

A  
RED SUN  
ALSO RISES

MARK HODDER



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**A RED SUN ALSO RISES**

is dedicated to

Lynne Blackburn and Ian Bailey



## — A WORD — FROM THE AUTHOR

**T**hose of you familiar with my “Burton & Swinburne” tales might also be aware that I live in Valencia on the east coast of Spain. Among my friends, I count a few members of the yachting community, an international crowd that comes and goes on a seasonal basis. In July 2011, one of them—Raymond Villeneuve—gave me the journal that became the basis for *A RED SUN ALSO RISES*.

Villeneuve had just returned from a diving expedition to the west of the Azores, where he’d been part of a team exploring the wreck of *The Hermes*, a small steamer that sank in 1947. We met for a beer in one of Valencia’s sea-front bars, and after we’d exchanged the usual pleasantries, he said, “In one of your novels, you make a passing reference to the island of Koluwai in the South Pacific. Why that particular place?”

“In remembrance of my Great Uncle James Leigh,” I replied. “He was a missionary back in the 1920s. He’s thought to have died there.”

“Of what?”

I shrugged. “The records don’t say. I suppose that’s why he fascinates me. There’s a mystery surrounding him.”

My friend nodded thoughtfully, then abruptly changed the subject. “This ship I’ve been exploring—not much is known about it. *The Hermes* was privately owned by a Captain Franklin Powell and seems to have made regular runs between Gibraltar and the Caribbean. It went down a couple of years after the end of the Second World War. There were no traces of cargo aboard the vessel, but we found a watertight safe, which had kept its contents well preserved, though they didn’t amount to much.”

He placed a small package in front of me—something wrapped in waxed paper with an elastic band around it.

“There were documents, a small bag of coins, and this. Take a look.”

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My curiosity piqued, I pulled off the band, opened the paper, and found a leather-bound notebook inside. Its delicate, browned, and slightly crumbling pages were filled with almost illegible handwriting.

“As you can see, it’s written in English,” Villeneuve said. “I’ve read a little of it, and it seems to be your sort of thing. I thought you might like to have it. It also mentions Koluwai, and a missionary who went there.”

He had little else to say regarding the book—the handwriting was so bad he’d given up reading it—so I thanked him, took it home, and over the next few days struggled to decipher it.

What you hold is adapted from that journal. Adapted, because the man who wrote it, Aiden Fleischer, possessed an exceedingly archaic and long-winded style, entirely unsuitable for a modern audience. My revisions involved editing and untangling the grammar, updating and standardising the spelling, and excising a lot of fairly dull material—extensive notes on flora and fauna, and so forth. I did, however, remain faithful to the author’s rather eccentric capitalisation of certain nouns.

I undertook a small amount of research with regard to the names and places mentioned in the account and can confirm that the parish records in the little town of Theaston Vale, in Hampshire, England, show that a man named Gregory James Mortimer Fleischer was the Anglican priest there from June 1868 to September 1883. He had a son, Aiden Mortimer Fleischer, born 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1863, who took his vows in 1882 and replaced his father as parish priest the following year, resigning the post in 1887.

Aiden Fleischer next shows up in the archives of the London Missionary Society, where he trained during 1888—the year of the infamous Ripper killings—before being posted to Papua New Guinea. He was twenty-five years old when he left Britain. I’ve discovered no further traces of him.

The once-famous Hufferton Hall, mentioned early on in the journal, is now gone and all but forgotten. The last of the Huffertons, Sir Rupert, was murdered there in 1923, after which a succession of occupants came and went before the manor fell into disuse. It stood empty throughout the 1950s, was inhabited by squatters in the 1960s, and fell victim to an arsonist in 1972.

## A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

I've not been able to find any evidence of the Stark family who, according to Fleischer, once worked there.

Mark Hodder  
Valencia, Spain  
August 2012





## CHAPTER I

# CLARISSA AND ALICE

I didn't intend to drop the crystal there. Even in my own time, it was a busy shipping lane. Now aeroplanes cross the area as well. Two days ago, a United States Navy training flight, comprised of five TBM Avenger torpedo bombers and fourteen men, entered the region and has been neither seen nor heard from since. I don't doubt that Flight 19, as it was designated, has gone through the rupture.

I can go home at last. My hand will be restored to me.

The crystal, though, is beyond retrieval. I can only hope that Artellokas, if he still lives, will find a different solution—a way to close the portal before it swallows even more unwitting travellers.

