

**BLOOMSBURY BLOOD**

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## Chapter 1

Josiah Fowler drove through the gates of the University of Bloomsbury later than he had hoped. From the tranquility of Rutland, driving had seemed a lovely idea, but the gentle delights of the first dozen miles were no compensation for the intense frustration of the last twenty. He decided that he would go directly to the evening meal which opened the Church Antiquarian Society's annual conference. Checking into his room could wait until after the presidential address. He would just fish out a cravat. Although he was only twenty-five years old, a mere post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Rutland, he derived enormous pleasure from adding a few retro-chic touches to his persona. He had often thought while listening to a programme on BBC Radio 4 in which guests were invited to imagine themselves stranded on a desert island that for his luxury he would choose a theatre wardrobe filled with stylish costumes and accessories from the first half of the twentieth century. He adjusted his rear-view mirror until he could see himself clearly. His wavy brown hair did not need combing, and his boyish face was certainly not the kind that might need a quick going over with an electric razor. Fowler was inordinately pleased with the effect which he judged the elegant piece of burgundy silk made. He fastidiously tucked it into his tailored shirt. It was just as well that he was not going to his room as there were so many people milling around whom he wished to impress, and he had a vague suspicion that he had brought more luggage than was normal.

The conference desk was being staffed personally by last year's president, Professor Majorie Besselsleigh. She was an elderly woman—certainly in Fowler's judgement—and a legendary scholar, famed for her meticulous three-volume edition of the writings of

St Priscilla. A late middle-aged woman in a tidy navy blue dress approached her. This woman was thin and her skin was very white. Her hair was a great, air filled, swirling mound of fading blond.

‘You’re not going to spend the meal sitting out here are you, Majorie?’ she inquired in a commanding tone, ‘I’ll go and find the conference secretary and see to it that someone replaces you at once.’

‘No, Louise. No, really, I’m not very hungry,’ Professor Besselsleigh replied firmly. ‘Besides, given this year’s theme of “Fasting and Feasting,” I fancy skipping the cafeteria food and then going out to an extravagant Italian restaurant after the lecture.’

Fowler’s hovering presence was now noticed. He mumbled something about being sorry to have missed her conference last year, received his conference pack, and found himself moving toward the dining hall in the company of the other woman. It seemed that everyone else had already queued for their food. Long tables were filled with conference delegates eating and chatting away. The only person moving about was Professor Harold Osborne. He was a thin man, at least six feet tall, with grey hair cut very short to draw attention away from the fact that it had receded considerably, a glowing forehead, and a House of Brunswick nose. He was this year’s vice president and therefore, under the society’s constitution, he would serve as president next year. Although he had already settled down at a place in the middle of one of the tables, Professor Osborne had nevertheless found it expedient to make a quick trip across the quad in order to procure a bottle of claret from the bar. He passed by at a distance and did not appear to notice the two late comers.

‘My name is Jo Fowler’, Fowler said to his chance companion as he was completing the process of finding his name badge in his newly acquired pack and fastening it onto his shirt.

‘I’m Louise Cavendish’, she said, and he simultaneously read her badge.

‘Are you related to this year’s president?’, he asked naively.

She glared at him. Fowler did not have a great reserve of human experience upon which to draw and he could not quite locate the exact emotion he saw in her eyes. Was it bitterness? Hatred? Malice? He did know, however, that it was unpleasant, and deep-seated, and that he was not the cause of it, nor was it even really directed at him, but rather he had merely had the misfortune to occasion its manifestation.

‘We were once married’, she said curtly and turned to inform the server that she would have the Lancashire hotpot.

‘O really’, he mumbled as she did so. It was a stock phrase of his which he usually used to express scepticism or mild disapproval slyly, but on this occasion it was meant to indicate that he refused to be overly disconcerted, despite his faux pas. Nevertheless, this was an inauspicious start, and their dinner conversation was not assisted by the fact that he was a modernist and she was a medievalist.

Having consumed his chicken curry, Fowler polished off an uninspiring slice of pie which was purported to be lemon cheesecake, endeavoured to bring his time with Dr Cavendish to as polite an end as possible under the circumstances, and moved on to the lecture hall unaccompanied. There were only a few minutes left before the presidential address. He spent them wading through the conference pack, eager to discover such facts as when he was presenting his paper, which of the parallel sessions he ought to attend

and, most of all, which leading figures in his field were meant to be present. (He had learned some years ago that the great and the good had a curious habit of registering for conferences which they did not seem to manage actually to attend.) He had already seen Professor Osborne, however, and he was as good a contact to cultivate as any.

At the front of the lecture hall was a platform upon which had been placed a rectangular table. Three figures were seated on the far side of it, facing the audience: to the audience's left sat Professor Osborne, in the middle sat Professor Besselsleigh, and to the audience's right, with a small lectern placed on the table in front of him, sat Dr Reginald Cavendish, this year's president. Professor Besselsleigh had been looking through the papers in front of her somewhat absent-mindedly, but she seemed suddenly to remember something and began rummaging intently through the pockets of the green suit jacket she was wearing. She soon found a bottle of pills. Removing the cap, she carefully tipped it, shaking it slightly as she did so, until one fell into her left palm. She then returned the bottle to her jacket pocket. Before her sat a stack of disposable cups and a green bottle of sparkling water. As she wrestled with the bottle, it became apparent that she could not unscrew its sealed plastic cap readily. Professor Osborne came to the rescue and, having removed the cap, poured a glass of water for her. He then proceeded to pour one for the president, and finally one for himself.

As this was happening, through one of those unpredictable principles of group dynamics, enough people in the audience had finished their conversations more or less at the same time to make the others feel that they ought to abandon theirs as well, and thus Professor Osborne poured the water like an actor on a stage, with a silent audience giving him their full attention.

There was nothing for it, but for Professor Besselsleigh to begin her introduction at once. ‘It is now my pleasure formally to pass the presidential baton, as it were, to Dr Reginald Cavendish, Fellow of St George’s College, Cambridge,’ she began. ‘Many of us are grateful to Reg for the distinguished work he has done for some decades now as the editor of the Bulletin of the Suffolk Ecclesiastical Architecture Association. This admirable publication has printed many rather important articles—and I am not merely referring to the ones written by Reg himself!’ This latter comment produced warm smiles all round. ‘He has also been laboriously researching for many years a study of Monophysitic liturgies which promises to revise some long-standing views in the existing literature, and which is eagerly awaited by many of us.’ She suppressed a desire to add, ‘and has been for as long as some of you have been alive’, and pressed on to a conclusion. ‘Reg has chosen as our theme for this year, “Fasting and Feasting: The Church and Food”. He will now give us his presidential address: “Sanctity in the Early Church: Holy Orders and Eating Disorders”. Please welcome your new president.’

Professor Besselsleigh was still holding the pill in her hand. She judged that this moment while the audience was clapping and before the president had begun to speak would be the most discreet one imminently available. She quickly placed the pill in her mouth and washed it down with the glass of water. Reg Cavendish, after a few off-the-cuff remarks regarding the declining standards of food at high table during his years at St George’s which duly elicited a moderate chuckle from his audience, began reading his prepared text: ‘Paradoxically, the church has traditionally viewed fasting as both a quintessential act of surrender to the divine will, of self-denial, and simultaneously a

remarkable act of personal will power, and therefore, in a particular sense, of self-assertion . . .’

One by one the attention of the members of the audience was distracted by the sound of Professor Besselsleigh wheezing. Her face had suddenly become flushed and puffy. She stood up, muttered something about not being well, and took a few steps. Then she collapsed, her body laid out on a bare expanse of stage. Professor Osborne quickly moved to her side. His back blocked the view of the audience. He exclaimed almost immediately, ‘She’s unconscious.’ Louise Cavendish jumped up from her seat, announced in a clear voice, ‘I shall ring for an ambulance’, and walked briskly out of the room.

Throughout his childhood, Fowler had attended corporate acts of worship whose participants relished the spontaneous and the unpredictable. His father was a noted minister in the Tongues of Fire Pentecostal denomination. Indeed, in certain small, but fervent religious subcultures in Britain and abroad, Matthew Fowler was a kind of celebrity figure. A lifetime of attending Pentecostal worship services had taught Josiah Fowler that when dramatic events are the focus of attention it is often more rewarding to watch the watchers. Professor Osborne was kneeling beside Professor Besselsleigh, adjusting her body into a more comfortable position. Reg Cavendish was vaguely feeling his own pockets, as if he did not want to be accused of just standing there and doing nothing. Everyone else was straining to see what was going on with a look of concern on his or her face; they watched transfixed as Professor Besselsleigh’s skin lost its reddish hue, being replaced with a light shade of blue.

Everyone, that is, except for two figures. One was a young woman—undoubtedly a post-graduate student and probably an American—with a different expression on her face. Once again, Fowler could not track it down to its emotional source. Was it regret? Suspicion? Fear? The other figure was a foreign cleric. Fowler judged from his moderate knowledge of ecclesiastical garb that he was probably from one of the eastern Orthodox churches. Certainly, the large metal cross which hung around his neck did not look particularly Catholic or Protestant. He was an immensely corpulent man with an uncut black beard. On his face was fixed a smirk of satisfaction.

As no one else identified themselves, a middle-aged woman who had once been a nurse reluctantly decided that her modicum of medical experience apparently trumped that of everyone else in the room. Moving onto the platform, she too knelt beside the outstretched body. Without rising or turning to face the audience—addressing no one in particular at all, and not raising her voice above a conversational tone—she announced that Professor Besselsleigh was dead.

