

THE WIND IN THE PIPES

Darkness had already fallen when Stephen Newman reached his destination. It had taken the young priest the better part of two days to travel from Cambridge to this little town in Yorkshire, and he was tired. The night train had taken him and his bicycle to York, but from there on he'd hitched a ride on a lorry. Travelling early in the day was fine, but in the afternoon it had started to rain. The lorry, poorly powered by a wood gasifier, had struggled with hills, slowing to a snail's pace.

Stephen got off the lorry and watched it disappear into the rain at a crossroads, and faced seven more miles to Little Fawnton. He fastened his suitcase to his bike and mounted it, cursing the rain. He had a lamp, but the wet gravel sucked all the light and he was steering by the darkness of the forest to his left and right. To comfort himself, he hummed a hymn, but he found it hard when puffing at every uphill.

By the time he reached the vicarage at Little Fawnton, Stephen was more tired than he'd ever been. He opened the gate in the thick red brick wall, pushed his bike into the garden, and tried to make himself presentable for the vicar. He walked up to the door on a path that led him through a large and pristine vegetable garden. Everyone had gardens these days, but whoever maintained this one was a perfectionist.

Before he swung the brass door knocker, he looked at his attire in the dim light peeking from the side of the blackout curtain. He was wet, muddy, and crumpled – quite far from what he wanted to present to the vicar of his first real parish job. Then, shivering with cold, he grabbed the knocker. Two loud bangs later the door opened, and he felt the welcome heat of the kitchen on his face.

“Oooh! It's Father Newman, isn't it? We expected you on Tuesday! Do come in, you look absolutely horrible”, said the old woman who opened the door. Stephen thanked her and stepped into the light, feeling like a retriever after a hunt in the marshlands. “I'm Mrs Wilson, the housekeeper. You must get those wet clothes off! Here, let me get you a blanket. You just sit down by the stove here, and I'll get you something to eat.” Stephen gave the old lady his dripping overcoat and jacket, as well as his hat, but stuck to his shirt and trousers.

In a very short time, Stephen was seated by an enormous stove exuding all-embracing heat which made him sweat and his trousers steam at the knees. He was also given a cup of tea and a roast beef sandwich, which tasted better than anything he could remember since the war started. All the time the old lady pottered about and talked, probably just as much to herself as to Stephen. “... and right after you're done with that tea, I'll take you to the vicar. But do take your time – don't want to rush you! I'll stow your shoes over here. You can borrow these until yours dry, these are my son's but he's in the Navy. Somewhere in the Mediterranean now...”

In ten minutes Stephen was feeling more comfortable so he asked about the vicar. “He’s in the study. I’ll take you to him right now, if you’re up to it, and you’ve had your tea?” said Mrs Wilson. Stephen smiled his thanks and stood up. She led him through a cavernous hall, up the stairs, and around the corner. There was a door slightly ajar, and Mrs Wilson knocked on it. “Reverend Morris? Father Newman is here to see you.” She led Stephen in, smiled to him and left.

Stephen was amazed at the sheer number of books. It seemed like the walls of the room were made of thick old leather-bound tomes. At the window there was a desk with an ancient writing kit complete with ink bottle and a dip pen, pushed to the corner of the desk. Papers and books were scattered on the desk. At the far end of the room was a massive fireplace, dwarfing the small fire burning in the grate. The flames sent the shadow of the fireplace dancing among the books.

Two huge leather armchairs were set at an angle to the fireplace, close to it, and there was a low chess table between them. A game was going on. The vicar sat in the chair to the right of the fire. “Mr Newman, how nice to see you. We’ve been expecting you ever since the Diocese told me you were coming to help us a bit.” The man didn’t rise to greet Stephen, but thrust out his hand for him to shake.

Stephen was surprised at the handshake, steely and determined but friendly – a contrast to the apparent frailty of the vicar. “I’m glad to be here, Reverend, it’s my first real job. Since I was ordained six months ago, I’ve been pottering about at the Diocese, but I’ve always wanted to work in a parish.” He followed the vicar’s signal to sit down in the other armchair. The fire had made the seat warm and Stephen felt cosy and safe in it.

“So how is the Diocese these days? Busy? Must be, what with the war and all, young priests are in high demand I guess?” said the old vicar as he poured himself some more whisky from a crystal carafe. He had a sip, and then stood up to get Stephen a glass too. He poured a good two fingers and handed the glass to Stephen, who smiled his thanks.