And what of Clarissa? Oh, sweet Heaven, let her still be there.

Wait. My apologies. This is not the way to start. My emotions are spilling onto pages meant only for the cold facts of the matter. I shall begin again. I must complete this account before *The Hermes* reaches Bermuda. When we dock at Hamilton, I'll entrust it to Captain Powell, who, upon his return to England, will post it to my old vicarage in Theaston Vale. Whoever occupies the position I once held might know what to do with it. I, meanwhile, will steer a motorboat southwestward to a point some two hundred miles north of the Bahamas, there to vanish from this world forever.

A confession: I'm not Peter Edwards. That name belongs to a young Australian soldier, born on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 1920, who was shot through the head on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 1942, during the Battle of Port Moresby.

My real name is Aiden Mortimer Fleischer. I am British, but my rather too Germanic surname would have been viewed with suspicion during the war, which is why I appropriated Edwards' identity. I'm not proud that I did so, but the poor lad had no further use for it and I was in desperate straits. He bore some small resemblance to me and his date of birth was useful, for while I

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appear to be in my mid-twenties, I was, in fact, born on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1863. By that measure, I am an old man.

Indeed, my youth feels a long way off. It belongs to far gentler times. The world is not what it used to be. Nor am I.

So, to my history.

My father was an Anglican clergyman. He became my sole parent when puerperal fever took my mother within days of my birth. I was an only child, and as I grew up, I felt her absence keenly. Father, by contrast, survived her loss with his character intact, remaining a kind, content, stable, and outwardly happy man. His faith gave him comfort, and I envied him. I suppose it was inevitable, then, that I spent my early years as he'd spent his, following a meek and scholarly path into the priesthood. I was nineteen when I took my vows. Barely a man! That was in January of 1882. Just a few months later, dear old dad suffered a brain embolism and dropped dead. The Church appointed me as his successor and I took over his role as vicar in my home town, the aforementioned Theaston Vale, in Hampshire.

For the churchgoers, it should have been a smooth transition from one Reverend Fleischer to the next.

It wasn't.

My predecessor had been a dynamic sermoniser. He was compassionate, engaging, funny, and popular. I was none of those things. I may have been doing the work of Our Lord, but it was immediately apparent that I wasn't very good at it. Crippled by nerves, I stuttered through each Sunday service while my flock first snored, then strayed.

Nevertheless, I was well-meaning—or so I told myself—and every word of comfort I uttered from the pulpit and, occasionally, in the bedrooms of the sick and the dying, was spoken, if not with true feeling, then at least with due care and attention. I knew the Bible from front to back. I always had an appropriate line of scripture at the ready and I never misquoted.

I was erudite.

They told me I was pedantic.

I was dutiful.

They said I was remote.

I was attentive.

They called me a cold fish.

As my daily failures accrued, I began to realise the truth of Jonathan Swift's dictum: "*We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.*"

I admit it. Sometimes I grew close to hating my parishioners! I hated that the men avoided me and appeared to regard me as some other gender—not female but definitely not properly male—as though my education and intellectual demeanour had rendered me an incomprehensible hermaphrodite. I hated that the women regaled me with interminable and pointless gossip, which sounded to me spiteful and uncharitable, but which, to them, was obviously as vital as the oxygen they breathed.

Three years of this passed, and an ever-intensifying resentment seethed in the darker recesses of my mind, for I felt helpless to change, and I was constantly and crushingly lonely.

I despised being a priest.

But what else could I be?

◦

The first of many alterations in my circumstances knocked at the vicarage door late one morning in August of 1885. It arrived in the form of the most disreputable-looking woman I'd ever seen. It pains me to describe her as she was then, but I must, for it was her deformities that initially bound us together.

She was, at most, five-foot-two, obviously a vagabond, hunchbacked, with crooked legs and swarthy sun-browned skin. Her jet-black hair—with streaks of white growing from the temples—was swept back from a deep widow's peak and fell in waves to her twisted shoulder blades. The dress and jacket she wore might have been fashioned from old potato sacks. However, by far the most remarkable thing about her was that the upper part of her face was concealed behind tight-fitting black-lensed leather-bound goggles.

"Forgive my imposition," she said, and her voice was sweet and mellif-

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luous, surprising me with its cultivated tone. “I’ve fallen upon hard times, Reverend, and I am starving. If you have anything about the place that needs doing, perhaps you would be kind enough to allow me to work in return for a morsel? I can put my hand to any task you care to name, including labour you would normally assign to a man.”