## Chapter 2

It was an anaphylactic reaction of course. More than a few people present had deduced this at once. This intelligence spread rapidly until it seemed like old news to everyone even when Professor Besselsleigh had still not been dead for more than an hour. Fowler was one of those who knew what he had seen. A cousin of his had a range of allergies which, despite the nervous vigilance of the boy's parents, had still resulted in two reactions occurring in Fowler's presence during the course of their childhoods, although the adrenaline kit which his aunt and uncle carried with them everywhere had ensured that the incidents had been arrested before they had progressed too far. Fowler knew it was a severe allergic reaction. Nevertheless, as he thought it over in his little, anonymous room that night—having stealthily transferred his luggage to it whilst most of the other delegates were still in the bar—he also came to the conclusion that it was murder.

He naturally had based this judgement on certain bits of evidence he had observed. A person who had lived a bit longer, however, might also judge that although his evidence was interesting and relevant, his inference was considerably premature. Perhaps such a person might not be wholly wrong in arguing that a youthful thirst for excitement fuelled by an over-active imagination was an unconscious influence in his speculations. Nevertheless, be that as it may, Fowler did come to the conclusion that it was murder. The next conclusion at which he arrived was that it was his duty to inform the police. Fowler had scant personal experience of officers of the law. He had certainly never provided them with unsolicited advice before. On the other hand, he did possess a

deep-rooted notion that honest citizens sporadically found it necessary to inform them of various things during the course of their adult lives. The next morning, shortly after breakfast, he called the Metropolitan Police and explained to the officer who answered the phone that—for reasons which he could outline to the appropriate person—it was his considered opinion that Professor Majorie Besselsleigh’s life had been extinguished with malice aforethought. The whole conversation was disappointingly short. The officer had shown no surprise or curiosity or even polite interest. She seemed merely to write down the basic details regarding who Fowler was and where he was staying and then blandly informed him that his message would be passed on.

Meanwhile, despite the unsettling events of the evening before, Reg Cavendish had sufficiently rallied to put his formidable mind to some complicated scheduling changes in order to ensure that the society would not be deprived of hearing his presidential address. Thus the first session after breakfast was now an opportunity to hear ‘Sanctity in the Early Church: Holy Orders and Eating Disorders’ in full. The president clearly foresaw that it would not do to recycle the ice-breaking remarks which he had used on the previous night. He rose to the challenge admirably, however, by building on them with an anecdote regarding a recent visit he had made to Oxford, the gist of which was that the culinary standards in a certain ancient college there were unquestionably lower than anything he had ever been made to endure in Cambridge. As the society always enjoyed a good dig at an impressive target, this went down very well. Fowler was an Oxford man himself, and he was sitting with Alister McLean, a friend from Oxford who was still finishing his D.Phil. there, and the two young men laughed as heartily as anyone. After this confident start, however, Cavendish seemed to Fowler clearly to betray signs of

being rattled. He sweated profusely and would break off mid-sentence to take a gulp of water or wipe his brow with a handkerchief. Nevertheless, he successfully delivered the paper on this second attempt.

This session was followed by parallel sessions of short papers. Fowler went to option D. The first speaker was a nun who gave an astute and satisfying paper on the relationship between fasting and mystical experiences. She was followed by an ill-prepared research student who rambled on about how ‘marginalized groups’ had ‘subverted’ the authority of the church by ‘transgressing certain culinary boundaries’. When stripped of its jargon, this appeared to boil down to the banal observation that early modern labourers were generally not so pious as to decline to eat meat on Fridays if an opportunity happened to have arisen. The chair eventually was forced to stop this speaker mid-flow after his transgressing of time-keeping boundaries had reached an intolerable limit. The final paper was given by a Reader in History who, it emerged during the discussion following his paper, appeared to have the ill-fortune to be almost the only person in the room who had not seen a recently published book which offered an exhaustive treatment of his chosen subject.

After the session was over, Fowler drifted toward the section of a central hallway where cups of tea and coffee were being served. On his way he was approached by Professor Osborne, who was coming from the opposite direction.

‘Dr Fowler?’

‘Yes, how can I help you Professor Osborne?’

‘There was a phone message for you. It was pinned on the message board, but as we have not really announced that there is a message board I thought I would bring it to you

myself.’ As he was saying this he was also flicking through the pile of papers he was carrying. Having secured a small square of yellow paper, he handed it to Fowler, who duly thanked him for his trouble.

The paper was a printed form for phone messages. The time blank had been filled in with ‘10:08 AM’. In the line which said ‘ \_\_\_\_\_ called’ the words ‘The police’ had been inserted. After the word ‘For’ had been added ‘Josiah Fowler, CAS conf.’. The box which said ‘Left a message’ had been ticked and the blank lines after the word ‘Message’ had been filled in with the sentence: ‘Will send someone around to meet you at noon in the main lobby.’ Fowler was pleased. He had started to wonder if they might disregard his offer to volunteer his considered opinion altogether. This was proof that they were taking him seriously. As he read it over again, however, another emotional tone also began to assert itself. He had a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the notion that this note had been left on a message board for all to see while he was at the annual conference of such an influential and distinguished body as the Church Antiquarian Society. He wondered if some noted scholars might view meeting with the police as suspicious or as not an entirely respectable thing to do. He began to speculate on who might have read it. Certainly, Professor Osborne had, and that was bad enough by itself. This train of thought was rounded off with his coming to the firm conviction that receptionists really ought to be trained to put messages in envelopes or, at the very least, to fold them over discreetly and write the recipient’s name on them.

It was already 11:45, so Fowler decided to go straight to the lobby. It was only a minute’s walk, so when he arrived he settled down in a large, cushioned chair to wait. From his briefcase he retrieved his cigarette case and lighter—recent purchases from an

Uppingham antique dealer. The case was made of silver. It bore the ensign of the 17th Lancers. Fowler knew that it was a breach of etiquette to wear a regimental tie which one had not acquired officially, but he judged that no such rule applied to cigarette cases. He was not really a smoker in the ordinary sense of the word. He would certainly be careful—or so he told himself—not to do anything so vulgar as to become addicted. Nevertheless, he had been truly seduced by the aesthetics of cultivated smoking. He longed to revive its rituals, faintly hoping that he could inhale—if only for a moment—the urbanity of a grander age along with the nicotine. Moreover, one of the unofficial compensations which being raised in a Pentecostal milieu offered was that the frisson of the forbidden which cigarettes usually granted only to early adolescents could be fully savoured well into adulthood.

‘So you have exchanged tongues of fire for sticks of fire, have you? An Esau move if ever there was one, let me tell you,’ Detective Superintendent Mark Kettle began. ‘Look at you, sitting there all posh as can be, acting like you’re one of the hoi polloi, well let me tell you what you ought to already know, your father is a greater man and more worthy of imitation than anyone that ever came out of Oxford.’ Lest he be unjust, however, he immediately added anticlimactically, ‘Except a few people like Wesley’.

‘Hello, Mark’, was Fowler’s initial reply to this speech. His second thought had been to carry on smoking brazenly. He was an adult. He could make his own choices. This defiant plan was no good however. He had already given himself away by instinctively making a sudden, futile effort to retrieve his case and lighter from the table before they could be seen. He shoved them back into his briefcase resignedly and extinguished his

cigarette in an ashtray. This was all over in a moment and he went on, smiling welcomingly, 'What a coincidence that they sent you!'

'I don't believe in coincidences,' Kettle replied, 'but there was nothing mysterious about it. I happened to hear your name and told them I would handle it personally.' He then added, 'You don't think that if some part-time Sherlock rings up and says he has some information that a Detective Superintendent comes round to take his statement, do you?', allowing a just view of things to work in his favour of his own personal dignity on this occasion. Kettle could not resist going one step further and playing what he assumed was the decisive card he had brought with him at once, 'You think she was murdered, do you? Well, it turns out it was an allergic reaction. Peanuts are not exactly poison, you know.'

'O really. They were to Professor Besselsleigh's system apparently,' Fowler replied coolly. He had now regained his composure and steeled himself to hold his ground even in the presence of an older man whom he had been taught to treat with deference during his childhood. Kettle was an over-weight, middle-aged, gruff policeman, but he was still just another man like himself. Fowler boosted his inner strength by quietly relishing the fact that Kettle obviously did not know what the phrase 'hoi polloi' meant, and must be in the habit of using it incorrectly, as he did so many other words. 'Peanuts may not be a traditional poison,' he went on, 'but if someone deliberately arranged for her to eat them in order to induce a fatal reaction, then surely that is murder.'

'That's true,' Kettle agreed gravely.

'Her reaction set in immediately after she took a pill. It seems likely that her pills were deliberately tampered with.'

‘Of course we looked at her pills. She was taking Erythromycin. There was nothing wrong with them. We’ve talked to her GP. She prescribed them for a skin infection over a week ago. According to her medical records, peanuts were her only known allergy.’

‘But perhaps only the one she swallowed last night had been tampered with. Someone might have emptied one of the capsules and filled it with crushed peanuts. It only takes a very small amount for someone who has a severe allergy,’ Fowler rattled out eagerly.

‘Look Jo, they’re not capsules, they’re tablets. They’re pure white and have an ‘E’ etched into them. It would take a first-class laboratory and a lot of know-how to make a decent imitation out of peanuts.’