Stephen didn’t drink, but decided to mark the occasion, and also to get warm inside. He lifted up the glass and held it against the fire. Liquid gold, he thought, as he had a sip. The whiskey burned his mouth. He set the glass on the chess table, careful not to move the pieces. “Yes, quite a few of my colleagues have joined up. I tried to do that too, but was told I have a crooked spine, and the rigours of army life wouldn’t be good for me.”

The old priest rolled the whiskey around in his glass and then had a sip. “That’s the Army view on things. You’ll find this is a demanding job too. As long as your spiritual spine is straight, you’ll do very well here. But tell me, what kind of stories did they tell you about Little Fawnton before you left?”

“Stories? They told me nothing, except that you have a fine fifteenth-century church. I am eager to see it, as I studied architecture in college and did a thesis on stone churches.”

The old man winked. “Oh come now, didn’t anyone mention me - the peculiar old vicar? Or the church organ? There must have been personnel changes at the Diocese. The old guard was always talking of our organ.” He took a long poker and resuscitated the fading fire,

collecting the unburned ends of the firewood into a small pyre. The flames leapt up and made the shadows dance more agitated on the books.

Stephen felt uncomfortable, and suddenly very tired. After a pause he smiled and said, "Perhaps I should excuse myself and go to bed. It's been a long two days."

The vicar pulled twice on a bell-cord hanging on the wall. "That's absolutely true, Mr Newton, and I am sorry for being such an inconsiderate host. Mrs Wilson will see to you. Good night."

Stephen bade him good night and left. Mrs Wilson had prepared a guest room for him. "You can stay in this room, or if you like, the parish has a small cottage just down the road. It has to be cleaned up for you, so maybe you'll stay here for a while with us." Stephen assured her any room with a bed was just fine for now. She left after telling him where the bathroom was, and then he went to freshen up. As soon as his head met the pillow, he was in a deep sleep. He did not dream.

When he woke up, it was already quite late in the morning. The first thing he saw in the sparsely furnished but comfortable little room was a crucifix on the wall at the foot of the bed, and he felt guilty for lying to the Vicar. Of course he had been told stories of the strange vicar of Old Fawnton, and the organ that played by itself at times. "*Oh, you're going to Little Haunton, sorry, Fawnton...*", "*While there, do make an effort to see if there's anything to the stories...*", "*If I were you, I'd watch that old vicar. Never know what he has up his sleeve...*" and so forth. Stephen had decided not to have preconceptions about his parish posting; he wanted to keep an open mind.

He went to the kitchen and Mrs Wilson fed him a proper country breakfast. When he asked if the vicar was available, she said, "Oh, Reverend Morris left while you slept. He wanted to go and meet some villagers in the north of the parish. He said he'd be back by nightfall, and that he'd see you then."

Stephen spent the day wandering about the village and presenting himself to the people. They were all happy to see old Reverend Morris get some help. By the time he returned to the vicarage, he'd had lunch at one house, tea in two places, and dinner at yet a third house, and it was dark already.

When he sat in his room, writing his diary and contemplating the day, a knock on the door yanked him back into reality. "Yes?" he said.

"It's me, Mr Newman. If you'd like to see the church, I need to get something from the sacristy, and I wondered whether you'd like to join me", said the vicar.

"Just a moment", Stephen said as he stood up and put on his shoes. He joined the vicar at the top of the stairs and together they descended into the hall and went out the front door. It was a misty night, and Stephen shivered as they walked up the winding path to the church. The dark shapes of headstones could just be seen in the light of the candle lantern. At the top of the stone stairs, the edges rounded by the feet of countless churchgoers, the vicar took out a wrought-iron key and opened the massive door. Stephen entered the church.

He had always been fond of old stone churches, and with one glance he found Little Fawnton superb. Centuries of loving care had maintained its whitewashed interior pristine, and the pews, built of oak, showed the effect of a million Sunday services. Elaborate but faded paintings adorned the walls. He stood in the aisle and took in the arches of the ceiling, the candelabras, and the woodwork of the pulpit. Stephen could not see details in the dim light, but by the time the vicar returned, Stephen was in love with the little church.

The vicar smiled as he saw Stephen's expression. "I know, my dear fellow, it happened to me too. I arrived in 1898, fresh out of college. I thought this place was where I wanted to spend my life, and I'm lucky – I've been able to do just that." The old priest smiled and patted Stephen on the back. "And just so you don't have to ask, the organ is back there." The vicar pointed into the recess at the back of the church, beneath a large stained glass window.

In the dim and flickering light of the lantern, Stephen could only tell it was quite a large organ for such a small church. "It's a very nice instrument", he said, more to say something than to express a thought. Then he decided to come clean with the vicar. "And it plays by itself?"

