

Two Seas

by Danielle Ashley

Thin columns of smoke were rising from very subtly coloured, frozen ground around the estate.

Michael Dickson opened his eyes upon an image he had memorised, a white and featureless ceiling. Light was creeping into every corner of his bedding; there was nowhere to hide. The sun was the clock that dictated the day, in this enormous house, and this was deemed to be good for the residents – although very often, like on that day, there was no sun to actually see in the sky.

He knew what was going to happen that day. He'd heard them talking about it as if he couldn't hear, and he'd been looking forward to it with an apathy that could seem almost ungrateful. He had been told to pack his things. As if to confirm to Dickson that the order was really to be carried out, activity was underway in the courtyard outside. Horses had been ordered from the stables, boys had gathered sacks on the gravel. He'd heard them, during his fruitless attempt at shielding his eyes from the brightness.

He got dressed in haste, for he knew that the inspector would be knocking on his door and if he hadn't been ready the consequences would be dire. The leather bag given to him to hold his belongings was not large enough, but nevertheless he only filled a small part of it, with only a few of his best garments. The rest would be left behind to be burned in the stoves.

The hall, from which his room was separated by a twice-elbowing, high-ceiling corridor, was filled with fellow dwellers who had just heard the news, and regardless of personal attachment to him, all were out to see the spectacle. Dickson had kept it all to himself. He had spared them the futile excitement. The few he had befriended were waiting restlessly at the front of the crowd to say goodbye. Shouts of 'Silence!' resonated on cue.

Edward, called the Greek, with his frightening grey beard and grooved forehead stared at him with God knows what feelings in his bulging eyes. Johnstone, called Jest, was on the other side nodding without the courage to open his mouth, while Zacco was his usual fawning self, but his demeanour was so erratic that morning that Dickson couldn't decide if he was happy or sad to see him leave; certainly he was excited, animated, spirited. The poor Italian had gambled himself to within an inch of his very death, until someone decided to take the matter in hand. He'd been Mike Dickson's closest friend for some time. He was the only one to somewhat understand the descent to madness caused by the loss of all of one's fortune and more, much of which had occurred in large lots, gone up in flames over the course of one night. He would still lie awake in the darkness at times, sleepless and sweating, agonising over the luck that turned against him and re-living before his eyes the scenes of his most ruinous defeats. 'I lost! I lost!' he was known for shouting, and repeating under his breath each time the thought entered his head, which was often. This time he grabbed Dickson by the arm and recited a variation of his common utterance. Dickson would usually nod at this, but today the barrage was so intense that it precluded all meaningful reaction from an interlocutor. 'I lost! I lost!!!' The poor wretch had probably tried to say goodbye and this is all that came out. Dickson patted his shoulder in response, unable to speak. Then the guard arrived.

He was led to the door, passing through the pitiful crowd. Everyone stayed silent whilst any guards were in sight. Even the fools could work out how to escape the cane.

The carriage waited in the courtyard with an open door. His bag already loaded, the driver stared ahead while Dickson embarked. The ride would take many hours.

The countryside passed by, silent, frozen, without any landmarks to tell the hill ahead from the one before. Dickson opened his mouth several times, hoping that by the time he'd opened it, words of conversation would come out. However he knew that the driver had been well-instructed as to who his passenger would be, and nothing he might say would be taken seriously. None of the replies he might get would be more than empty, polite noises designed to tranquilise the patient. Would anybody ever listen to him again?

Blotches of darkness were coming into view now, the first roofs of the villages encircling his hometown; the strokes of smoke suspended in the air, which he had spied in the distance, were now traced back to their origin. The horses were sweating, and they looked very unhappy, but painfully they carried on, looking forward to a reward at the end of the journey that would probably not be forthcoming. At least the horses weren't feeling the bitter cold, which had soaked through Dickson's jacket in a matter of minutes, and was now a hair's breadth away from his core.

A few faces turned, among those working at the sides of the street. Inside some of the windows, soft glows were visible. At the sight of this, Dickson leant back and rested his back on the cushions, closing his eyes and waiting through the last few moments of the ride.

He was dropped off at the address that was on his papers, none having taken the trouble to confirm the information. At this point, the silent driver finally came to life. Once he'd unloaded his bag, he smoothed his thin beard, then removed his glove and gave him a firm handshake, and with a frank expression bordering on a very tight lipped smile, looked at him directly in the eyes and said, 'Good luck, Sir.'

That was a surprise, Dickson thought as he lifted the bag off the ground. Perhaps he ought to have risked it during the journey, and asked him questions after all. Or perhaps the driver was simply momentarily cheered as he eyed the ale at the end of his day. The feeling of freezing toes reminded Dickson of the inconsequence of his thoughts. He raised his gaze to look at the window that used to be his, its fate now unknown. Had *they* not known about it? He winced at the prospect of being locked out of his property and thus being homeless in his own street. He slowly turned around, looking for some signs of hope, until he was back facing the same way, his head turned to his window up there and whatever may be in it. Finally a 'Hoi!' call startled him back to attention.

He traced the sound back to a row of dead carcasses. Great, I'm speaking to the dead, he told himself with sarcasm. Am I not a lunatic vagrant after all? However, after staring for a moment, he discovered a human face in the darkness behind those lumps of dismembered livestock.

'Mr Dickson, aren't you?'