Fowler looked so deflated that Kettle had a sudden, contradictory desire to say something in support of the other side. The policeman searched his brains for something which might keep Fowler’s argument from looking too thoroughly demolished. ‘What put the idea in your head that it was murder anyhow?’, he ventured.

‘Because I knew for a fact that she hadn’t eaten anything.’

Kettle glanced at him quickly. Fowler’s confidence was returning. He went on, ‘The question is, how did she come into contact with peanuts? Given the fact that she did not deliberately eat anything, I think that the idea that it could have happened accidentally might be just as far-fetched as the hypothesis that it was murder.’

‘Well, that is very interesting, but I will tell you straight, as a professional, that we don’t have what it takes to open a murder investigation. We have no motive, no suspects, and peanuts for a murder weapon.’

‘I’ll just have to find out a bit more then,’ Fowler replied. He then added, almost to himself, ‘If she was murdered, then it was probably by someone who is attending this conference.’

### Chapter 3

The last item before lunch on the newly revised schedule was the Annual General Meeting. Fowler's rendezvous with Kettle caused him to arrive late. He now slipped into an easily accessible seat toward the back of the hall. His entry did not go unnoticed, however. Keen members of the committee discreetly glided over and bombarded him with an intimidating assortment of hand-outs. Fowler, like everyone else, had heard the gossip that the financial situation of the society, after many years of humming along smoothly, had become suddenly dire. This rumour was immediately confirmed in his mind when he saw that after item three on the printed agenda, 'the financial situation', was the name 'Dr Reginald Cavendish', thereby revealing that the president himself would tackle this apparently thorny issue, rather than following the customary practice of leaving it to the treasurer.

Reg Cavendish was already speaking. As Fowler orientated himself to the flow of words, it appeared that the president had been paying a tribute to the late Professor Besselsleigh and was now, aware that he was on shaky ground, endeavouring to move from praising to burying her. 'I do not think, however, that it is in the interests of the society, to allow our great respect for Majorie, and our shock and sadness regarding her sudden death, to keep us from facing squarely the alarming situation regarding the society's financial position which has arisen since our last AGM. This society, I believe we can honestly acknowledge to ourselves, serves a vital, an indispensable, function. For many years it has nurtured academic work of the highest calibre. It is a beacon of light in

a slipshod age.’ At this point, the president suddenly lost control of himself. ‘I will tell you bluntly,’ he blurted out, ‘Majorie has put the very future of this society in jeopardy by her incompetent decisions. As a president, she has been weighed in the balance and found grievously wanting.’ These last sentences were said with such violence as to startle everyone. There was wild animosity in his eyes. He was like an enraged father who had stormed out of his house to accuse a neighbour of driving so recklessly that he might have killed a child.

Absorbed in his own high-running emotions, Reg Cavendish did not realise at first the effect he was making. He stood there slightly panting, his eyes roving his audience, slowly assimilating their mood and trying to bring himself under control in order to adjust to it. ‘Some people say I’m too passionate about protecting those things which cultivate the life of the mind,’ he said very slowly in a low voice, giving equal weight to each word, ‘but true learning is one of the very few things in this world which really does deserve knights errant to rise up and fight on its behalf.’

Having regained his composure, the president returned to the factual material which it was his duty to communicate at this time. ‘The main cause of this alarming financial predicament is the Anglo-Russian conference. This matter will be fully explained in a moment by our treasurer, the Revd Anne Roebeck-Glanville, but there are other factors as well. We lost a great deal of money on last year’s conference and I think we must assume that the *Proceedings* volume to emerge from it will also be a significant financial drain, and one which we can ill afford.’

If the financial situation had not been so bleak and Professor Besselsleigh had merely been absent rather than dead, the society’s members might have smiled upon hearing

those last remarks. No one could deny that ‘The Church and Infant Mortality’ had not been a success. As a theme, it did not lend itself to the kind of droll asides which the society’s members had come to expect from conference speakers. Moreover, it was altogether too narrow. A good theme was one which was sufficiently broad to enable a scholar working on almost any period, figure or community to find a relevant connection with his or her work. It would be something fairly neutral and bland which one could play straight for most of a paper, but leaven with a few wry remarks, or even a more substantial passage in which the human foibles of some dead prelate are mischievously exhibited. The death of children was hardly a theme open to such treatment. A good portion of the society’s faithful spotted this early on and discovered that they had a scheduling conflict which necessitated their skipping the Church Antiquarian Society conference for that year. Almost all of the expenses of the conference remained undiminished, however, only the fees paid by the meagre band of delegates did not cover them, and thus the society had made a sizeable loss. And that was not the end of it. The society’s other main, annual financial venture was a series it published of scholarly volumes arising from its conferences. Reg Cavendish was undoubtedly right when he predicted that *The Proceedings of the Church Antiquarian Society Volume 62* would cost the same as any other volume would to publish, but would not come close to generating the usual amount of sales. Every number of the *Proceedings* could not be expected to sell as well as volume 49, *The Church and Sexual Immorality*, but there were not the reserves to absorb the losses a really unpopular title would create. Library sales had never come close to covering the costs by themselves, and even libraries were picking and choosing based on the attractiveness of the subject matter these days, rather than just

buying the next in a series as a matter of course. He was therefore doing no more than telling the sober truth when he argued that Professor Besselsleigh's choice of theme had single-handedly landed the society in a serious financial hole. And that was before the Anglo-Russian conference had been taken into account.

The Revd Anne Roebeck-Glanville, who had no wish to say anything unkind about dear Majorie, clearly did not relish her task. 'As those of you who have been members for some time will know, the society from time to time lends its support to various international conferences for the mutual benefit of British scholars and those of the co-sponsoring nation. Some of you may remember the delightful time we had in Geneva seven or eight years ago. Well, Majorie received a letter from some Russian scholars who cordially invited the society to co-host a conference to mark the tercentenary of the death of St Boris the Healer. In the light of the fact that this event was only five months away, there was not really much time in which to make careful plans. Our Russia contacts did not have a very reliable fax machine and, in the end, we went ahead without properly ironing out the precise financial responsibilities involved. Some of the Russian scholars were so kind to us—we really ought to put some pictures from the trip on display somewhere,' at this point she looked around the room vaguely as if it might be possible to select a suitable location instantly, '—but when it came to money matters we found that the characters we were dealing with were not at all pleasant. I'm sure many of the good people we met there are just as much victims as we are and were very embarrassed by the whole situation, but nevertheless I think it would be fair to say that the whole thing became rather sinister. Now, I think we would all agree, that what mattered most was dear Majorie's safety and that it was perfectly proper of her simply to

write a cheque from the society's account for the amount they demanded—although I also think it is only fair to say that it was literally extortionate. Now, when the committee heard about this, they promptly demanded that a stop be put on the cheque and, fortunately, this was done in time, although the society, of course, had incurred sizable expenditures on the conference anyway, especially on travel costs, and had brought a great deal of cash along with which to pay conference debts as well, all of which was handed over to the Russians. This money alone amounted to more than the whole of our general reserve fund. Now Majorie was very uneasy about the cheque being stopped, but I think it is only fair to say that this was undoubtedly the only prudent thing which the committee could do. We are trying now to establish what debts can legitimately be laid at our door—I fear dear Majorie did make some injudicious statements about it only being right that our society paid the lion's share—and I am afraid that we will still have to incur some more expenditure over this matter, but I can assure you that we will hold our ground and that it will be nothing like the sum originally demanded.'

Fowler was tempted to smile at the image of a bunch of befuddled academics and ecclesiastics falling into the hands of the Russian Mafia. The more he thought about it, however, the less funny it seemed. The word 'Mafia' was hopelessly tainted with romanticism due to the distortions of Hollywood. He suspected that when many ordinary Sicilians heard the word it did not conjure up in their minds an intoxicating cocktail of legendary personalities, colourful audacity, grand gestures of generosity, mouth-watering cuisine, and stylish living. If the Italian Mafia was more bestial and banal than its cinematic depictions suggested, then this observation was immeasurably more true when one began dignifying every foreign criminal organization with the term 'Mafia'. One had

only to read the papers to know that Russians who defied the wishes of criminal networks in their midst were being assassinated on a weekly basis. Sicily offered no parallel to this level of murder. It seemed like hardly a month went by when one did not hear that some prominent figure in Russian society, or even a distinguished foreigner living in Russia, had not been powerful enough to protect his or her own life once these criminal elements had issued a death sentence. As Fowler thought more deeply about it, a news report he had heard recently came back to him. The Russian Mafia—the media would not forego the term—had recently begun to increase its presence in Britain. The City of London was being used for money-laundering and Russian criminals were increasingly coming to live in Britain in order to protect their interests. The Russians involved with this special conference had only dealt with Professor Besselsleigh. She was, after all, the society’s president, and thus might appear to an outsider as a person who could make final decisions. In their eyes, she had double crossed them, broken her word, by putting a stop on the cheque she had signed. They had been deprived of a notable sum of money which they thought they had gained. They had been openly defied, as if they had no power to enforce their threats. Was it possible that these actions had cost Professor Besselsleigh her life? If the Church Antiquarian Society had indeed gained the unwavering attention of such criminals, perhaps her death would mark just the beginning of its troubles.

It was now lunchtime. Although it would be easy enough for him to dine with an old friend or acquaintance, Fowler saw it as an opportunity which needed to be used effectively. The right conversation might elicit information relevant to his investigation. He decided that Professor Osborne was his optimal companion. Osborne was a longstanding member of the society and, as vice president, he would possess as much

insider knowledge as anyone. A desire to thank him more fully for acting as courier for his phone message would provide a sufficient, albeit thin, excuse to engage him in conversation. Fowler—budding detective that he was—had also surmised what would act as attractive bait. He weaved his way through the crowd until he could sidle up to his quarry.