Her grotesque appearance unnerved me, but I managed to stammer, “Quite, quite,” and blinked at my reflection in the shiny glass of her eyewear. “I have some shirts that require darning. Can you—um—but no, probably that wouldn’t—I’m sorry—”

She smiled and tapped the side of her goggles with a finger. “I’m not blind. I can do needlework. I suffer a condition of the eyes that allows me to see with perfect clarity in darkness but which causes me great pain in daylight or in the presence of gas lamps. I would be entirely incapacitated without these glasses.”

“Ah. Good!” I said, before hastily correcting myself. “Er, that you’re not blind, I mean! Is it—is it a congenital condition?”

“Quite so, Reverend. I was born with it.” She made a gesture that indicated her entire body. “As for the rest, a childhood accident is to blame—a chance occurrence, or perhaps it was the will of God, or maybe I was responsible for some misdeed in a past life and am now suffering a natural retribution. I suppose I must have done something very bad to have been thus punished!”

Startled by this statement, I replied, “You refer to the Buddhist belief in reincarnation, and in reaping what you sow over the course of multiple lifetimes?”

She nodded. “They call it *karma*. But I was merely being facetious. I don’t really believe in it—I’m a strictly practical sort. Supernatural and theological explanations for the world and our existence in it interest me only in so far as they might give hints of forgotten scientific knowledge. I mean no offence.”

“None taken! I’m not so dyed in the wool that I would deny a person the right to question the veracity or usefulness of the Christian faith—or any other creed, for that matter. I was simply taken aback that you know of Buddhist beliefs, that is all.”

“Because I appear a down-and-out, and you therefore presumed me ill-informed about such matters?”

I hesitated, feeling rather disoriented by the strange conversation that had come out of nowhere to interrupt my morning studies. “Forgive my forthrightness,” I said, “but yes, you do have the air of a beggar about you, and I’ve never heard a man or woman of that unfortunate class speak as you do.”

“Class! It is not a class, sir! It is misfortune and adverse circumstances that cause a person to fall to this state, not inherited qualities of character!”

I shifted from one foot to the other, a vicar made awkward and embarrassed by a vagrant, and stuttered, “Of c-course. Forgive me. It was a bad choice of—of—of words. I meant nothing by it. I appear to have jumped to conclusions about you on sight and now find that all of them are wrong. You are obviously not at all what I took you to be. May I—may I ask your name?”

“I am Clarissa Stark.”

“Would you care to come in, Miss Stark? I’m moved to hear your story, and I have a thick vegetable soup on the stove. It won’t take long to heat up. We’ll forego the needlework. The people of this town are used to seeing me in frayed shirts. They’d be confused if I presented them with otherwise.”

“Thank you, Reverend—?”

“Fleischer.”

I ushered her through to my small kitchen and she sat at the table while I put a flame under the soup and set some water to boil. Later, if I could do so without sounding impolite, I’d offer her the opportunity to wash.

“Are you from the North, Miss Stark? I hear the vaguest trace of a Scottish burr in your voice.”

“Have you heard of Hufferton Hall?”

“The one near Edinburgh? Of course. It once housed a famous Museum of Mechanical Marvels.”

“I was born there.”

I turned and looked at her, my eyebrows raised. She smiled and shook her shaggy head. “No, no, I’m not one of the eccentric Huffertons. My mother was their cook, my father their groundsman.” She saw my expression and went on, “Ah! You’re surprised a child of servants is educated. The explanation is con-

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nected with the sorry state of my back and legs. When I was five years old, Lord Hufferton's eldest son, Rupert, who was then in his thirteenth year, took his father's autocarriage without permission and—"

"Autocarriage? What's that?" I interjected.

"A conveyance that moves without need of a horse."

I considered her reply while I ladled soup into bowls, set one before her, and put bread and a glass of water beside it.

"You mean like Étienne Lenoir's *Hippomobile*?"

I remember that Miss Stark directed her face at me, and her eye lenses reflected the light from the kitchen window. I can still see every detail of that scene, as if it was preserved in amber. I don't know why I recall it with such clarity. Maybe because it was the first moment she considered me with obvious respect.

"I'm astounded!" she exclaimed. "You've heard of Étienne Lenoir?"