Dickson recognised the butcher. He knew the face, vaguely.

Pleasantries were exchanged which the tired and ill-tempered Dickson struggled hard to bear. 'So where have you been?' Said the butcher with deeply annoying false mirth. 'Your servant came one

day to give me your keys.’ Dickson had no such servant. ‘If not for that, I would have thought that you were dead!’

Dickson immediately elected against telling the truth about his disappearance.

‘I went away.’

‘But where?’ Said the butcher with an animated grin. ‘The further I’ve been is Crieff!’

‘I went on a really long trip,’ Dickson added with an artfully pitched voice as to make himself sound bored, hoping he’d be left alone. Dickson was not good at the game of lying. He didn’t remember the man’s name, either. Perhaps he never knew it.

‘That was very long!’ retorted the man with amusement, his curiosity still annoyingly aroused. ‘So you trade? How exciting! Where?’

Dickson said the first thing that came into his head.

‘China.’

‘Oh good! You’ll make a friend now then. A Chinaman just moved in. In there! Into the house next to yours. Just over there.’

Great, thought Dickson in supreme indifference.

Dickson had never in his life tasted the thoroughly bitter taste of the lack of human dignity. Even during his stretch being locked up, he’d maintained, despite the rigours and the lack of amenities, a core of self-respect and value that had helped him through. There had been a complete lack of both though, during that night, as had been forced to sleep rough, like a common beggar, protecting his bones from the encroaching ice by the sheer despair of body heat and discarded material.

His bones ached fiercely; his back felt like the fallen branch of a tree that was born bent and didn’t want to be straightened, crackling, and shredding itself as it was forced to do so. His hands and feet were dead lumps of foreign flesh.

And yet the indignity of a night under the arch of a doorway in the street, the degrading advice he’d received by a fellow homeless man, and the disapproving looks of smarter-dressed burghers who would, in usual circumstances, have been well beneath him, was not as great as the repulsion he would have suffered by sleeping in his own home.

Dickson indeed could not bring his imagination to think of such place as his dwelling – and his imagination was rich indeed. He had unlocked and opened his door with the key received from the butcher, expecting – naively, he conceded – to find what he had left.

What welcomed him as he pushed the door open were the broken bottles, the bare stone, the plaster dust and the absence of any recognisable furniture he’d left. A black circle of burnt coals in the middle of the master bedroom gave a hint as to where the pieces of furniture might have ended up during his absence. A whole wall was missing. All the rooms looked empty and slumped into. Other than refuse and ash, there wasn’t much there left at all. It was a house utterly violated.

The startle and dismay he brushed aside to avoid the pain, selecting instead a palette of rage and hatred to silently express to himself what he felt.

But what shook him into a more immediate concern were the rats.

'Let's get out of here,' he said expressionlessly to Jonah the meddling butcher who was waiting on the doorstep for a sign.

And so it had happened; he had been dropped off, freed and released back to nowhere, with not one hand to rely on until he could get his affairs in order. And wasn't this hope itself dubitable? Hadn't his ordeal made him unfit for that?

At the first lights of dawn he went, judging futile any further attempt at sleep. The stone slab was like a hot griddle in reverse – instantly freezing, that is, instead of scorching, and the lack of sleep wasn't a concern. He started walking without a goal, passing other beggars as well as merchants starting their day. A row of leafless trees guided him along through the city, until he stopped at an unpaved, untended patch of clay-like loose ground, upon which a building might have stood previously. As soon as he stopped walking, the chill invaded him again, and the resumption of his aimless trek was merely a reflex.

Miles and miles he walked, coming into glancing contact with the shore of the Firth and continuing along it heading east, leaving the city boundaries and heading into Haddingtonshire. For hours he walked. What difference did it make where he went, now that he had nowhere to return to? As he kept going, he grew somewhat more content. Without realising, he had broken a sweat and was now almost pleasantly warmed.

He was now standing at the top of one of several grassed mounds, onto which he had deviated from his path in order to gain a vantage point and rest. As his body drew breath, the inescapable cold returned to reach through his damp shirt. Dickson winced, his temporary relief brought to an end. Below him he could see the row of glum houses, the slow smoke in the insufficient light. He looked over at the black cove behind, wondering what might lie there. His eyes followed a pair of fishing vessels that had headed back to shore and were presently about to dock. Who were they, and what had they caught today?

As he descended back towards the road, Dickson suddenly started to feel concerned about which direction to turn towards. He ignored the time of day.

Haze and dilute smoke began to thicken the air, turning anything beyond a stone's throw's distance into nothing more than a grey smear. Finally, he felt reassured enough by the narrow shape of a bell tower standing out from an irregular assembly of roofs. During his internment, Dickson had faithfully recited all that was required of him, but within his private mind he doubted whether he was a religious man. Which is why he walked across the cemetery at the front of the church entrance almost ready for argument and fight.

The church door was heavy to open but yielded, and the colourless chill of the outside gave way to a dry and echoing penumbra. Nobody was in sight. The triptych of stained glass windows behind the altar were bright with the overcast light, but cast no rays. Irksomely, the light they let through actually made it harder to see, as they only lit the nave weakly whilst stopping the eye from adapting

to the darkness. The candlelight was a much more comforting glow, warm and living, bringer of a fleeting pleasure to the cheeks.