‘O, hello, Professor Osborne. Thank you once again for being so kind as to pass on that phone message to me. A friend of my father’s heard that I was in London and decided to look me up. I was thinking of heading over to the bar to wait for the lunch queue to quieten down a bit. May I buy you a drink as well?’

‘Why yes’, he said, offering the young man a warm, paternal smile, ‘I was thinking of strolling over there myself. And, please, call me Harold. I always think that, however important a person might be elsewhere, here in the CAS we are all family.’

Professor Osborne declared that he would have a glass of red wine. Fowler said that he fancied red wine as well and suggested as casually as he could that the best plan might be for him to buy a bottle of wine which they could then carry on with them and continue to enjoy over their meals. Professor Osborne rewarded him with another glowing smile, ‘Fine idea, my boy.’ Fowler was immensely gratified to discover that there were people who still said ‘my boy’. He idly wondered what expression the professor might have chosen if he had been talking to a young woman.

As they sat down in the bar to enjoy their first glasses of wine, Professor Osborne made the obligatory enquiry regarding Fowler’s current research project.

‘I’m working on Methodism and the working classes from the 1840s to the First World War. It’s really an expansion of my D.Phil. thesis.’

‘Well, that’s very interesting, my boy. I once did some work in that area. Only it wasn’t Methodists, it was Presbyterians, and it was focused on the early eighteenth century. Still, it produced some intriguing discoveries which might be relevant to your research. When one studies the evidence, the middle classes actually turn out to have been more anti-clerical than the working classes. It was meant to be a two-part series, but I’ve never found the time to polish off the second article. I published the first one in the old *Presbyterian and Unitarian Historical Review*. I think it was in 1979. It might shed some interesting light on your work.’ At this point, Professor Osborne, after some rooting around, secured a pen and a paper napkin, and used the former to write upon the latter the title of his article along with the name of the journal and the year 1979 with a question mark after it. He insisted that it was no trouble at all.

Once they had procured their meals, Fowler judged that he had sufficiently ingratiated himself to see if the professor might be willing to confide in him.

‘It seemed from the AGM that Dr Cavendish did not really get along very well with Professor Besselsleigh’, he ventured.

‘Poor show of Reg to let himself lose control like that. Still, what you must understand, my boy, is that it is not really a personal issue, strictly speaking. Reg is fanatical about scholarship. He acts like a kind of self-appointed priest in the Temple of Learning, standing guard at the altar. I have seen him reduce people to tears; I have seen him make the most heartless decisions, but it is not really personal. He is not thinking about the person involved at all—he might count them as friends—he is just keeping guard.’

‘So did he regard Professor Besselsleigh as a friend?’ Fowler pressed.

‘Well, he once regarded her as more than a friend, a lady friend, as they say,’ the professor chuckled.

At this point, Fowler thought it might be expedient to refill Osborne’s wine glass before proceeding any further. After he had done so, he charged bravely on, ‘Is that why his marriage broke down?’

‘Well, one might say it was a specimen of the reason,’ he said, chuckling again.

It was hard for Fowler to imagine the elderly woman he had seen die the night before as a temptation to infidelity. He could not resist letting his boyish wonder sidetrack him from the strict path of acquiring knowledge useful for detective. ‘It must have been a very long time ago,’ he remarked.

‘Well, my boy, let me see. I think it was just after my book, Country Parsons, was published. Have you ever read it?’ Fowler was forced to concede that he had not yet had the time to give to that volume which it deserved.

‘It is difficult to find a copy these days, but it is a solid piece of work. Scholars these days don’t take the time to research a book properly. Come to think of it, I think I still have an extra copy or two lying around somewhere. If you’re stuck, I suspect I could sell you a copy.’ Fowler tried to appear interested whilst technically remaining noncommittal, but he nevertheless suspected that he had indeed just purchased a dusty copy of this long forgotten monograph.

‘What year was that?’ Fowler asked, trying to regain the thread.

‘1969.’

‘That must have been pretty early on in the Cavendish marriage.’

‘Marjorie was undoubtedly the first—but by no means the last, my boy,’ he said and chuckled again.

‘But surely that was all over long ago,’ Fowler replied, this time playing at being naive in the interests of gleaning further knowledge. The ruse was amply rewarded.

Osborne laughed heartily this time. ‘Well, there is a young American girl here somewhere who could tell you whether or not Reg’s tutorials are still up to scratch.’

At that moment, Fowler instinctively knew that the ‘young American girl’ in question was the woman whose tortured face he had picked out of the crowd while Professor Besselsleigh was dying.

## Chapter 4

The University of Bloomsbury was a fairly old establishment, graced with touches of grandeur. Fowler had been pleased to discover one feature in particular, the Geographic Library. This room had been lavishly assembled in the late Victorian era as a homage to the exploits of exploration, conquest, and the accumulation of knowledge which so marked that age. Dotted about the walls were the mounted heads of wild animals—mostly from Africa or India—which had been slaughtered by men who thought in terms of courage rather than conservation. Although Fowler suspected that one ought to be impressed by the fierce creatures such as the lions and the tigers, he always found that his eyes rested with fascination upon the wildebeest instead. These stuffed creatures were dwarfed, however, by the huge, fitted mahogany bookcases which stretched from the floor to the ceiling down the longer sides of the rectangular room, and which dominated it by the determined way in which they colonized so much of its wall space. In the middle of the room there were large tables—some vast and bare, waiting for some great work to be done upon them, and some laden with stacks of antiquated maps in enormous leather pouches. Adjacent to two of these tables there were two large, tan globes set in walnut stands. The room was still ostensibly a reference library, but Fowler doubted very much whether in recent decades any student of geography engaged in serious research had ever chosen it in preference to the main university library. It had been left as a kind of show piece and Fowler was grateful to whomsoever had made this decision. It was to this room that he came to put his mental energy to work on the mystery before him.

He chose a large, comfortable chair positioned beside a tall window which filled half of the room with natural light. From this position he could view both the masculine decor of the Geographic Library and the flower gardens, green lawns, and noble trees of the quadrangle, taking his inspiration in turns, as his mood shifted. Who murdered Professor Besselsleigh? That was the question he had come here upon which to muse. What had he learned already? Reg Cavendish had been the only person so far to have revealed a personal animosity to her. Also, there was this matter of the American research student. He had discovered that she was having an affair with Cavendish. Perhaps the look on her face he had observed was produced by a dawning awareness that her lover had caused Besselsleigh's death. Perhaps she had even been manipulated into becoming an accomplice. Still, scholar though he was, Fowler could not bring himself seriously to imagine an execution on the authority of the Goddess of Learning ordered as the deserved punishment for the crime of endangering the life of that priceless treasure, the Church Antiquarian Society.

Another possibility was that she had been assassinated on the orders of a Russian criminal gang. What was the evidence in favour of this theory? Firstly, Besselsleigh had undoubtedly found herself entangled with such figures at the Anglo-Russian conference. Secondly, they had demanded money which she had apparently paid, but had then retracted. Thirdly, despite the fact that it was painfully obvious that the society was being swindled, she was reluctant to stop the cheque, thereby indicating that she had been threatened or intimidated. Fourthly, the type of persons involved would not be squeamish about murder. Fifthly, Russian organized crime is now operating in Britain. Fowler's mind also wandered back to the foreign cleric he had seen smile so

incongruously while Professor Besselsleigh was dying. The more he thought about him, the more he was convinced that he was a Russian. Nevertheless, in truth, Fowler did not find this theory entirely convincing either. He did not think that murder by peanuts was really the style of such thugs. Furthermore, he did not think it made sense as a tactic. Surely, if it was a case of extortion, a murder was premature and possibly counterproductive. The first stage would be to make some more threats, signalling their power to operate in this country. At the most, a small act of violence, or even of vandalism, would serve as an adequate calling card. One could always escalate the violence if one met with further recalcitrance.

Thus Fowler's mind homed in on Louise Cavendish. What was the case against her? Professor Besselsleigh had had an affair with her husband during the early years of their marriage. Besselsleigh had been the first one—the opening act of a long personal tragedy. No doubt, Louise Cavendish might have been able to convince herself that Besselsleigh had been the seductress and that, had she not dragged her husband down in this way, all the others would not have followed. For all he knew, there might even be some truth in this. Fowler had seen for himself that there was a living rage in Louise Cavendish which centred around the breakdown of her marriage. Far from time healing this wound, it had been growing, festering, slowly poisoning the whole system. Toward the end of her life she had now surveyed her days and, finding ruin scattered across them, had determined to punish the person who had made it all go wrong. Louise Cavendish would have the wit to exploit an allergy. It was a clever move; revenge could be achieved and a capital crime committed, all without incurring much risk of being caught. A disillusioned lover's desire for revenge was a real motive. Fowler could understand

how such an emotional state could lead to murder. Louise Cavendish was his prime suspect.