The vicar touched his nose with his index finger. "I was sure they'd tell you something at the Diocese. They've sent people here to investigate the rumours, but the organ knows when to stay silent. They've never found a thing, heard not a sound, but us here in the parish – we know."

"But surely that is not possible, Reverend? The organ needs wind in the pipes, a blower, and someone to play it, before it can emit any sounds. That's the real world view at least", Stephen said, smiling at the vicar.

"Ah... that's the real world indeed. You'll see. And you'll hear if that is to be. But we should be heading back to supper, I am quite sure Mrs Wilson has everything prepared. I'll show you the rest of the church tomorrow." He directed Stephen to the door, closed it behind himself and locked it. They walked to the vicarage in silence.

Within a week Stephen felt completely at home at Little Fawnton. He accompanied the vicar wherever he went. All the people he met promised to assist Stephen in every way while he learned the way of the town. He made an effort to learn the routes of the village as soon as possible, and soon he was able to take on some of the duties of the old vicar.

In a few weeks Stephen had completely blended into the parish. He had his work given to him by the vicar, who guided him as a master would an apprentice. Reverend Morris was a beacon of sense and stability in a world wrecked by war, and a trustworthy provider of spiritual help. The young priest did his best to emulate him, and the parish people rewarded him with their co-operation. He also moved out of the vicarage and into the modest little parish cottage down the road.

Early on, he had taken it as his habit to retire to the church to meditate and reflect on each day. By the time daylight waned and night set in, he was often seen slipping inside the shadows of the church, there to sit in silence and gather his strength for a new day. The dim, candlelit church provided him with serenity and joy.

On one such occasion he sat close to the altar, reading the Book of Common Prayer by candlelight, when he thought he heard a sound behind him. It was a high-pitched wailing sound, almost too faint to be heard, and it stopped as soon as he turned his head to see what it was. Straining his ears, he wondered about it, then shrugged and went back to his book. Another sound, this time an oboe-like toot, caused him to turn round with a snap; in the dim church there was no one but himself, and no source for sounds was apparent.

Stephen thought himself too tired to continue reading. As he stood up and collected his things, he heard a loud sound blast from the organ, as if someone had slapped their hands on the keyboard trying to hit as many keys as possible. Stephen listened for a second to the violent discord, then ran out of the church to collect his wits. When he felt calm enough to peek in again, all was quiet in the church, and no one was to be seen close to the organ. Stephen felt his cold sweat drying off his forehead; he didn't want to enter the church, but he locked it instead, double-checking the lock before he left.

Stephen felt silly to ask the vicar about the sounds he'd heard. Besides, he was not entirely sure he had heard anything in the first place. Maybe it was overwork? Perhaps his bout of the flu and fever had made him hear things when none were to be heard? He had no answer, but was able to bury the incident after some days.

Days joined each other in the never-ending chain of life, and Stephen felt more at home with every passing evening. He had come to enjoy having supper every night with the vicar, and even if he had moved out to the parish cottage down the road from the vicarage, he joined the old priest whenever it was possible. After supper they often retreated to the study for some whiskey.

On one such occasion, the vicar asked, "Where did you say you studied again?"

"St Jerome's at Cambridge."

"You don't say! I went to Old Jerry too!" the vicar said, raising a toast to their alma mater.

"Oh, splendid", said Stephen and had a sip of the whiskey.

"Tell me, what did you do after your final exam? Is the Ass and Cart still open?"

Stephen wiggled. "Yes, it is still open. We did go there for a beer to celebrate."

The old vicar wasn't finished. "A beer...?"

Stephen felt himself going red. "A couple, yes."

"Come now, Stephen – may I call you Stephen? – A couple? As I remember it, graduating students went to the Ass and Cart to raise hell!" The vicar leaned back and looked at the fire, and Stephen saw the flames reflected in his spectacles as if his eyes were all alight.

Stephen confessed, "As I remember it, I drank eight beers, or thereabouts. And before you ask, yes, we did attempt to tune the bottles so as to be able to play Beethoven's *Ode to*

Joy. I have a faint recollection of getting my two tones out of the bottles, and managing a fair rendition of the tune, before I passed out.”

The old priest slapped his thigh and laughed. “So the Beethoven Bottle Organ is still alive and well at the Ass and Cart! This is the best news I’ve heard all week!”

Stephen smiled. “It was quite fun, yes, if not the morning afterwards. But then, no more exams that week, or ever after.” They went on discussing life at St Jerome’s until midnight, when Stephen finally walked slowly home through the silent village. He didn’t mind the slight seagoing feeling the vicar’s whiskey had brought him.