Fair wooden benches were set in tidy lines. The walls were humble brick and roughly cut stone laid out in irregular patterns. Some scaffolding had been erected to maintain the fragile lead-lines of the windows, or perhaps to replace a broken pane. Dickson had no time for admiring paintings, but he did notice a pair on either side of the altar and there were also some un-noteworthy reliefs above each column. It was a medium-sized church with a low amount of detail and sophistication, yet tasteful. Marble was sparingly used on the floor. He'd noticed this, because now he was looking at the floor – exploring, seeking the best corner into which to lay himself down, to fall into slumber and finally rest, taking advantage of his being alone.

Wedged between the last bench on the right side and the divider at the end of the congregation section, the corner most sheltered and warm (he'd learnt fast to find one), he woke after a sublime sleep. His instincts had taken over, and survival trumped pride. And although this could be uncomfortable, there was satisfaction to be had in surviving. As he breathed the cold air outside, where he had gone for a short walk to invigorate himself, he thought: perhaps he belonged in the mud.

On his return inside, a figure previously unseen was now present.

A priest in a black cloak, his shoulders turned to him, was arranging something on the altar.

He continued doing so even after the door slammed – which could not possibly have gone unheard.

Dickson considered his options. He could have sat down and pretended to pray, hoping not to be interrupted or engaged. He could have left. Instead he remained at the back, staring at the floor, displaying uncertainty and thoughtfulness, waiting for the events to choose their own way.

The priest walked off again, holding something in his arms, disappearing behind a painted wood panel beside the altar. Dickson sat down at the very back; his mind was dispersing and scattering the atoms of despair that were trying to reassemble themselves into the ugly prospects that haunted him. He considered this place merely a room to sleep, a warm space that someone else had conveniently paid for.

'Welcome', a gentle yet well marked voice propagated down towards Dickson.

The figure appeared again from behind the panel, and looked directly across, with a friendly smile imparted on its features. 'We welcome all, traveller,' he said, while descending the steps connecting the altar to the lower floor and walking briskly towards Dickson.

Dickson took a while to think, before opting for the blandest of answers. 'Thank you Father.' He was anxious to produce a story that would avoid him having to explain much. However he failed.

'But I'm not a traveller you see...'

'I know, I know. But we are all travellers in the Lord's great pilgrimage, from our cradle to the destiny beyond.'

Dear God, he thought. This man knows his lines. I wish he'd leave me alone. Nevertheless, Dickson nodded, surprised to find himself more or less in agreement after actually thinking about what had just been said.

'That's right,' he acknowledged.

'I am Father Balisch.'

Dickson was displaying an insecure stance which promptly begged some more reassuring words.

'My friend, be at ease: this is my home. It's God's home.'

The guy was cheerful. He was not old, had a slim build and a long face. He spoke in a somewhat foreign accent. He enunciated very well, although the English way – he was certainly no Scot. And he spoke very deliberately, very intently. He wasn't showing what one would call excitement – but getting across his message seemed to matter much to him.

'We are in the house of God', he repeated.

'Indeed we are, Father.' Dickson spoke more securely now. He had decided to get his friendly side on the stage. 'My name is Lewis. I'm pleased to meet you.'

'I'm pleased just as much as you.'

An awkward cliché, but the man means it, thought Dickson.

'Do you ever wonder why God causes sinners to happen upon one another?' continued Father Balisch. 'Every encounter has a meaning. ... So why are you here?'

Dickson struggled with himself as to what he should answer.

'Affairs out of town, Father.'

It came out convincingly. But contrary to Dickson's wishes, the priest pressed him.

'Affairs of what kind, my friend?'

At this point Dickson saw the chance to inject some degree of truth into the story.

'My house has suffered damage, and I must see to it that it is repaired.'

The second he said it, Dickson cringed at the wooden affectedness of his choice of words. No surprise, because no matter how close to the truth, he was still lying.

'Good heavens, that is regrettable to hear.'

'It is very saddening.'

Both men were nodding in agreement now. On one side Dickson was itching to free himself from the enquiring clergyman, but on the other he knew that to do so would mean leaving the building, leaving him exposed to cold and wind again. In this house of the Lord, the word that mattered was 'house', and it was a warm one.

Finally Dickson swallowed his pride and asked.

'Say, Father, would you allow me to sleep the night, here? I have nowhere I can go.'

The priest smiled, delighted. 'But, good Lewis, I don't make the invitations. *He* does.' He indicated the ceiling. 'The Great Landlord. And he brought you here today.'

Dickson was not entirely sure whether this ultimately meant yes, or no.

'You may of course stay. It is a bitter weather that we have today,' said the Father, clearing the doubt. At hearing this, Dickson started to compose a formula of gratitude in his mind, but the Father reprised and pressed on, the advantage now firmly on his side.

'...But let me ask you, dear Lewis, one thing.'

Dickson braced himself. But he was spared.

'Never mind,' said Father Balisch in a sudden change of mind. 'I shall retire now. You are welcome to stay!' He repeated the last sentence as if there was any risk that Dickson might not have heard it before, then started to walk away.

'Thank you, Father.'

The priest had now reached the concealed door from which he had emerged before.

'I will bring you some thing to stay warm!'

'I am very thankful.'