But what *was* the clever move? This is what Mark Kettle wanted to know. It was no good guessing who might have done it, if one could not show *how*. Fowler saw the truth in this and set his mind to work on this aspect of the problem. It would not do to say vaguely that she must have eaten something. He knew she had not eaten and did not plan to do so until after the lecture. Was it probable that someone might have thrust half a cucumber sandwich laced with peanuts into her hands as she walked to the lecture which she had been tempted to consume greedily? Even if she might have done such a thing, Fowler doubted that the time scale would fit. The reaction had come on with deadly speed. One moment her skin colour had been perfectly normal, she was breathing naturally, at ease with herself, her situation and her surroundings. A few moments later she was in obvious distress. There was no hint of any discomfort when she introduced the society's new president. Then she took a pill. Kettle, however, had ruled the pill out convincingly. In order to entertain the thesis that a white tablet identical to all the rest in the bottle had been privately manufactured with the express purpose of killing Majorie Besselsleigh one would have to pile on equally fantastic suppositions such as the notion that she was a secret agent worthy of the attention of MI5, the CIA or some other national unit of covert operations. No, it was not the pill. So how was it done?

At this point in his reflections, Fowler had the first of a series of mental breakthroughs which ultimately led him toward the explanation of this whole case: it was not the pill, but the water.

This flash across his mental sky galvanized him into action. He left the Geographic Library in a whirl, heading determinedly for the main lecture hall. The hall was empty so he resolutely marched up unto the platform. There were the three chairs. There was the table with the half lectern resting on it. There also was a stack of clean cups made of white plastic. Finally, there was a green bottle of sparkling water. To his disappointment, it was obviously full and unopened. Fowler brazenly removed the cap. The release of the pressure made a hissing sound and the warm water began to foam. He smelt it. He tasted it. He examined the cap and bottle. It was just an ordinary bottle of sparkling water.

‘Can I help you at all, my boy?’

Fowler was startled. ‘O, hello, Professor Osborne,’ he remarked sheepishly. There had been a certain sharpness of tone in the question and, given the fact that he had been caught red-handed in a cheeky act, he thought it best not to exercise at this moment the permission which had been granted him to address the society’s vice president by the appellation ‘Harold’. ‘I was just killing a bit of time before the next session and, developing an unpleasant tickle in my throat, I thought no one would mind if I helped myself to some water.’ As soon as Fowler had finished blurting this out, he knew that he was over-explaining. It was just like the cigarettes with Mark. He must learn to project a strong personality without letting the current of its power dip even for a moment, he thought to himself. On the other hand, it only took him a second to recover. Fowler nonchalantly refilled his cup, then he replaced the cap on the bottle, and drifted out of the room.

He knew where his duty now lay. The job was a dirty one, but his sense of dedication would surmount unpleasantness. He reasoned the matter out in this way: if the bottle was removed in the normal manner it would have gone into a bin. Moreover, if the murderer had removed it, he or she would probably have put it in a bin as well. What was the alternative? It would create more danger than it would alleviate to hide it in one's luggage. It was possible that one might hide it in a briefcase or something and then carry it off the campus to dispose of it somewhere else. This again, however, seemed to create a situation, although perhaps only briefly, when the person was definitely associated with the incriminating material in a very suspicious way; and leaving the campus might appear suspicious if it came to detailed accounts of people's movements. Fowler finished his calculations with the conclusion that regardless of how the bottle was removed, or by whom, it probably would have ended up amongst the rubbish in the large skips which the campus used for waste disposal.

Despite his having assembled a wardrobe for this little away trip which some might have judged so prodigious as to be unseemly, Fowler found that he did not possess the right kit for picking through rubbish. He audited his inventory, selecting the items which he was most willing to sacrifice. This process produced a cream-coloured short-sleeve button-up shirt, black trousers, and a pair of brown leather shoes with laces. He could not bring himself to wear this combination, however, so he substituted a pair of brown trousers for the black ones, forfeiting an entire outfit to the cause, for undoubtedly the tweed jacket could only be worn with those trousers.

Searching through rubbish for a clue to a murder is not unlike an historian's task. One does painstaking work methodically, examining similar and irrelevant items for hours on

end, straining to stay alert and to give one's attention to every detail individually, lest a vital piece of evidence floating in a sea of irrelevant facts might go unnoticed. Fowler settled down next to the skips, large plastic bags of rubbish arranged around him, like he was in an archives with piles of monotonous manuscripts awaiting his attention. He pursued his task patiently, relentlessly.

After two hours and seventeen minutes of work, when he already examined thirty-six uninteresting green water bottles, he found something which aroused his interest. This bottle was empty—as had been all the others. As he had done with the rest, he unscrewed the cap and smelt inside it. He had hoped to catch a faint whiff of peanuts, but this wish was not to be fulfilled. What he did smell, however, in this one bottle alone, was a distinct odour of some kind of hand soap, detergent or washing-up liquid. Why would anyone take the trouble to wash the inside of a disposable water bottle before throwing it in the bin?, he wondered. There was more to come. As he carefully examined the cap, he could clearly discern bits of dried glue in it. He thought of Professor Besselsleigh struggling to open the bottle and Professor Osborne having to take over the operation. He now knew what had happened. The cap had been glued in order to give the impression that the bottle had not been opened already. But it had been opened, and a small, but lethal amount of peanut powder or oil or something of the kind had been put in it. Fowler was convinced that he was holding a crucial piece of material evidence from a murder. He carried the bottle away triumphantly, noticing too late as he walked briskly back to his room that he had chosen a walkway directly outside the row of windows which lined the main lecture hall. There was a plenary session in progress; his

trophy had been displayed within the full view of all the members of the society,  
including presumably the murderer.

## Chapter 5

The Tongues of Fire Pentecostal denomination is a close-knit band of earnest people. They would valiantly and instinctively inconvenience themselves for each other's benefit. Moreover, this pattern of behaviour is also extended to the relative of a member or an erstwhile member who had wandered away from the fold. For an eminently redeemable, good-hearted, talented young man who was a true-born child of one's own spiritual house, who had not strayed very far, and whose father was a great man to whom one owed an incalculable spiritual debt, one would go to considerable lengths—cheerfully absorbing any personal cost involved. Thus, although Detective Superintendent Mark Kettle was sincerely dismissive of Fowler's murder theory he had nevertheless not only left him with his card, but had also added his personal extension to the phone number and—an act of favouritism the unprecedented nature of which Fowler was completely unaware—even added his pager and mobile phone numbers. Fowler, innocently taking advantage of this extraordinary level of access, decided to contact him. It just so happened that the moment the call arrived was as convenient a time as any, so Kettle promptly offered to come around at once, meeting him once again in the main lobby at the University of Bloomsbury.

'This must be the non-smoking section, eh?' Kettle said with a broad smile as he approached him.

Fowler, of course, was ready for him this time. 'That great gospel preach Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said, "I smoke to the glory of God,"' he announced cheekily.

Kettle shook his head resignedly before shooting back, ‘A fool is right in his own eyes,’ then, deciding that this obligatory opening duel had now played itself out, looked up and added in a brighter tone, ‘What have you turned up?’

Fowler retrieved the water bottle from his briefcase, handed it over, and explained his theory of how the crime was committed. Kettle looked at him pityingly. ‘I’ve always said there was no one so stupid as a clever person. This is your ingenious theory, is it? I know you’ve been trained to spin grand, prosaic ideas out of the air, but I’m sure glad you’ve never tried your hand at murder: you would botch the thing for sure. Let’s just suppose that someone did want to kill that professor lady, and they wanted to do it by slipping her some peanuts, no one in their right mind would put them in water of all things. You would put them in something that would mask the taste and smell, grind them into the sugar for her coffee, anything. Water is the last thing you would try. It would never work.’

‘Oh really? But it did work.’ Kettle’s speech had made an impression upon him, but Fowler had mentally prepared himself to hold his own on this occasion. ‘We are not trying to plan a murder, Mark. It’s happened. We can hardly let a murderer get away with it on the grounds that we do not approve of the choice of modus operandi.’

‘Look Jo. Either way, this bottle doesn’t move the thing on. It’s not going to lead us to a murderer. We’ve got no suspects.’

Fowler outlined the list of suspects he had compiled. He took from his briefcase the conference pack and from it extracted the sheet with the list of delegates. The only likely candidate for the foreign cleric was ‘Fr. Alexis Zernov, Saratov, Ukraine’. Fowler also noticed that the only female post-graduate student from Cambridge was named Amanda

Brown. He deduced that she must be Reg Cavendish's lover. Reg Cavendish, of course, was also on his list of suspects, as was Lousie Cavendish.

‘Alright Jo, I’ll have some checks run on these people, but—understand—a murder investigation has *not* been opened. I’m doing this off my own bat.’

Between his research in the university's weekly archive of the unwanted and the obsolete, and his meeting with Kettle, Fowler had missed all the afternoon sessions. The next scheduled item was the evening meal. There were about twenty minutes left before it would be served. He decided that he would spend this time milling around in the publishers' display room in case he might be able to attach himself to someone whose table conversation could further his enquiries. Fowler casually scanned the tables of newly published books, trying surreptitiously to read as many of the name badges of his fellow browsers as possible. His eye was caught by a book published by the University of the West Coast Press entitled, *Queen Victoria, Female Lay Preacher to a Revived Nation*, but he quickly moved on. At another table he idly wondered about the financing, team of scholars, and potential market behind a twenty-three volume series of *Eighteenth-Century Calvinist Sermons*.

The name badge he had just read, ‘Christopher Walduck’, rang a bell. He retreated to another table to scan his list of delegates once again. Walduck, it turned out, was one of the three male research students from Cambridge and therefore he could well be a useful informant. Fowler opted for the direct approach.

‘Hello, I’m Jo Fowler, I don’t think we’ve met before.’