I sat down opposite her and broke my bread. "I'm a reader, Miss Stark, and not merely in theology. I'm interested in where the human race is going, both spiritually and materially. I keep up with the latest inventions."

She took a spoonful of soup, and it suddenly became apparent just how hungry she was, for our conversation was temporarily halted as she applied herself to the meal with an enthusiasm that was sad to witness.

I had led a very sheltered life in Theaston Vale. The only cities I'd ever visited were Southampton and Winchester. I'd yet to experience the teeming masses of London's poor and had never seen starvation before. It shocked and humbled me.

Silently, I served the young woman a second bowl, cut her another chunk of bread, then crossed to a cupboard and took from it a bottle of red wine. After pouring her a generous glass, I finished my own meal before transferring the now boiled water from the stovetop to a tin bathtub in the scullery. I refilled the pan and set it back on the flame, then, without a word, left the kitchen and went to the church storeroom. There were bundles of clothes in it, all clean, all contributed by the charitable. I took up as many as I could carry and transported them back to the scullery.

"That was delicious," Miss Stark said as I rejoined her. "Thank you very

much. It's been longer than I care to remember since my appetite was properly assuaged."

I didn't know how to offer her the opportunity to wash without sounding indelicate, so I opted for blatancy and hurriedly said, "When a couple more pans have boiled, you'll be able to—to—to bathe. I've placed clean clothing beside the tub. Please take whatever you need."

I felt my face glowing red.

"You are very kind," she responded softly.

I topped up her glass and decided also to indulge. As I sat back down, she took a sip and muttered, "Bordeaux. From the Pomerol vineyards, I should say."

"Great heavens!" I blurted.

She chuckled. "It's not a claret I'd expect to find in the vicarage of a sleepy little Hampshire town. Are you a connoisseur?"

"It's a hobby of mine," I admitted. "How is it that you possess a knowledge of wines?"

"Reverend Fleischer, I'm happy to tell you my story in its entirety, and you must reveal to me how you know of the inventor Étienne Lenoir, but would you mind if we wait until after I've bathed? It is surely bad enough that I've intruded upon your day, but to do so with the odour of the road upon me, and to then remain and enjoy your hospitality without first correcting the problem, would be nothing short of uncivilised."

I acceded her point, and an hour later we reconvened in my sitting room, which, as she observed, more resembled an overstocked and chaotic library.

Much to my surprise and confusion, Miss Stark not only appeared considerably younger—perhaps a couple of years my junior—now the grime was scrubbed from her, but had also dressed herself as a man, in trousers and white shirt, waistcoat and a light jacket. I'd heard of "bloomerism," of course—it was much discussed in newspaper articles about female suffrage—but I'd never witnessed it "in the flesh," so to speak.

"The bloomerists wear trousers as a protest against the inconveniences of women's attire," my guest explained as she painfully manoeuvred her twisted form into an armchair by the fireplace. "For if a lady fails to hold up her skirts

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while out walking, the hems are soon soaked in all manner of foul substances. Yet they are made from such heavy linen that, after hoisting them up for half an hour, one's wrist cramps and aches abominably. But this is beside the point. I'm no bloomerist. I chose this attire simply because it better suits the life I have been forced to lead."

I also sat. "Let us begin again, Miss Stark. You were telling me about it—your life—and that you came by your education in relation to a thing called an autocarriage."

"Yes, a conveyance invented by the late Lord Hufferton—Sir Philip—and, as you correctly supposed, similar to Étienne Lenoir's *Hippomobile*."

"Powered by a combustion engine, then?"

"No. The Lenoir engine consumes fuel inefficiently, is exceedingly noisy, and is forever overheating and seizing up. Sir Philip employed a steam engine instead. Have you heard of Thomas Rickett?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Of Buckingham. He invented a steam plough some twenty years ago, which inspired the Marquess of Stafford to commission a steam carriage from him. The machine Rickett constructed was a three-wheeler, with a rear-mounted coal-fired boiler and a two-cylinder engine. Power was transmitted via a chain connected to the right-hand rear wheel. Sir Philip employed a very similar design, but introduced into it a horizontal double-acting steam-powered beam engine, gave the vehicle four wheels, and connected the chain to the middle of the rear axle. The front seat could hold three passengers, the one in the middle steering with a tiller, accelerating by means of a regulator lever, and braking via a foot pedal."