And indeed, Dickson was given blankets. It was also at that point that he confessed he'd been using a false name, and offered his real one. After being wished a good sleep and being left alone in the church, Dickson wrapped himself well, and closed his eyes.

Later that day, in the mid-afternoon, not much sooner had Dickson stirred and awakened from his sleep that Father Balisch descended once again across the building, wielding the suspended question from the previous exchange.

'Say Michael, have you not a friendly home to go to in the whole of the city, I wonder? What befell you, my friend?'

Dickson pursed his lips involuntarily and fear rose. He began to elaborate further untruths – that he was a foreign landlord, that he did not want to be recognised, that he was robbed, and so on, but just as he was about to give up the fight, the priest gave up the chase, and closed the exchange with an empty remark.

But Dickson had to open up, and his mouth, having already opened, was duly picked up by the clergyman's watchful eye. He sensed the beginning of a confession and acted as he had learnt to. 'God is ready to take your troubles, dear Michael. He can carry them better than you can. You only have to offer them to Him.'

Dickson, conceding, after a pause that afforded him the chance to choose how to begin his tale, began:

'I became very ill.'

Balisch nodded.

'Of a very damning illness,' Dickson continued. 'It scraped my life clean of all I'd achieved.'

Father Balisch was listening with intense interest.

'After I was well enough again, I was returned here with nothing.'

'Why did this happen, my friend?'

Dickson shook his head. 'I lost my mind. I will not speak of the things I thought I'd seen. But they led to folly. To many stages of folly, ending in this: I was found, wrapped in a cloak, almost dead from exposure, at the top of a chalk hill in the south of England. I was shouting out the obscene things I had seen. I was in an evil rapture.'

The question he was expecting arrived on cue. 'Why had you gone to the south of England, Michael?'

'I followed a voice inside of me. I fancied people conspiring to seize power. They told me to go there. To follow them.'

'What kind of power did you want?'

'I didn't desire power. But I took part nonetheless. I knew that my vision was not going to bring us power. I knew the end would be ruin. But I didn't speak a word of it...'

'I must say, Michael, this looks the work of the Unholy. If not power, what did you seek, then?'

'I knew what I sought, but I can't speak of it.'

'Why might that be, Michael?'

'It is not something that can be described.'

The priest was completely still, waiting for Dickson to carry on.

'It was part of my madness, I now understand. A concept formed of the tainted transports of an unhealthy mind, gathered by chance, and cast into a shape that resembles a human concept, but which does not in fact exist and which I cannot describe.'

More silence followed that.

'A complex of sick emotions wrapped in the guise of an ideal. A moral hallucination, if you will. Something that possessed meaning in my eyes only, and which to a healthy mind is nothing but a shadow with a twisted shape.'

'Does it have meaning to you even now, Michael?'

'It is less sharp than before. But it does.'

'And still, with the mind of a sane man, you cannot explain it?'

'I can't, Father. In fact, I can't explain it even to myself. I only know it by its name.'

'Its name?'

Dickson had truly cornered himself.

'Yes. I even imagined a name for it.'

This time Dickson would not give ground. He had no intention of pronouncing the name.

The priest went for the kill. 'Imagined... or known?'

Dickson stared into his still eyes. They were still, and patient, but they hid the fire of the drive to knowledge that all intelligent men shared. He knew that if he opened his mind there could be no telling what would be pruned out of it against his will. He stared into the priest's eyes, silent, for a time long enough to be considered unwillingness to answer. He imagined grasping, greedy hands behind

the pupils, ready to pry open his head and desecrate it. And even if he had been willing to share the full tale, the act of drawing his memories through his mouth again, to relive the climax in enough detail to be able to verbalize it, was something the very thought of made his veins shiver. He held still and wordless, in a suspended cosmos of horror.

‘My goodness,’ the terse voice of Father Jordan Balisch finally broke the stillness. ‘I thank the Lord that you are back with us, Michael. I am glad you are alive and I’m glad you are with the Lord.’

Dickson was still shaken to the bones.

‘Indeed,’ he brought himself to utter.

The two, by mutual unspoken consent, stopped talk of such things, and instead spoke of daily concerns. Dickson was asked to help in trivial errands, which he was more than inclined to execute, and was then rewarded with a simple hot gruel of corn meal.

The night was peaceful. Dickson had roused once or twice from his sleep, but was met with the gentle mildness of the temperature and the aroma of wood and stone. He felt at ease, and fell back into a deep and relaxing sleep. He dreamt of safety, of the shelter of a private home, until a knocking interrupted him. He turned towards the door in his dream, went to open it, but before he could do so he was awake and dispelled of the vision.

Instead, he was on the floor of the church again, on a beautiful morning which sent warm-coloured sunlight streaming through the church windows at a grazing angle. The knocking continued at regular intervals. Knock... knock... knock... As nobody seemed to be heeding it, and thinking the visitor perhaps important, he went himself to answer the large door of the building.

As he turned around the screen at the far end of the aisle, he saw his misjudgement – for what he’d heard was not work of the door knocker but a carpenter with an axe chopping some long piece of wood on the floor of the church. Balisch was also there, standing and observing the completion of the work. Before any of the two took notice of him, he moved closer and took a better look at the log being broken up and disjoined. It was the crucifix which had hitherto stood tall in the central position of the altar. The cross, along with the wooden Christ, were being reduced to fragments.