‘*Glad* to meet you, I’m Christopher *Walduck*,’ came the reply. This was said in a refined, perhaps overly refined manner, exhibiting a tendency to linger dramatically on certain words or syllables.

Walduck, a thin, tanned young man with a step in his blond hair, was wearing a stylish tan three-piece suit with a metallic orange necktie. Post-graduate students, the lowest rung on the academic ladder, were easily identifiable at learned conferences, not simply by their youthful bodies and faces, but also by their habit of either underdressing or overdressing in comparison to the more established scholars. The underdressers wore their costumes defiantly as a way of flaunting their freedom from adult responsibilities, but the overdressers usually imagined that they were blending in with their betters. It never occurred to them that their trendy, hardly worn, ready-for-a-wedding clothes, distinguished them from the main herd of scholars just as clearly as if they had chosen to wear combat gear. As Walduck was an overdresser (as, of course, Fowler himself had been), Fowler decided to try a bit of flattery: ‘What university do you lecture at?’

Walduck blushed with gratification. ‘*Well*,’ he started in his dramatic way, ‘I’m at Cambridge, but I’m only a *lowly* post-graduate student, *toiling* away on a *dreary* thesis.’

‘O, you’re at Cambridge, are you?’ Fowler replied, pumping as much enthusiasm into his voice as he dared. ‘Surely, you haven’t come to London just to have another chance to hear Reg Cavendish.’

‘*Well*, as he is my supervisor, I really *ought* to be here. And, knowing him, if I missed it, he would probably *scold* me for not staying abreast of my field.’

Fowler suggested that they head for the dining hall and they began to move in that direction. Having successfully established that their conversation would continue over

the meal, he carefully prompted his informant. ‘No doubt you’re wise—I hear that he is fanatical about maintaining the highest scholarly standards.’

‘You *haven’t* heard about poor Amanda already, have you?’

Fowler decided exhibiting some knowledge was the best way to elicit more. ‘You mean that American lover of his? What about her?’

‘*Ex-lover*. Most *distinctly* ex.’ Having made this vital correction, Walduck began to unfold the latest gossip with childlike relish. ‘Well, Amanda is on a *special* M.Phil. honours programme which they have only just introduced. It is meant to be the absolute *gold* standard. One must pass a written examination *and* produce a thesis. Well, Dr Cavendish graded her examination and—wait for it—failed it by *two* points.’

‘But surely she understands that he has professional responsibilities,’ Fowler remarked dryly.

‘Alas for him, she does *not*. Apparently they do things *differently* in America.’

‘Can she ask for a different marker for the re-take?’

‘Well that’s just it. There is no second chance on this programme. She has simply failed. Amanda is not really my *kind* of person, you understand, an *auto mechanic’s* daughter of all things, but I do see a lot of her—and I must confess that she does not deserve this.’

‘Are you saying he did it on purpose out of spite or something?’ Fowler inquired.

‘O, no, no. He is *scrupulously* fair. That is the whole point. He would not let the fact that he knows *perfectly* well that she is a very able and conscientious scholar—not to mention that she is, or rather was, an *intimate* friend—interfere one iota with the sacred integrity of a *master’s* programme.’

‘So did she deserve to fail or didn’t she?’ Fowler persisted.

‘If a *machine* had graded the paper, I’ll sure it would have failed her by *precisely* two points, but any other faculty member who had ever given her a tutorial or discussed her work with her at all would have passed her and would not have felt they had *dumbed down* anything.’

By this time, the two men had procured their meals and were now settling down at a table. Fowler asked politely regarding Walduck’s own research, feigned interest as one does, and generally paddled around in several other predictable pools of conversation. When he had judged that he had done enough to disguise the fact that he was purely on a quest for personal titbits, he broached the subject of Professor Besselsleigh’s death. ‘It was odd her having an allergic reaction like that, wasn’t it?’

‘It quite gave me the *creeps*.’

‘How do you think it happened?’

‘O *I* don’t know. She had a curry or something with a few *peanuts hidden* in the sauce, I suppose.’

Fowler stared at him. ‘How do you know it was peanuts?’ he asked sharply, realising too late that he had not been able to hide a note of accusation in his tone.

Walduck smiled. ‘You really must learn to *circulate* a bit more,’ he said, and sputtered a stifled laugh. ‘Of course, her close friends and colleagues *knew* she had a peanut *allergy*, and by now, you must be the *last* person here to get that little piece of information passed on to you.’

‘But it seems like such a weird fluke, doesn’t it?’ Fowler remarked, trying to regain the initiative.

‘*Well*, it seems that *more* and *more* people have allergies these days. In fact, the *really* eerie thing is that Dr Cavendish has a peanut allergy as well. I *suppose* he had the good fortune to choose the *fish* option or something.’

Fowler once again allowed the conversation to range over more mundane topics. Continuing in this vein he asked, ‘Did you come to the CAS last year?’

‘O, *yes*, I was the one. If there is *anything* you would like to know regarding the historical fluctuations of the church’s position on deceased unbaptized babies *do* let me know.’

‘Dreary, was it?’

‘Even the *scholarship* was depressing. Would you *believe* it—the paper I found the most interesting was that one which turned out to have been *plagiarized*?’

‘I haven’t heard about that,’ Fowler prompted.

‘*Chandler* Johnson is the chap’s name, a Senior Lecturer at *Cheshire* University, or some such place. Some *German* journal had published the piece a few years ago. He simply *translated* it, changed the title, and put his own name to it.’

‘How did all this come out?’

‘O, I don’t know. Of course it is *almost* true that British scholars never read *anything* published in *any* language other than English or, on a *triumphant* day, French, but not quite true. Someone recognized it and word soon spread.’

‘So what did the society do about it?’

‘*Well*, Dr Cavendish, true to form, was keen to *hound* the *unfortunate* man out of the profession.’

‘I noticed at the AGM that he thought Besselsleigh had let the side down.’

‘O that’s another story altogether. No, on this occasion, she was *livid* as well, *especially* because it had happened at *her* conference.’

‘So what happened?’

‘The two of them joined forces and saw to it that he was *expelled* from the society—*unprecedented*—and a letter was sent to his head of department *detailing* the *whole* incident. He is *probably* working in his father’s *shoe* factory by now.’

Once their meals were finished, they went to the main hall for that evening’s plenary lecture: ‘Friar Tuck and All That: the Image of the Gluttonous Monk in English Popular Culture’. Afterwards Fowler had a few drinks in the bar with a former lecturer of his, but finding no one very interesting with whom to converse for the purpose of detection, shortly retired to his room. It was not until he had begun to hang his clothes up on the exposed bar which acted as a substitute for a proper wardrobe, that he began to sense that something odd had happened. He kept coming across items—shoes, towels, pillows—which were just slightly not right, not precisely the way he would place them, hang them, fold them, set them, leave them. The explanation occurred to him slowly. Someone had searched his room.

## Chapter 6

In the morning, Fowler glanced at the message board after breakfast and discovered that there was a little yellow square sheet for him. The receptionists had not yet been on the discretion training day which he had planned for them in his imagination, but Detective Superintendent Mark Kettle, in compensation, had been the very model of subtlety. The blank regarding who had called had been filled simply with the word 'Mark'. The message was 'Would like to meet you for coffee at the Bloomsbury Group Café at 10:30 AM'.

Fowler dutifully attended parallel session E, the highlight of which was a young Scotsman who cheerfully rubbished the work of every living historian in his field to the great amusement of the audience. After this, Fowler strolled out to the front gates. The University of Bloomsbury is situated on Palmerston Square in the centre of which is a reasonably pleasant park. Although it was a clear, summer day, it was not too hot. Fowler felt the warmth of the sun's rays, breathed the fresher air, admired the trees, and generally made the most of this little change of scene, walking with an exaggerated dignity as a response to the loveliness of his surroundings.

As the Bloomsbury Group Café was also on the square, his journey was just a matter of a few minutes walk across the park. The café, of course, did have some tenuous link to the Bloomsbury Group, but it certainly never was what the Algonquin Hotel was to Dorothy Parker and that set of New Yorkers. Moreover, whatever might have happened on the café's location in the 1920s, happened in a room with very different furnishings from the present ones and, if not in a different building altogether which had been

demolished some time ago then, at the very least, the interior of the present one had been extensively remodelled. Still, although it was useless as a primary source, Fowler found it to be a surprisingly good secondary source. Scattered about the walls were numerous photographs, informative signs and plaques, and facsimiles of bits of memorabilia which offered a harvest of information for the historically inquisitive.

His attitude toward the Bloomsbury Group was persistently ambivalent. In one sense, he was jealous of them, of their moment in history; they lived an illusory golden mean which he could only imagine wistfully—a fairytale marriage between progressive ideas on the one side and, on the other, all the style and beautiful things which he guiltily coveted, but which intellectuals had since discovered were predicated upon an oppressive, hierarchical class structure which was fundamentally at odds with a progressive worldview. He thought it ironic that what he should most admire about a group which celebrated their own self-awareness was their childlike innocence—champagne socialism notwithstanding, or rather illustrating the point perfectly. Nevertheless, he did not really like them. In truth, most of them were not very nice people. Nor did their work mean much to him. If asked, he would have said he thought Virginia Woolf was a great novelist, one of the greatest, but this was a tribute to his social and political sensibilities rather than his literary ones. He thought that the literary achievement of women ought to be better recognised in the canon and, for whatever reason, Virginia Woolf had come to be the supreme figure whom a person who thought this way must praise. In truth, however, he would rather read George Eliot—and dozens of other authors—than Woolf. He did enjoy E. M. Forster's work but, if he was honest with himself, he probably derived much of this pleasure from the lush elegance which

Merchant Ivory Productions had discovered in them. No one's poetry did he value more than that of T. S. Eliot, but he was not really part of the group. Lytton Strachey epitomized his ambivalence. He could not help venerating a man who had proved that one could gain fame from pursuing an historian's craft, but he found his adolescent iconoclasm distasteful, which was perhaps the flavour which kept him from really liking the Bloomsbury Group as a whole. Nevertheless—he thought wistfully as he gazed at the photographs hung over the reception desk—they did know how to dress.