"Fascinating! My goodness, Miss Stark, you appear to have a firm grasp of mechanical design, though I suppose that's to be expected of anyone brought up in Hufferton's orbit. But, I say, while I knew he collected such wonders for his museum, I had no idea he'd designed one himself. So this is the carriage his son took?"

I'd supplied my guest with a fresh glass of wine. She imbibed a little, nodded, and said, "Rupert was a dreadfully disobedient child, forever getting into trouble. In 1870, he was thirteen and I was five. My parents and I lived in a



tiny cottage on the estate. I used to stay with my mother in the manor's kitchen until it was too dark for my father to be working outside. He'd then come to fetch me home. One evening, as he and I were crossing the grounds, the autocarriage came careening toward us, out of control, with Rupert at the tiller. It hit us square on, killing my father outright and breaking my back and legs."

I pondered this disaster for a few moments, then murmured,

*"When he shall die,  
Take him and cut him out in little stars  
And he will make the face of heav'n so fine  
That all the world will be in love with night  
And pay no worship to the garish sun."*

After a further pause, Miss Stark said, "I loved my father dearly. That is a very appropriate quote."

"It's from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*."

"I know. And I'm much impressed that you chose to reflect upon my loss rather than the calamity of my injuries. You accurately detected how I was most wounded that horrible day. Such power of insight must make you a very good priest, though I'm intrigued that you chose to recite Shakespeare rather than the Bible."

I shifted uneasily in my chair. "As a matter of fact, I don't think I'm a very good priest at all. When I quote from the Bible, I rarely feel that it's truly coming from my heart. But let's not talk about me. Please continue with your story; I'm thoroughly captivated by it."

She looked into the fireplace, and the light of the flames momentarily turned her eye lenses a glaring red.

"Lord Hufferton commissioned Edinburgh's famous surgeon, Joseph Lister, to attend to me and ensure my survival. My convalescence was long and agonising, and despite that my internal injuries healed and my bones knitted together, over the ensuing years, as I grew, my body warped out of shape, causing me incessant pain. Six months after my father's passing, my mother died—I think of a broken heart—and Sir Philip made himself my legal guardian. He transferred his affections to me, leaving Rupert, with whom he'd always had a difficult relationship, out in the cold. Tutors were hired,

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my education began, and I immediately found that the process of acquiring knowledge distracted from my pain. I was thus extremely attentive and diligent in my studies, and made rapid progress in a great many subjects. Most of all—due, no doubt, to the environment in which I lived—I developed a love for engineering. Sir Philip was very supportive of this, despite my gender. He allowed me free use of his extensive library, and of the museum and workshops, and took care to involve me in every one of his projects. We constructed traction engines together. We invented a steam-powered cable car system. We drew up blueprints for armoured war machines that could travel over the land or through the air—machines so huge they will never be built. We even perfected the autocarriage by returning to, and improving upon, Thomas Rickett’s original three-wheeled design.”

“Lord Hufferton was obviously a very good man,” I observed.

“Yes, he was. His generosity extended to my social education as well. He allowed me to attend his famous annual *bals masqués*, and told the guests that treating me with respect was a condition of their attendance. Inevitably, there were examples of the vacuous variety of young aristocrat at the soirées, and when one such suggested that I should have costumed myself as Quasimodo from Victor Hugo’s *Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, Sir Philip flew into an uncharacteristic rage and threw the fellow out by the seat of his pants. That, however, was an exception. The majority of guests were very generous to me. Can you imagine it? Me, sitting discussing philosophy and politics and science with men whose faces were hidden behind Viennese masks? Men who were the luminaries of High Society? They were the people who’ve shaped this land and its culture, and I, a mere slip of a girl, spent many an engaging evening in their company. I learned a great deal from them—predominantly, how to think.”

“And from the vacuous ones, how not to,” I ventured.

“Precisely. I don’t mean to suggest that it was exclusively cerebral, though. The balls were marvellous fun, and Sir Philip always laid on a variety of entertainments, such as singers and acrobats and magicians. Such wonders! They were the happiest days of my life, Reverend.”

“What an extraordinary young woman you are, Miss Stark! I feel positively embarrassed that I offered you shirts to darn!”

She tut-tutted. "I can sew and look after a home just as well as the next woman. We made an agreement, Reverend Fleischer. You fed me. I will mend your clothes. I insist upon it."

"It really isn't necessary, but thank you. How came you, then, to such dire straits?"