Even Dickson, who secretly held many doubts about the doctrines taught and promulgated by the Church, was horrified at the sight of the Saviour being dug into with a dirty hatchet and made into firewood. Yet the cleric kept watching the job unperturbed.

As he had now been noticed and smiled at, Dickson did not restrain his surprise and, in a tone full of incredulity, he questioned Balisch.

‘But Father,’ said Dickson, further reinforcing his puzzlement with hand gestures, ‘Why are you having this carving destroyed?’

‘To make space, Michael,’ the priest calmly replied.

‘But for what? And isn’t it sacred?’

‘No, Michael, it isn’t,’ came the reply, ‘now that the question is clear, it’s not anymore.’

‘Which question?’

'The question of our belief, my son. Come here, let's leave the gentleman to his work.' He led Dickson back towards the altar through the mid-line of the hall. 'The transition has been completed. We are rejecting the deceptions of the past.'

'I'm not sure if I... understand, Father... at all...'

'I am sure this is all quite new to you. And indeed it is new to many of my fellow servants of God who have never heard of this but are about to. A change is in the works, and it is a change both necessary and good. It took a long time to find the truth, but now our great Synod has unravelled it. It's me, and many other courageous pioneers, who are taking it into the light for the first time. We may be opposed – but our word will come to outshine the others. The deception, my dear Michael, has ruled our minds for too many centuries.'

'I still...'

'All the way back, to Constantine, even further, perhaps, plans were afoot to confound and mislead, and claim the true light for themselves. The cruelty! The lives squandered! No, this correction has been waiting enough.'

Balisch's voice had abandoned the colloquial and had taken on oratory tones.

'Dickson, the falsehood! The falsehood of the cross! A dead-end! An empty symbol, a deaf and powerless device! And how many pray to it still! And no wonder they then come to us and demand to know, why none of their prayers are answered. But not any longer, this is the good news, Michael! Not any more.'

And as he savoured the meaning of his own words, he radiated what seemed a kind of tense and expectant joy.

'The cross is a falsehood, Michael. An irrelevance. A decoy. The true gate to the Holy lies somewhere else. It's been discarded, forgotten, but not by all. Not by the truly studious. Not by us. The gate to the essence of our belief leads through *the other* symbol, Dickson.'

Dickson's breathing had stopped.

'Ichtus.'

And as Balisch said the word, he pointed to the new stained glass roundel crowning the windows: a huge fish in a frontal view, with an open mouth dominating and observing the congregation from the summit of the apse.

Giving up any pretence of composure, Dickson said through a very dry mouth: 'I need some air'.

Then he turned and ran for the door, now seemingly to him impossibly far away. He yanked the door open, relieved when the heavy black handle ceased the contact with his hands, and sprung out into a frantic dash on which he felt his life depended.

His ears heard something like crickets. The wind that usually froze his fingers off, could not penetrate or rouse him. He was suddenly aware of the encircling nature of environment. Things behind him, shrubs, bushes, grass, gravestones, and all that he could not see but still existed, lived, overcrowded his ability to reason, and delivered deep discomfort at the knowledge that he could not, however hard he tried, be able to see all of them at once.

As he continued his escape onto the path that cut under the cypresses, he came in sight of the road, and he spotted a black coach come through the green and grey patchwork of grass and stones. He sprinted, and shouted until he'd gotten the driver's attention and bid him to stop. Without awaiting leave to do so, he jumped aboard.

A man and a woman, the former fat but neatly dressed, the latter plainly attired and looking more outraged than frightened by his sudden irruption, tried to dissuade him from any further impertinence, but he got their attention by presenting them with something he had in his pocket. Previously, when he had visited his despoiled house, Dickson had seen that by some kind of miracle his heavy writing desk had survived the devastation and looting that had ravaged his abode, and while the butcher waited outside, Dickson quickly retrieved a gold coin from a secret drawer he had had installed in it.

The occupants of the coach thus accepted his request to take him back to the madhouse by the quickest way they knew.

Back they went, into the depths of Lanarkshire.

Dickson stared, through the coach window, at the white, almost triangular façade of the place he knew. The winter harshness that could turn even the most lovingly tended garden into a sharp tangle of dry twigs had done just that, and there was no telling which plants would revive and which ones would stay dead on the arrival of spring.

The man in the coach tried to conceal how impatiently he waited to be rid of his unexpected passenger. Yet, perhaps owing to some fear of further unpredictable behaviour, he allowed Dickson to take his time in dismounting and setting off on his own way. He finally did so, and the coach started to move away slowly behind him.

He walked towards the entrance, expecting guards to come to ascertain his identity, however none came; he reached the door and pushed. What met him was not warmth, but only a barely less uncomfortable chill, and a waft of stale odours.

The reception room was, contrary to his recollection, devoid of furniture and nobody was to be seen. Beyond a second door, which lacked the guard that would always block it, was the main hall with the high ceiling, a widened and more richly decorated corridor. Papers were on the floor, and pieces of wood. The white, still daylight came in through the windows on the upper half of the walls and by the time it reached the lower volumes through which Dickson moved it has dissipated to almost a grainy nothing.