'I thought you would like this place,' Kettle said as he approached. 'The more unrighteous someone's life, the more people like them. We've got a statute to Oscar Wilde now, did you know? D. L. Moody once preached in Palmerston Square, but a Moody and Sankey Café would never do, would it? You couldn't sell cocktails like that.'

'If I remember Moody's habits correctly though, you should be able to shift some cigars,' Fowler retorted with a grin. 'I've got some news for you', he then went on eagerly, 'how's this for confirmation that it wasn't an accident: someone searched my room yesterday!'

Kettle became instantly alert at this news. 'I'm sorry to hear that, Jo,' he said earnestly.

'O, I'm not worried by it,' came the dismissive reply.

'No, really I am. It's not a nice feeling to know that an intruder has been poking through your things. We had our house broken into once. My poor little woman was literally scared to death by the thought of it.'

'O really,' Fowler replied with the callousness of youth.

‘Well, I’ve got news as well, that’s why I called this meeting.’ At this point the two of them were seated and had ordered their coffees, Kettle deciding to complement his with a Bakewell tart.

‘Go on,’ Fowler prompted, ‘what have you found?’

‘I’ve found a murderer,’ Kettle pronounced dramatically.

‘Who?’

‘Dr Reginald Cavendish.’

‘How did you find out? Some kind of forensic evidence or something?’

Kettle smiled. ‘I didn’t say I had found your murderer—just a murderer.’

‘You mean that Reg Cavendish once did time!’

‘No, I suppose I’m making more of a spiritual than a legal judgement. He killed a man twelve years ago when he was doing some work in Armenia. During an invasion or something many centuries ago, a church hid all these precious things—you know, gold goblets and stuff like the things in the Tabernacle or Solomon’s Temple—in a cave. Cavendish had found a few leads in some old manuscripts and tracked the stuff down—still in its hiding place. He had hired a team of locals—just farm boys or whatever—to help him with the work. Well, the story goes, he got suspicious of this one chap and went to spy on him one night. He found the bloke melting down a gold candlestick. Cavendish was so angry he just picked up a shovel or something and whacked him, killing the guy on the spot. A lot of money was paid to a lot of people and the whole thing got hushed up but,’ he added by way of compensation, ‘God saw what happened.’

‘Well, well,’ said Fowler, ‘The man is a fanatic. Do you know that he was sleeping with a student of his and that he failed her examination although, a reliable source tells me, almost any other don would have passed her.’

‘It doesn’t surprise me one bit. A man is never unrighteous in just one area of his life,’ was Kettle’s response, apparently choosing to focus his moral indignation on the fornicator rather than the inhumane marker.

‘Don’t you see? A man who thinks that damaging antiquities is a crime worthy of death and who would rather ruin his lover’s career than violate his own fastidious sense of scholarly integrity is a man who just might kill Besselsleigh because she had made a mess of the society.’

‘I do see that, Jo.’

‘And there’s more. Cavendish has a peanut allergy as well. His mind would have thought of it, because he’s got to think about his own allergy all the time. Besselsleigh and he undoubtedly would have talked about their allergies with each other. He would have known exactly what he was doing. I’m telling you he must be the murderer.’

‘It’s all circumstantial still, Jo, but, if there is anything to come out, it will come out in time. I’ll hint to the coroner that he might want to go slow on this one, and I’ll make sure my people get involved. This is the kind of stuff we’re good at. We’ll find out what there is to find about Reginald Cavendish and this lady’s death. Once you’ve got a suspect there are a million physical links you can look for which might connect them to the crime—the glue in the bottle cap, something will have left a trail.’ The two men had swapped the information they had come to share, and Kettle had finished his speech, but

he could not help adding one more line, 'But listen, Jo, don't go rattling his cage in the meantime.'

## Chapter 7

For the rest of the day, Fowler took Kettle's advice and resumed his erstwhile role as an ordinary conference delegate. Because time is very full at a conference the illusion is often created that a great deal must have happened in the wider world during the same period. When one has sat through five or six separate sessions, listened to papers presented by a dozen or more speakers whom one has never heard before, exerted one's brain to enter a world which they have laboriously uncovered through many months of research and reflection, and made interesting new acquaintances at a succession of coffee breaks and meals, what happened before one did all that seems a long time ago.

Although one has only neglected to read a newspaper or catch a news broadcast for a day or two, it is nevertheless easy to make the assumption that some momentous war must have broken out or some other major development occurred, and one is bewildered to discover that the same stories one already knew about are still lingering on—the peace talks continue and neither the threatened breakdown nor the promised breakthrough has occurred. Thus, by the following morning, Fowler—whose mind throughout this period had frequently reverted to thinking about the case when it had not been otherwise engaged—was feeling very restless. A murder had been committed and no one seemed to be doing much about it. He quietly concluded that it would do no harm if he resumed his gossip-gathering activities.

He arrived promptly when the dining hall first began serving breakfast. The first meal of the day, however, does not lend itself to this kind of detective work. Many people are not particularly sociable at that hour, and as eating is the only obvious reason for being

up and about, loitering around in the halls is apt to look suspicious. Also, as more people choose to skip breakfast than any other meal, it is not an ideal time to wait to catch a particular figure. Fowler decided to read the bulletin boards with apparent absorption, demonstrating a perverse desire to pursue this task with utter thoroughness. Louise Cavendish was wandering toward the serving area but, as he had already had one meal with her, and as he was not sure what new information she could add to the case against her ex-husband, he did not attempt to join her.

After ten minutes more of reading helpful advice for responding to various disaster scenarios which might befall one whilst staying on campus, Amanda Brown also appeared. She would be a useful informant indeed, a rich source of intimate and reasonably fresh details about Reg Cavendish. Unfortunately, she was deep in conversation with another post-graduate student. Fowler followed them in, but they took the last two seats at the end of a table so he was not able to overhear their breakfast conversation—let alone insinuate himself into it. He chose instead to occupy a position where he could keep track easily of everyone else who entered the dining hall. Reg Cavendish never appeared for breakfast. Neither did Father Alexis. Neither did Professor Osborne.

The first session was a plenary one in the main lecture hall. The speaker was Dr Judith Barrett, and her title was ‘Christmas: Christian Feast or Pagan Revelry?’. Fowler thought it was unfortunate that a paper on Christmas was being given in the middle of summer, but he conceded, in an effort to be fair, that as the society’s annual conference was always in July, the only alternative would be to ignore this subject altogether—a

solution which did not seem a just one given the prominent place which Christmas occupies in most Christian cultures.

There was some whispering happening on the platform. Fowler sensed that there must be some kind of minor mishap, a slide projector which was needed but not working, something along those lines. Within seconds, however, he had latched onto the real reason: Dr Reginald Cavendish was not there. As the president chose the plenary speakers personally, it was a convention of the society's that he or she was always the person who introduced them. On the other hand, the Church Antiquarian Society was also fanatical about strict time-keeping. There was nothing for it but for Professor Osborne to make the introduction himself. 'Ladies and Gentlemen, it would appear that our president has been unavoidably detained, so I think it might be best if we pressed on without him. Many of us are grateful to Dr Judith Barrett for her landmark book, A Natural History of Fairies . . .'

Fowler used his Pentecostal training to keep tabs on the congregation, as it were, but this only served to reveal that one crucial event never occurred: Reg Cavendish never did join the session. Fowler wondered whether he ought to leave the lecture early. The police ought to be notified at once. They had dithered, giving Cavendish time to sniff out what was happening. Now he had made up his mind to disappear. Every moment that passed before the police were informed increased his chances. Fowler wondered if he would try to leave the country. He could get to Heathrow, buy a plane ticket, and be off—all in a matter of hours. Assuming he has his passport with him, that is. If not, would he risk returning to Cambridge for it or would he try to hide out in the UK? Either way, the police needed to get on his trail fast. Nevertheless, such anxious thoughts

notwithstanding, Fowler's sense of decorum in the presence of his betters restrained him from drawing attention to himself by walking out in the middle of a paper.

Fowler had not been the only person who had been monitoring the situation. As soon as the lecture was over, Louise Cavendish rose promptly and walked purposefully out of the room. She went straight to the porter's lodge and demanded to know what her ex-husband's room number was. Whether or not it was their normal policy to release such information, the sheer force of her personality did the trick. She went straight to the room and knocked authoritatively on the door. Silence. She waited a few moments and then rapped loudly once again. No reply. Back to the porter's lodge. 'Who here has a master key?', she demanded. 'He told me he was feeling suicidal. We will need to get into his room at once.'

A maintenance man named Mike was deputised to accompany her on this errand. He had greasy black hair, deposits of black material clinging to his finger nails, and several visible tattoos. With Lousie Cavendish hovering immediately behind him, he turned the key. The door did not open. 'He's slid the bolt shut on the inside,' Mike informed her. He tried to enter through the next room which shared an en suite bathroom with Reg Cavendish's room, but the bathroom door had been bolted from the inside as well.