Weeks went on. Stephen resumed his visits to the church, armed with his Bible and prayer book, and the memory of the organ receded and blended into the whitewashed walls of the holy house. One Sunday Stephen remained behind after the last parishioners left from the evening service. The vicar had not attended the service due to a bit of sickness that had kept him bedridden for almost a week already.

Stephen stood at the altar, extinguishing candles, when he heard a long note. After a moment’s pause, a long, undulating lower note played in the church, and when it ended, its echo died slowly. Another note followed, once more lower than the two. Stephen turned slowly to face the organ at the far end of the aisle.

The sounds repeated. They became louder every time they were heard again. Stephen assigned the notes an identity. *Three... Blind... Mice*. After a long pause, *Three... Blind... Mice*. He felt an urge to go to the organ and banish the spirits within, using the rites he’d learned, and his faith. And yet, a primeval fear balanced that urge and wanted him to leave the church as fast as possible, to escape the possessed organ. Stephen crabbed sideways to the wall of the church, and feeling the cold stone with his back, slid down to the door and into the night, hearing *Three... Blind... Mice* as he went.

It was harder for him to forget this experience than the previous, but busy days and congenial evenings eventually did help him. And so Stephen became a part of the parish. The vicar was happy for Stephen’s assistance, and he worked tirelessly once he’d recuperated.

Stephen was not surprised, therefore, when he was awakened in the middle of a night by a hurried knock on the door. “Stephen? We should go to Woollenham. Farmer Miles is dying, and I’m on my way to him.” Stephen responded, got dressed, grabbed his bag and rushed out. The vicar was already climbing into the lorry and Stephen went to sit beside him.

The son of the dying man drove the lorry as only someone who is born and bred in those parts possibly can. With the dimmed headlights, Stephen had no idea where even the road was, but they arrived at the Miles farm in half an hour. The vicar rushed upstairs with Stephen in tow.

There were three people by the bedside of the dying man, his wife, oldest son, and only daughter. They gave way for the vicar to reach the wasted and feverish man lying in the bed. The vicar went into the Extreme Unction straight away, and Stephen took it unto himself to console the wife. The man on the bed seemed oblivious to the world as the vicar read his

prayers in a subdued voice, but as he made the sign of the Cross, he opened his eyes. "Reverend...?" he asked, and lifted up a waning hand.

The vicar took his hand with both of his, and said, "Shhh... you just rest. You'll be fine. Trust me."

The man smiled at the vicar, then injected all his remaining strength into one sentence. "I'll find mine." At that, his spirit left him, and his lifeless body fell back on the pillows. The vicar put the dead man's hand on the bed and closed his eyes.

"He is gone. Let us pray." The five people mumbled a prayer, led by the vicar, and then the vicar turned to the widow. "He's in good hands now. No more pain, no more suffering, and he was a brave man to the end. He has gone to meet his Lord." The widow burst out in uncontrolled sobs, and his son took him into his arms. The vicar and Stephen bade the family farewell and went downstairs, where the driver was waiting to drive them back.

Stephen was burning to ask about what farmer Miles had said, but decided not to say anything in the lorry. In the dim dashboard light, Reverend Morris seemed old as the hills. He'd sent people out of this world for forty-five years now, and every one of them had been his friend. Stephen felt proud to be his apprentice in the craft of the priests.

Once at the vicarage, the old priest took his leave from Stephen, but instead of going into the house, he went round it and disappeared into the darkness. Stephen went to tell Mrs Wilson what had happened, and then walked down the silent road to his cottage. He prepared to go to bed, but his mind was uneasy. He decided to pray, but found his soul wandering, and always returning to the words of the dying man.

Half an hour later, Stephen could not take it anymore. He needed Reverend Morris to explain. He rose, put on his clothes, and returned to the Vicarage. He slipped into the dark garden without a sound. He wondered how narrow the path looked in the near total darkness, and how long the little walk to the church seemed, so different from the daylight.

The door to the church was ajar. Stephen glanced behind him, but admonished himself for feeling scared; he was a man of the cloth, entering a holy building, in full view of God – what could possibly harm him? He could sense the scent of burning candles, and as he entered the church, he saw Reverend Morris sitting in the middle of the pews with his arms on the backrest, his head drooping down and to the left. Stephen hurried to his side, worried something had happened to him, but as he slid down the pews to the old man, Stephen was relieved to see him turn to face him.

"I was quite sure you'd turn up", Reverend Morris said. "I could see you had things on your mind back there. For example... Farmer Miles and his last words?"

Stephen had to admire the vicar's perception. "You're right. I had to come and ask you, what did he mean with that?"