Dickson did not know the plan of the building, beyond the very few rooms he had been allowed to visit during his stay. The cells he passed were all empty. The bare halls he now traversed were windowless, but doors abounded. In his head, he had been counting the corners that his scramble through an unknown corridor was taking him through, and he began to suspect that he might be coming back round in a circle. A big empty building this might be, and I homeless, Dickson thought, but not even in the midst of the most terrible storm will I spend a night in such a place. The transformation was so stark that he seemed to forget that he'd already spent many nights there. Then he felt a glimmer of recognition; familiarity started to guide him. Such instinct lead him on,

indeed successfully, to what used to be Mr Stoppard's watch desk and the junction that took him to his what used to be his own room.

Dickson's old room was no more remarkable than any of the others: bare and unloved in, not even a bed but scattered wooden furniture that appeared to be there for storage rather than for use. And then Dickson once again came out of the room, and turned his head left and right. To the left was the path he came from, which was also the path that he was always led to and from for all purposes. To the right the hall continued, though not for long, and then a set of double doors connected it to some other place. He realised that he had never been that way, not once in the long months spent there, nor had it occurred to him to even ask himself what may be there. He took a few steps in the direction of the double doors, and already he was in unexplored territory despite still being in direct line of sight of his old room's door. Just before the double doors another small opening on the right begged to be examined. With a strange apprehension he looked inside, as if the free roaming he'd done so far had been absolutely permitted while this new curiosity was wholly illicit. It was a simple, small hygiene room, now as cluttered as any other. He realised that it shared a wall with his own room.

His curiosity satisfied, he slipped himself through the double doors, which he had no need to touch as they were already ajar enough for him to pass through. For a while the passage darkened as he went on, but then brightened again as open windows appeared. This time light was bright and came straight from the ceiling. He was now overlooking a lower floor over a bannister, which he could presumably reach by locating a staircase that led there although none was in sight. This new wing and interconnection of floors was new to him despite having lived yards from it for months.

And then he came to the door. The door was no special door, nor was it marked, nor were hints leading to it. He simply knew the door, and was led there by something that he couldn't distinguish from his own volition, or by blind chance. But once in front of the door there was no doubt whether he should open this or another door, or whether to head somewhere else. Without thinking, he simply took hold of the handle and opened the door.

The chamber was vast. It was wooden-panelled, and had had much work done to it, in the guise of carvings, polishing and varnish. It looked almost like a courtroom. Dickson knew one of those from some time long ago. The ceiling was high, and light could come in. The benches were empty, in readiness. But it was also terribly untidy. Workmen's tools were strewn across the floor. Rough wooden planks were balanced against the smooth wooden walls.

Dickson found nothing further to do than to sit himself down. Observing left and right, the structure to which his bench belonged, almost resembled a church's choir assembly. No longer scared, he ran his eyes around. Then he thought he caught sight of the foot of someone sat next to him. But it was only a scrap of cloth.

Across the room, separated by yet more clutter, was a similar high-backed bench, turned the opposite way. Dickson went to inspect it, and as he circled it he jumped at the human figure he saw – but quickly recognised the familiar sight.

'Oh dear, oh dear, you at least! It's me! It's me!'

Zacco the Italian was looking at him without surprise.

'What happened to this place? Where are the Rectors?'

Zacco oscillated back and forward. Was it a nod? Was it restlessness?

Then the door opened. Dickson didn't see it, as the high boards of the seating structure blocked the view. But heard it. And heard the steps. Decisive, confident and rehearsed. They had reached him before he could estimate their distance.

Balisch, in a fresh clerical robe, had come. Smart, black, simple in its cut, almost devoid of detail save straight and sober white trims, yet pressed and impeccably fitted, the religious suit was crowned by a face that didn't have a wrinkle of irritation in it, and by a smile conveying a similar purity. Unlike the Italian, the priest exuded gladness at the sight of Dickson. It was a moment of joy, almost.

'We are here!' he exclaimed, 'and we will begin.' His happiness was evidently tied to the clear sense of intention which drove his sharp and controlled movements.

'A new age for Christianity has begun. And to bring the news, to bring the news, to the land, and beyond, this is what we have to do.'

Balisch stuck a hand under his robe, and ran it over his chest until he stopped and returned it to the view of the two other men. In his hand was a golden coin. And on his face, the same unchanged expression.

Without offering an explanation, he placed the coin on the table in front of Zacco. Dickson didn't have to stretch his thinking too much to recognise it. However it no longer felt his, but foreign and soiled. The priest then produced more items which followed the coin and were placed next to it. These additional props in this infernal game rested directly between the coin and the end of the table where Zacco was seated. It was two pairs of bone dice. Zacco's face fired up with a surge of life.

Dickson saw a chance. He resolved to try to make the most of it.

'Father! This is not Christianity! This is gambling! It's sin! Have you not read the Book? What came into your mind? My God, Father!'

Balisch's expression altered only the tiniest amount. 'It is not gambling, Lewis, because we already know the outcome.'

Dickson's tension was mounting so fast that he could no longer be still, and he started to turn his head around, in search for anything, any argument with which he could stop the cleric's demented rituals.

'And there's something for you, too, Lewis,' he added, and he signalled that he wished to be followed as he started to move toward a supported pulpit-like structure. But Dickson, in a final attempt to end this situation, ended the charade, stating loudly: 'My name is not Lewis!'