"It's very simple. Two years ago, Sir Philip suffered a seizure and died. Rupert became the new Lord Hufferton, inherited the estate, closed the museum, and threw me out onto the streets."

"What? How could he do such a thing when it was he who caused your injuries? Has he no conscience?"

"What little guilt he may have harboured quickly turned to hatred. Perhaps he felt that he lost his father to me. Certainly, he always treated me with disdain and constantly mocked my appearance. Once, he encountered me in the grounds and snatched the goggles from my face, leaving me blinded and agonised by the sunlight."

I shook my head despairingly. "The Lord is known by his justice; the wicked are ensnared by the work of their hands."

"From Psalm Nine, if I remember rightly," she responded. "But judging by your earlier statement, should I take it that the sentiment comes not from your heart but from your head?"

"My intellect tells me it's appropriate to suggest that Our Lord will cause your tormentor to learn the error of his ways, but, frankly, my heart doubts the truth of it."

"Rupert is rich, influential, and living a very comfortable life, despite his bad reputation," she responded. "While I've spent two years as a vagabond, spurned and isolated everywhere I go because of my appearance. It is, indeed, difficult to see any justice in it, or to have faith that justice will eventually come, whether by the hand of God or through the mechanism of *karma*."

I was moved by a sudden impulse. "Perhaps I can do a small thing to at least weigh the balance a little more in your favour. I need a sexton—someone to maintain the church, which is old and in disrepair, and the cemetery, which is overgrown. I would benefit from a housekeeper, too, just to keep the place tidy and free of dust, for I'm useless at such things. Would you be willing to

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fulfil such a role? There's an outbuilding that could be converted into modest living quarters if you're disposed to tackle it, and the Church would provide a small stipend for your services."

She said nothing, then leaned forward, and a quiet sob escaped her. It was an entirely unexpected response, and I felt horribly awkward that I'd been the cause of it, but I fully realised in that instant how dreadful the past two years had been for her, and was struck by a powerful sense of kinship. In truth, she and I couldn't be more different, for she seemed a thoroughly *authentic* character—if you understand my meaning—for whom the world denied a place, while I, by contrast, felt rather a fake, though my position was secure. Nevertheless, a bond had formed.

"You have my sincere gratitude," she whispered.

In this manner, my long association with the remarkably practical, resourceful, and inventive Clarissa Stark began. Many weeks passed before I could even begin to accurately gauge the extent of her abilities, but I can tell you now that she excels in engineering and chemistry, knows a great deal about medicine, is an artisan of unparalleled talent in metals and wood, and performs miracles as a cook, gardener, housekeeper, and bookkeeper. Much to my delight, I also discovered that she is well read in Latin, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch. For a man who studies in many languages, what could be more welcome than a companion with whom to discuss the merits of José de Cadalso y Vázquez, or the Comtesse de La Fayette, or João de Barros, or, of course, our own William Shakespeare?

Occasionally, we even debated the Good Book.

In intellect, we tended to come at things from opposing directions. I was always looking for evidence of God's plan in man's many innovations and accomplishments, whereas Miss Stark sought only to thoroughly understand and improve upon them, without reference to any possible divine influence. Her technical knowledge appeared inexhaustible. By contrast, I soon began to comprehend that my grasp of "things eternal" lacked equivalent depth, making of whatever wisdom I possessed a fairly useless commodity. Miss Stark one day advised that I could best address this problem by travelling.

"It is not healthy that your engagement with the world is conducted

through books alone. If you believe in the divine, then you must seek to witness it in action.”

I considered this an unrealistic proposition. “Do you not think it more efficient to learn from what other men have written? Surely it would take me a lifetime to gain through direct means even a scrap of the knowledge that I can read on a single page.”

“But it is *experience* that promotes insight and personal growth, Reverend. You must grasp life by the scruff of the neck and struggle with the challenges it presents, otherwise how can you progress as a human being? And if you do not progress as a human being, how can you contribute to the furtherance of our species, whether our advancement follows a divine design or not?”

I shrugged this off, little suspecting that my naivety was about to propel the two of us along a path that would involve the dramatic furtherance not of mankind, but of a completely different order of being.

Our opinions were also divided on the subject of evil. Miss Stark insisted that Rupert Hufferton was wicked by nature, but when she revealed to me that his mother had died during his birth, I was quick to observe that, just as I’d been mistaken in suggesting the poor were a “class” rather than the product of unfortunate circumstances, so she might be wrong in her assessment of her former tormentor.

