the clouds high above were moving rapidly, the sun was bursting through. "It's going to be a beautiful day girl, let's go out anyway should we." He comforted his wife, "He's a growing lad, he doesn't want to have to be tied to our apron strings. But I tell yer what, soon as that Paddy gets back in I'll go over there and wipe the floor with him."

Liz smiled at the image of Hugh tackling Paddy, although Paddy was half the man he had been she would always remember him as the big, strapping lump he once was. "You do that Hughie, come on, let's get ready."

As Davey ran he could feel his heart pumping furiously, his legs were heavy and he was bathed in sweat. Without the helmet running was hard. He scrambled down the slope from the railway line and tore through the bushes towards Carnatic Hall. As he neared the house he could hear the sounds of machinery, by the time he reached the field his eyes confirmed what his ears had already told him. The house had been pulled down to its foundations.

"Davey," said a soft voice behind him.

He jumped forwards in fright then whirled round, "Chacuti!" he gasped. She stood before him, she looked even more beautiful as the sunlight shone through her misty figure.

"The house can no longer protect me, has the Shaman come for me?"

Davey thought hard, should he tell her everything and risk terrifying her or should he lead her away, but where could he take her? His heart missed a beat when he remembered other occasions he had been asked to take her from Carnatic. "He is near. I don't know where but we have to be ready for him, follow me." He ran back into the bushes and followed the same direction he had taken when the Shaman had appeared at the railway carriage window. He shivered at the memory but his fear lent him speed. They reached the lake. "He will find you Chacuti, this is our only chance. Stand on the bridge."

She glided across the lane and onto the bridge, the horror in her face as she looked down at the water told him that she remembering the last time she had been upon the structure. He fastened his shirt collar, buttoned his jacket then walked into the lake. The water was perishing. But he walked out into the same spot where he had once witnessed the image of the Shaman rising like a corpse, he shivered and was not sure whether it was with the memory or the icy water. He positioned himself beneath the girl and stood there, up to his shoulders in freezing water and prayed that whatever might happen would happen quickly, before the cold got to him and he was forced back out. Above him stood Chacuti, his prayers were answered. He no longer felt the cold as a blur of speed told of the arrival of Paddy at the foot of the bridge.

Davey wanted to cry out, "Uncle Paddy, what are you doing? It's me, Davey," but he had learnt enough from his time at the mirror to know what was expected of him. The girl had been right, he had much to learn but learn he had. If any further proof had been needed the helmet upon Paddy's head and dagger in his hand provided it.

As Paddy walked up he heard the Shaman's voice echoing from his uncle's mouth, "Do not move child and it will soon be over, it has been long but it will soon end."

Chacuti kept her wits about her, "You shall not take me, I am the daughter of Lord Axa, the only warrior to have stood against you. You shall not take me!" She turned and pretended to run, Paddy darted forwards, the dagger was raised. The distraction the girl had provided gave Davey his opportunity, he leapt up and seized Paddy's ankles and heaved. He tumbled down into the water. At first all was still, Davey moved away from the spot where he had splashed into the lake. He had barely moved when a horrible threshing started, beneath the water he could hear muffled screams. Suddenly the snake shot up, its mouth was wide open its fangs curved down from the mouth of Paddy. The reptile was in its death throes, its tail lashed the water sending it into a boil, arms began to protrude from its body, first arms and then legs. But they were not the arms and legs of Paddy. Davey watched in terror as the snake's body transformed into that of the Shaman.

"The helmet!" cried Chacuti and pointed out the helmet slowly sinking, he seized it and placed it upon his head. Remembering that the dagger would also have been dropped he dived down into the water, the power of the helmet led him straight to the weapon, he rescued it from the churned up mud of the lake bed. Back he rose to the surface where he held the dagger before him as if it might protect him from the awesome mutations he was witnessing.

The Shaman was floating waist deep in the water. He hissed, "Boy, you know not what you do." As he spoke he floated towards the bridge and grasped the structure with his hook-like fingers. Slowly he began to heave himself up from the water's grip.