But Balisch, without stopping, replied: 'Our names are fleeting in the eyes of the Lord. You can call yourself what you prefer.' Dickson noticed with chilling horror that the coin he had given up, and that now was apparently being staked, was a French coin with the effigy of the doomed king that had been so gruesomely beheaded. Louis number Sixteen.

Dickson felt as if all of his blood had turned into vapour and its pressure was pushing outward altogether from within the top of his chest and in his head. His will to understand gave way to something more primitive.

'No!'

Balisch had reached the top of a curving wooden staircase, contrary to his wishes without having been followed, but what he was now about to do was nevertheless in full view to all. There was a patchwork of empty sacks covering a large implement at the top of those steps, and the priest drew this covering off it, and it fell. Underneath there was the square figure of a compact organ.

A skilled painter knows how to blend the most contrasting colours together in a small space of the canvas, in a gradient riding smoothly between the extremes, where a hue gives way to the other in a silky progression of intermediate tones, such that no contrast is perceived, but a coherent and purposeful shift. Such was the reaction of Dickson's instincts, from fear, to a glimpse of a minute window of opportunity to evade, to examination of this chance of salvation, to an all-pervading stab of excitement, to a burning feeling of want, to the liberating and absolute dawning of the possibility of power, until the Dickson who so uncertainly and unsteadily walked trembling into this building, had been completely swept away out of sight in the space of an instant only long enough as to be just about barely reckonable. What was, or had been, his current fallen state, his quiet and humble search for a new life, and his other resolutions, seemed no longer necessary. There was a way out of all of his pain, and this was it.

Without waiting for any further instructions, he strode up the steps and pressed the keys, and manoeuvred his hands into positions he knew well.

He knew what to do. But when his fingers dug into the keys, the sound coming out was not the expected. It was deeper, both in aural quality and in its very nature, something he felt almost interiorly, a pervading feeling of horror conquered. He continued, the thought of stopping wiped clean from his mind. He maintained only just enough awareness of his surroundings to see from the corner of his eyes Zacco down the stairs, struggling, albeit with no less energy than himself, with a pair of rudimentary drums. He played them both with a single hand, while with the other he frantically threw the dice over and over. Their noise they caused by rolling was impossibly loud for their size. It was almost musical.

Dickson, his sober reasoning annihilated, saw this and started to suspect that this was a competition between he and the Italian for which of the two would reap the highest reward of this irrevocable step and sit in the pantheon of the [REDACTED].

It is at this point that the events started to diverge from his expectations. Staring ahead, into the tarnished pipes, he noticed movement. He saw the smoothness of the metal increase, he saw ripples through it, almost as if through liquid. He saw them deform slightly, then regain their structure, then small bumps forming on the surface, then smoothness again.

His hands were furiously punching, traversing a theme he knew well, and yet inserting variations, now discordant, clearly in error, now perfectly fitting, and yet he did not feel as if he was straying. The bones of his forearms were carrying the vibrations of the sound, and he felt as if the sound was shooting backwards out of his elbows behind him, like fiery ashes from fountains of death.

The power was immeasurable. As his gaze kept sweeping the pipes, he witnessed yet more devilry, as the surface of the metal finally broke and it appeared as if they were sweating, droplets pooling then coursing down towards the ground. Until they reversed motion, and started building upwards, accreting on the top rim of the pipes and causing these to grow in height.

Dickson screamed, partly due to the sense of omnipotence, and partly due to the terror of not being able to control what was happening; however, the former prevailed, doubts were once again shaken off, and the diabolical optimism that had risen in him remained in charge.

The music roared on. Whether what happened before him was reality or hallucination, it continued, unabated, shaping itself into something more definite, growing in size. The pipes started to flatten, and to bend. They had grown nearly to touch the ceiling, and yet at this point then bent backwards, flattening more and more, and beginning to spin around the room, overlapping, like ribbons of molten lead with a will to impersonate cyclones.

The situation was entirely out of the control of Dickson, yet Balisch, whom Dickson could barely see through the gaps left by the furious spinning of the powerful metallic streams, seemed delighted, observing relatively calmly and yet with an obvious sense of eager anticipation.

The shapes that had sprung to life from the instrument began to resemble waves, marine symbols of the unfathomable mass of water whom humans could sail upon, but never conquer. The waves started to break, and their motion started to deviate in such a pattern as to give the impression of a bulge beginning to form. It grew and grew, as the crux of the piece neared, as the air of the organ, modulated by a relentless force, started to reach a point of maximum pressure.

Dickson had forgotten everything. If a man cannot learn from a failure as ruinous as that which he had survived, what hope is there for the rest of humankind? But he chose not to remember, remembrance having been in its power all along.

The priest was in rapture. He began to spin on himself, watching the room blur, as the enormous bulge overhead began to open. He watched in ecstasy, and Dickson watched him. But then something awful happened.

Dickson was staring at the scene below, as his hands were inches away from sounding the final chord. And then he stopped dead. A huge wooden stake sprung out, with a sickening noise, from the face of the priest, and from his mouth a wail of unspeakable pain blew out. He remained standing, for a few moments, flailing, like a deer who tries to shake off a predator who had just bitten into its neck. The scream became deep, louder, and horrific, expelling more air than one could believe a man could hold, until his lungs squeezed out the last of the air, and the roar of the hurricane was all that could be heard. The light started to subside and the power of the wind, although still strong, began a slow downwards climb in intensity.