“Evil must be caused,” I insisted. “Is it not obvious that Sir Philip was prejudiced against his son as a consequence of his wife’s death? Rupert was a badly behaved child—and is now a dissolute adult—because he felt unloved, and perhaps even guilty. His misbehaviour was a cry for help.”

“Tosh and piffle!” Miss Stark exclaimed. “The same misfortune was visited upon your family, yet your father doted on you, and you are kind and generous. Why different results from an almost identical circumstance?”

“The source must be farther back,” I responded. “Sir Philip’s reaction was shaped, perhaps, by some ill that was done to him by his own parents.”

My companion snorted dismissively and said, “Back and back and back until, no doubt, you arrive at Cain! But why stop there? Cain’s murder of Abel was prompted by a jealous rage, and that a response to God’s cruel preference

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for a blood sacrifice over a gift of fruit and grain. Must we then consider God as the source of evil?”

“God is the epitome of good!” I objected.

“So your argument falls down. Cause and effect are an insufficient explanation.”

“Do you have an alternative?”

She shrugged. “Maybe there’s no origin, and no point to evil at all. Perhaps it’s simply a component of some personalities, in the same way that gregariousness is, or shyness, or boldness, or timidity, or any other characteristic.”

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In 1887, two years after Clarissa Stark joined me in Theaston Vale, the Tanner family arrived in the town, having moved from Southampton, and in them I saw demonstrated a wickedness that appeared to support my sexton’s assertion, for there was neither rhyme nor reason to it. The Tanners were simply bad.

They were a large clan, headed by a brute of a man named Oliver who came to set up shop as the town’s new blacksmith. On their first Sunday in the parish, they attended my morning service, descending upon the church in an unseemly manner, with much shouting and boisterousness. Despite it being an early hour of Our Lord’s day, the head of the family was obviously drunk and slurred his words as he introduced his pinch-faced wife, his three burly and sneering sons, and his two daughters, the youngest of whom was a mousy, runny-nosed girl of about ten years.

The other was Alice.

Alice—who promised Heaven and sent me to Hell.

She was curly-haired, tall, and shapely, with dark direct eyes that glittered and flashed like those of an angry cat. Her beauty was mesmeric—and she used it with ruthless efficiency. When she stepped forward that morning, I, who had no defence, was conquered in an instant. I stammered like a fool and turned red as a beetroot. She giggled, fluttered her lashes, smiled coquettishly, and entered the church. Her father slapped my shoulder and emitted a bellow of laughter before following her in.

The service that day was the worst of my life. Again and again, my gaze found its way to where Alice sat watching me with her lips curved into a slight smile, and each time I lost my train of thought and stumbled dreadfully in my speech. Meanwhile, the three Tanner boys disregarded me and talked to one another loudly throughout my liturgy, while their father sprawled with his head back and snored with the volume of a passing locomotive.

The crudeness of her family notwithstanding, over the course of the next few weeks, I found myself thinking obsessively about the girl and the way she'd looked at me—with a challenge and an invitation—and when I discovered that her father had purchased a small allotment on the outskirts of town, and that she worked there each afternoon, I began to take daily postprandial strolls so I might walk by it and stop to exchange a few words with her. She was always polite but distant, regarding me with pursed lips and hooded eyes, as if she knew something about me of which I was not myself aware. Our conversations were short and restricted to meaningless observations about the weather or the progress of her vegetables. What few attempts I made at greater depth were met with a giggle and a dismissive wave of the hand. It was obvious she was sorely lacking in education, but like an idiot, and contrary to all the signs, I interpreted this as a sort of purity, seeing in her a wholesome naturalness through which the divine spirit might be expressed in an unadulterated manner.

In my regular evening debates with Clarissa Stark, I again and again tried to legitimise my infatuation by dwelling on theories of female beauty, oblivious to the fact that this may have been a painful subject for my disfigured friend. I proposed, as the ancient Greeks had done, that perfection of physical form was somehow an expression of well-balanced internal virtues, and it was to these that I was drawn in Alice.

"Then I am obviously entirely without virtue," Miss Stark observed.

"Heavens above! I didn't mean to imply that!" I objected. "Your physique was damaged by your terrible accident, so it cannot be judged on such a basis!"