'You will need to break it open,' Louise Cavendish declared, more as a command than a verdict.

Mike suspected that there would prove to be no good reason for this lady's anxiety. He was not intimidated by her, and he also thought that his bosses would probably not approve of his busting down a door. Nevertheless, this was the kind of little project he most enjoyed: he fancied having a go at a door. Anyway, he had been here long enough;

he was ready to jack this job in if they wanted to hassle him. Louise Cavendish shadowed him as he went back to the office and procured some tools before returning to Reg Cavendish's room. He put a thin chisel into the crack between the door and its frame at the point where the bolt was. He struck it with a hammer, several confident blows. It was a neat job. Mike could not help but admire his own work. The blows had ripped the screws holding the brass frame of the bolting mechanism out of the wood, sending the whole thing falling to the floor inside the room. The door was hardly damaged at all. Once again, he turned his master key in the lock and this time the door opened easily.

The room, part of a whole block of identical ones which had been designed for first year students, was Spartan at the best of times. In the summer, however, when every individual touch which the students added during term time had been removed systematically, it was prison-like in its bleak utilitarianism. There were no windows at all. The door was situated on the right side of the room. In front of it, on the right wall with its head against the far wall, was a single bed, neatly made. On the left wall, also butting up against the far wall, was a simple wooden table with a drawer in it, which the university dignified with the name 'desk'. On top of it sat a moderate-sized piece of blue luggage with its lid down, and on top of it sat a set of screwdrivers and a roll of black tape. In front of the desk was a wooden chair. At its left side was a small wicker basket which was meant to serve as a bin. It contained only one item, a used light bulb. If one looked at the room standing with one's back to the far wall, say, standing between the desk and the bed, one saw the door on the left. On the right, was an exposed metal rod which the university referred to optimistically as 'the wardrobe'. There were several

items of clothing—a suit, a few shirts and pairs of trousers—hanging on it. Below it sat two pairs of shoes.

On the left wall when entering from the door—between the wardrobe and the desk—stood another door. It stood open. Walking through it one immediately faced another door. This door was bolted on the inside. To the left there was a sink, followed by a toilet. Above the sink was a mirror. At the bottom of the mirror there was a short shelf. Several items of toiletries—shaving cream, deodorant, toothbrush and toothpaste—had been haphazardly put upon it, as had a small, portable radio. Between the sink and the toilet another little wicker basket had been set. It was empty. On the bit of wall to the left of the far door was fixed a toilet roll dispenser. It held a newish roll of paper.

From wall to wall on the right side was a white acrylic bath. The lamp which usually sat on top of the desk had been put inside the bath. It was plugged in to the socket beside the desk. Both rooms had been designed to be as small as possible; the cord reached comfortably. The red lamp was submerged beneath the water of the full bath. So also was the dead, naked body of Dr Reginald Cavendish.

For once, Louise Cavendish seemed at a loss as to what to do. ‘Should we unplug it?’ she said to Mike in an uncertain whisper. It was a genuine question for a change.

‘You’re not suppose to touch anything,’ Mike replied firmly. ‘What we need to do is call the police.’ He was apt to defy the police on a fairly regularly basis, but he had a finely tuned sense of what was a scrap one might be able to wriggle out of with a bit of luck and bravado and what was a serious issue which ought not to be messed with at all.

‘But we shouldn’t just leave him here,’ she ventured hesitantly. ‘Should I stay here while you call them?’

‘No, the lock on the door is still good and there’s a phone just down the hall. We’ll lock it up and wait for the police to arrive. They like everything to be left well alone.’

The police arrived promptly, taking charge of the locked room. As Fowler had already phoned Detective Superintendent Mark Kettle on the general grounds that Reg Cavendish seemed to have deserted his post, it did not take very long before he was on the scene as well. Fowler’s prime suspect was dead.

## Chapter 8

It was suicide of course. At least, that was the report which quickly spread from delegate to delegate until its dissemination appeared to be complete before the police had even left the scene. Kettle felt on much firmer ground. He understood violent death; he knew its contours and was not afraid of it. One thing was sure: it was definitely not an accident. Someone had opened the lamp's plug and taped up the earth cable. It was a thorough, tidy job. In a peculiar sense, Kettle even found it worthy of admiration. It was several long hours before the Detective Superintendent could have a conversation with Fowler. For the sake of privacy, the two men met in Fowler's room.

'Suicide!' Kettle pronounced with disgust, 'I thought this was supposed to be a group of Christians.' Kettle adhered dogmatically to the ancient Christian teaching that suicides were automatically damned, as did the bulk of the Tongues of Fire faithful. Fowler had shed this teaching, along with many other religious notions from his childhood, but he knew exactly what his erstwhile co-religionist meant.

Fowler gazed out the window—his room was on the side of the accommodation block which did have windows—and muttered wistfully, 'Those who are ready to die the church declares unready; those who are unready the church declares ready. It is one of those little, nasty ecclesiastical catch-22s.'

'Which of course begs the question,' Kettle interjected, brushing aside any descent into philosophy, 'why did he do it?'

'He was murdered,' Fowler noted languidly.

Kettle exploded. 'I told you, you academics spend so much time making simple things complicated, that you can't see straight anymore. The man was naked in his

bath—there is no sign of any struggle on his body. He was in a windowless room with the doors bolted on the inside. Electrocutation in the bath is a classic pattern of male suicide. He fixed the plug—he knew what he was doing. What more do you want?’

‘It doesn’t make sense. He was in the middle of his presidential conference—the height of his career.’

‘What are talking about? You yourself thought he had done a runner. Maybe he did kill the professor lady, and he knew we were on to him.’

‘No, Mark. It doesn’t wash. He hadn’t even been arrested yet, let alone convicted. There would be time later to commit suicide, once he knew he was really trapped.’

‘There is no right time to top yourself,’ Kettle retorted, but this was more a theological statement than an observation of human behaviour. ‘Listen, Jo. You can’t see the wood for the trees. Cavendish committed suicide. Case closed. Besselsleigh was either an accident or she was killed by Cavendish. Either way, case closed. This is all over but the paper work.’

‘For a society to lose one president is a tragedy, but losing two looks like sheer carelessness,’ Fowler muttered, almost to himself.

‘What are you saying, Jo?’

‘I’m asking the question: who would want to kill both Professor Besselsleigh and Dr Cavendish?’

‘And what do you answer yourself, Pooh?’ Kettle retorted glibly, drawing on a literary allusion of his own, formed from years of patiently reading to his children before they went to bed.

‘When I first thought through Besselsleigh’s death, my prime suspect was Louise Cavendish. Fact’, he said striking his right index finger with his left one in a mime of counting, ‘she is bitter about the breakdown of her marriage. Fact’, he said again, striking the next digit, ‘Besselsleigh was his first partner in infidelity. Conclusion, if she was ready to get revenge on Besselsleigh, she could well have been ready to deal with her ex-husband as well.’

‘It happens,’ Kettle conceded, offering grudging approval to such a banal scenario as crimes of passion.

‘But it is odd,’ Fowler continued, ‘that both last year’s and this year’s president might have been murdered.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Enmity against the society. The case against Louise Cavendish fits both deaths, but so does the Russian gangsters theory. Perhaps they want to set a public example for some of their more important British clients, showing them that they are not to be messed with. Maybe lots of threats have happened behind the scenes, and the committee is being very stubborn. Anyway, the motive for killing Cavendish is exactly the same as for Besselsleigh.’

‘It’s not personal, just business,’ Kettle said, offering his impersonation of an Italian-American Mafioso.

‘That reminds me,’ Fowler snapped his fingers in his excitement, ‘I’ve got a new suspect I haven’t told you about.’

‘Go on.’

‘Get this down. Dr Chandler Johnson, query Senior Lecturer at Cheshire University. He was caught trying to pass off some other scholar’s work as his own at last year’s conference. Besselsleigh and Cavendish teamed up to make sure he was publicly disgraced. He’s career has probably been ruined.’

‘He gets caught copying some other kid’s homework so he commits a double murder,’ Kettle summarized dubiously.

‘Mark, I’m with you: there is never a good reason for murder. But murders happen. I think two have happened at this conference. If I’m right, the murderer needs to be caught. Of course, he or she doesn’t reason like the rest of us.’

‘God help me, I know I could commit murder,’ Kettle reflected pensively.

‘Yes, I know,’ Fowler said impatiently, ‘and you could be tempted to doctor up your CV, but you couldn’t imagine yourself being tempted to do the former in order to punish the people who exposed the latter. I understand all that. That just proves that bitterness is not the foothold the devil would try to use to bring you down.’

‘Listen, Jo,’ Kettle said with an impressive tone of authority in his voice, ‘First of all, Cavendish’s suicide means that the murder investigation has been closed. Second of all, it was never open. You understand? But,’ he raised his finger defiantly as if he was going to give a warning rather than a concession, ‘I will run a few checks on these people on the quiet. And hear me now, Jo,’ his tone had softened suddenly, ‘God knows I’m not a superstitious person, what I’m going to tell you is simply a fact of human nature: murders don’t often come in twos. Lots of murderers, so called, are just some bloke who killed somebody. But a true murderer is a slave to his sin just the same as a liar or a

fornicator or anyone else. If someone has really killed two people, let me tell you straight, given the right circumstances, chances are they will kill again.’