That was when Dickson recognised the stake as an arrow, sticking out from the left eye socket of Balisch – now a dead corpse for sure – and the sudden commotion as a premature, abortive end to the proceedings. The author of the attack was the man standing at the main entrance to the hall. He held a very large crossbow, and had a well-trimmed beard and a black, gentlemanly suit.

He was the carriage driver, the man who had ferried him from this place to Edinburgh two days before. He didn't move, and neither did Dickson, both men waiting for the last of the poltergeist to die down. The metallic worm-like ribbons still spun in the air, but in smaller and smaller circles, and their size itself shrinking and shrinking, as they spiralled towards a common centre. Meanwhile the instrument that Dickson had previously played now was just a heap of broken wooden pieces and hot embers. Dickson watched what would probably be the final movements of these supernatural objects, still unsure whether it would all culminate in death or escape, but the expression of the driver, who meanwhile had stepped forward a few steps to better observe, gave him hope it would be the latter.

The huge rivers of quicksilver were now reduced to small ribbons, and they all began to collapse into a single object. They gave off a fizzling sound as they united, and began to take a solid, less

changeable form, cooling down and condensing further, as gravity seemed to gradually gain a victory against the spectral forces that had earlier been keeping such items airborne.

Finally it touched the ground, and the arcane synthesis seemed to end. The whole room around them, that had seemed a stately courtroom at the beginning of the ordeal, was in tatters and charred. Balisch was indeed a dead body, a blot on the floor on par with the many broken chairs and fallen tiles. Yet it is towards the mysterious object that the two souls drew nearer.

It was a complex, composite object, perhaps the size of a large square serving tray, quite flat yet having some thickness, part rigid, part flexible. Across a hard frame, many flat ribbons were stretched, presumably the cooled down remnants of the giant objects that had flashed round the room during the rite.

Dickson stared mystified, deathly afraid of the incomprehensible artefact, yet somewhat fascinated. His trance was broken by the arms of the driver grabbing the object, lifting it and dropping it on a high table with a piercing rattle. The man hadn't hesitated to touch the object; but he did so hurriedly, with the swiftest of motions, trying not to hold it for longer than needed. He was then quick to step back.

Dickson was still in a state of shocked puzzlement when the man in the black suit pushed his crossbow towards him and bid him to take it. He then offered a large arrow until Dickson took that too. It was oversized, very elaborate, clearly tailored to order, even having minute motives carved into the wood. The tip was viciously barbed and yet beautiful to behold, and the fletching at the back had colours so carefully arranged as to be sure to have some significance, perhaps as coat of arms. In a break in the carved motives towards the back, was impressed a word in bold characters: 'HUNTER'.

The man's voice brought Dickson back to the reality of the situation. 'Dickson.' He commanded, for his tone was clearly that of a command. He made a motion with his head towards the object which was now resting on the table, an altar-resembling high bench which was rather in keeping with the judicial appearance of the room.

'You must shoot it'.

Dickson pretended not to understand.

The bowman, growing impatient, tore the crossbow and arrow from Dickson's hands and loaded it for him, then pushed it back towards his chest. 'It is you who has to do it,' the man continued, in a tone which left no room for doubt.

Dickson was sweating. He was going through so many possibilities in his mind that he could not possibly fully explore in the little time that this shadowy man would give him to comply. But what would happen? What would happen to the death and horror that had been freed by the priest's folly (and his – for he was now very well aware that the frenzy that had led him to near destruction in the past had seized him again)? Where had it gone – was it banished? Was it lurking, waiting? Was it circling invisibly overhead?

'Dickson!'

The thundering voice was threatening, but gently so. But what would be of him? What was the significance of all this? Once the artifact was shattered, pierced, what would result? What would be of him? Of the world? He felt like screaming but he tried to hold. The eyes of the dark archer – who

had saved his life, he now knew, yet he could not get himself to trust completely yet – regarded him sternly.

Finally something sparked in his mind. Before his reason could take hold of the idea and judge it, the idea had already made its way to his limbs, had already engaged his muscles, and had set his heart to race. He turned around as if fleeing from a hungry beast, and started to run towards the door. As he reached it, the rush of blood in his veins only left enough space to allow the sound of the man's voice screaming a very seriously dismayed No.

He zoomed through the corridors, he broke into the open air again. The sky was as grey as most days would get. The man chased.

Dickson, a desperate spring in his stride, ran faster than he ever had before, towards trees, away from the road, away from any structure, hoping for cover. He still did not know why he was running.

'Dickson! You fool! Please! Stop!'

The man was fast, but not quite keeping up, thought Dickson, whose senses were now completely alert and tuned to the task at hand, that of getting away, now that the primitive prey escape instinct had been set afire inside him.

'Dickson! No! I can save you! I can set you free! You fool! Stop!'

Dickson heard the words, but he listened only intently enough to judge whether they came from the left or from the right, whether his pursuer was getting fatigued, whether he was outpacing him. The meaning of the words was discarded.

'Noo! For your sake, Dickson, stop!'

The voice was distant now, and was starting to be muffled by vegetation. Inside him, something interrupted his pure focus on the flight. Something roused, like a whisper from a different place. Something familiar, reassuring, and warm, close in distance, yet distant in time. He did not heed it, and was soon gone. On, he ran, into the timeless grove.