"Regardless, I think any such evaluation is flawed at the outset," she replied. "And the girl's beauty makes her all the more dangerous."

"Miss Tanner isn't dangerous!"

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“Your inexperience blinds you.” She ran a finger over her goggles. “What a shame these only filter light. I wish you could look through them and see what I see in the girl.”

“Which is what?”

“Rupert Hufferton.”

“Pah! Back to your conception of causeless evil!”

My friend shook her head and limped out of the room, quietly saying over her shoulder, “If God is good and no one is evil by nature, then you, as a priest, have just one option remaining.”

“And what is that?”

“Give the Devil his due, Reverend. Give the Devil his due.”

In hindsight, I can acknowledge that I probably knew all along that Miss Stark was correct in her assessment of Alice Tanner. I was aware there was something rotten inside the girl and was cognisant that I was on a course for disaster—yet I couldn’t pull myself back from the brink. In truth, the unfamiliar and irresistible force of bodily desire propelled me, and I was helpless to resist it. So I took my daily walks, exchanged pleasantries with the girl, and every day fell deeper under her spell.

I don’t want to dwell on this for too long. The memory is embarrassing.

The trap was sprung on the first Monday of June in ’87. I was next to the allotment, at the side of the road, making small talk across the fence, when a heavy hand slapped down on my shoulder and yanked me around. Oliver Tanner stood there, his eyes blazing, his breath stinking of whisky, and his mouth twisted into an ugly smirk.

“Here now, what are you up to, my lad?” he demanded.

“I’m just—I’m just—”

“Is he bothering you, Alice?”

“Yes, Dad. He bothers me every day.”

I looked at her in astonishment. “Alice! What do you mean?”

Tanner shook me hard and growled, “Shut up, you! I’ll hear my daughter!”

“He’s always a-comin’ here,” the girl said, and looked at me with scorn in her eyes. “Always pushin’ ’imself at me with ’is foolish sweet talk an’ flattery. I’m sick of it!”



My heart hammered violently. “What? But—no—this isn’t true! Alice, why—?”

“Has he ever laid hands on you, girl?” Tanner snapped.

She looked down and quietly replied, “He tried. I ’ad to run away.”

It was a scandalous lie, and it was spoken with ease.

Tanner gripped me by the collar and practically lifted me off my feet. He thrust his face into mine.

“You’d do that? You’d touch my daughter with your filthy damned hands?”

“I didn’t! I never—I never—”

He shook me again and my teeth rattled. I wasn’t scared—I was too dumbfounded. My brain had frozen with the shock of it. I simply couldn’t comprehend what was happening.

“Stop yammering and explain yourself, or by God, I’ll knock you into Kingdom Come!”

Alice laughed. “He’d like that! He’s a vicar, ain’t he? Don’t do ’im any favours!”

Tanner snorted and grinned. “She don’t come free, my lad. If it’s a taste of Alice you’re after, you’ll have to ruddy well pay for it!”

“P-pay?”

“Aye, pay. There ain’t nothing for nothing in this life, and that includes the liberty you’ve already taken! How much does he owe us, Daughter?”

“I’d say fifty nicker, Dad.”

“But—what?” I spluttered. “This is outrageous! Fifty pounds? That’s a fortune! What for? I haven’t done—”

Again, I was shaken.

“You’re calling my girl a liar, are you?” Tanner roared. “You want me to tell the whole bloody town what you’ve been up to?”

“No! I only—I mean—I love her!”

“What?”

“I love her, Mr. Tanner. I haven’t—I wouldn’t do anything to harm her!”

The blacksmith released me and stepped back. He put his hands on his hips, doubled over, and roared with laughter. “Hah! What do you think of that, Alice? The scoundrel loves you!”

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The girl walked a short distance away, clambered over a stile, returned to us, and looked me in the eyes. She said, in a tone of such cruelty that I felt claws of ice digging into my chest, “You love me, Reverend Fleischer? You think I might find ’appiness with a dusty old bookworm—a tall, thin dullard? Look at you! A bundle o’ bloomin’ sticks bound together in last century’s togs! Pah! I’d rather be alone for the rest o’ me life than be bonded to such a wretched scarecrow!”

With dreadful relish, she cleared her throat, spat onto my boots, and added, “I don’t even consider you a man.”

“Fifty pounds, lad!” Tanner added. “You’ll pay fifty pounds, and if I don’t receive the money by Friday, the town’ll know you for the degenerate you are!”

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