Davey placed the dagger into the Shaman's back. He did not need to stab with the knife because the body had no resistance to the weapon, it simply allowed the dagger to enter into it. As the dagger sank to its hilt Davey felt it dissolve in his grasp, he snatched his hand away in shock and stood back staring.

The Shaman's taloned fingers loosened their hold on the bridge, he cried a fearful cry then fell back screaming. The body threshed wildly but did not rise again.

Scarcely able to believe what had happened Davey walked out of the water and onto the bridge, he stood with the spirit, the tears were rolling down his cheeks as he told her, "It is over Chacuti. He's gone."

A rip, something which appeared like a rent in the tissue of the air seemed to split open. The very fabric of the air seemed to give way and a horrible hole was formed. They looked into the hole and saw horrific shapes and figures moving around: evil cries, more evil than any which had ever been uttered by the Shaman or the skulls came forth.

From the lake came a horrific final scream, a small black cloud rose from the water, it hovered before them for a moment as if trying to take shape, evil eyes stared out from the black mass but then the cloud was swiftly drawn into the hole. Terrifying screams burst into the air all around as the rent in the air closed up and then left them in silence.

"He is gone?" asked Chacuti hesitantly.

"Yes," stated Davey. He looked down into the water and saw the body of Paddy, the sight broke his heart, he staggered back down the lane for a short distance and slumped down crying sorrowfully.

"You have done what you set out to do. I am freed, the Shaman is no more," said Chacuti.

"But my uncle's dead!" yelled Davey angrily through his tears.

"He died a long time ago Davey. You have saved his soul as you have saved mine."

Davey knew that what she was saying was the truth, he wiped his eyes with the back of his shirt sleeve, the sopping wet sleeve did little to dry them but cleared away the stinging salt.

"I can leave here now," said Chacuti, "Look, they wait for me."

Davey looked. Their surroundings seem to have shrunk back into the distance but along the lane was a group of people walking towards them. At first he thought it was the workmen from the house, come to tell him to get out the grounds but as they came nearer he stopped breathing.

Panqui ran before the group skipping gaily and singing a rhyme. Behind her, arm-in-arm, walked Lord Axa and his wife. Behind them were the old man and John - who as usual was grinning from ear-to-ear. They all stood some distance away as Davey watched Chacuti walking towards them. As she neared the group another figure appeared and took her gently by the hand. It was Richard. Together they walked to the waiting figures.

The air around the group seemed to shimmer and break up, the figures in the group turned and walked away with Chacuti in their midst. Davey watched them walk along the lane until they disappeared and there was nothing to be seen but the waving of the trees in the wind.

"Need a cuppa lad?" asked Mrs Murtagh when Davey walked soaking wet, still wearing the helmet, into her living room.

"Yes ta," he replied.

"I'll put the kettle on, " she said as she got up and went into the kitchen, "Go on up, you've got some dry clothes up there." Davey could detect the emotion in her voice but did as he was bid.

In Paddy's bedroom everything looked the same as ever but there was no Paddy. The tears he had cried on the walk back from Carnatic had exhausted themselves. Red-eyed he undressed, dried himself and put on the change of clothes. As he sat upon the bed fastening up his shirt buttons he gazed into the mirror. Nothing happened. No images appeared. He just sat, staring at himself, watching his cold hands slowly fastening the buttons. He took off the helmet and placed it into the wardrobe.

"Here y'are lovey," said Mrs Murtagh handing him a steaming mug of tea.

Davey sipped away and felt the fluid warming his insides, "He's gone Mrs M."

"I know lad, I know. Don't you be frettin' on it now, yer've done him a good turn."

He looked at her, her eyes showed the signs of fresh tears but she had dried them and was putting on a brave face, he knew not to let her down.

"He were a good'un weren't he lad," she reminisced, "remember that barrel of ale he lifted - more three men couldn't have managed it. But my Paddy..." The wart on her face wobbled, Davey placed his arm around her to comfort her.