The vicar said, "If you sit for a moment, you'll find out." And with that he faced the altar again, and sat in silence.

Stephen restrained himself and sat up straight, facing forward and looking at the crucifix, with his back to the organ. He tried to control his mind, to find the inner peace which so evidently was flowing in the veins of the vicar. He decided to pray, and went into the Lord's Prayer in his mind.

As soon as he had reached *But lead us not into temptation*, he heard a sound behind him. It was the faintest of sounds, much as a bird's call heard through a thousand acres of misty forest. The short hair of Stephen's neck stood on end. He controlled himself perfectly, not a movement betrayed his confusion. Another sound emerged, this time a high-pitched note out of a flute. As soon as it began, it stopped, and its echo passed from one end of the church to the other until it faded away. *But deliver us from evil*, he continued, hoping the prayer would help him.

Without noticing it, he said the rest aloud, and scared himself when *For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever* sounded in the church. Reverend Morris turned to him.

"That's nice, my friend, but scarcely necessary."

Stephen went silent. The Reverend made a swooping gesture in the direction of the organ.

"It's nothing to worry about. They're finding their pipes. It always takes some time, and results in some odd sound or two. But when they find their pipe, you'll hear how well they play."

"Who do you mean? And what do you mean, finding their pipes?"

"Why, the parishioners. The ones we send off, just like old Michael Miles."

Stephen felt his spine turn into an icicle. He took a deep breath. "The dead people of the parish cause the sounds?" he asked.

The old priest removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyes, as if he was tired of explaining such a trivial thing to his young curate. "Yes, they do. It just takes some time for them to find the pipe they need, and to learn how to play it."

Stephen felt his head swoon. He slapped his thigh to see he was awake, then turned to face the organ. As he looked, he could hear a long, low sound emanate from the organ. His eyes widened in fear, but Reverend Morris turned him to face himself. "That's probably Mr Collins. Takes quite a strong soul to work the tallest flue pipes. Oh, he was a regular horse of a farmer, he was..."

"But surely, Reverend, dead people can't play the organ!" Stephen was shaking. The vicar placed his hand on Stephen's shoulder.

"They're not playing the organ as you, or me, or indeed, the organist would. They're not operating the blower; they have no access to the manuals – they could not press a single key. What they do is find the pipe that works for them, and they think of wind. If they're in the right

pipe, they produce a sound.” The vicar turned back to face the altar again. “Or so I think anyway. I have no idea whether I am right. No one’s come to tell me what they do.”

“I admit, it did cause me consternation when I sat here with Reverend Redstone, back in 1898. I heard sounds just like you, and I was just as scared. But the bright side of the matter is, they only remain behind to play the pipes if you’ve been a priest worth your salt. If you’ve helped them, they’ll wait for you. If not, the organ remains silent, and you know you failed them. It’s as simple as that.”

The vicar let his head sag for a while, then continued. “And I am getting ready for the performance.”

“What performance?”

Reverend Morris faced him again but did not answer. “What kinds of sounds have you heard here?” he asked instead. Stephen explained the single notes he’d heard in the empty church, and the cacophony incident.

The old Reverend smiled. “Stephen, my dear fellow, the people of our parish are hard-working and God-fearing folks, but they were never beyond a healthy prank when they were living. Why should they be deprived of their sense of humour when they die?” He smiled to himself and patted Stephen on the shoulder.

Stephen was adamant. “But surely – these are country folks, how would they know how to play songs on the organ?”

Reverend Morris had a glimmer of mischief in his eye. “I seem to understand even organists tend to die at some point of their lives. Maybe they run the show. I do not know, Stephen, but that is my guess. Was there anything else?”

Stephen then told him of the *Three Blind Mice*. “That’d be the Collingwood boys”, the vicar said. “Last year, we had an air raid here. Yes, I know, hard to say why they came over here. I believe there was one bomber that was chased away from the attacking group. It was one of the Baedeker Raids.” The vicar took off his spectacles and blew dust off the lenses.

“Late April. Was it the 27th? No, it was the 28th. This solitary bomber came out of nowhere, chased by two of our Spitfires, who took turns shooting at the bomber. It was hit in the wing and right after it had passed the village, it crashed, unfortunately into our school. The bombs went off in the resulting fire. We lost twenty boys in that attack, and the three Collingwood boys were among them. It was terrible, just terrible, to go to their house and bring the news to the mother. You see, Mr Collingwood was killed at Dunkerque, and the boys were all the mother had.”

Stephen understood just how much the war had burdened the old vicar. “It must have been an ordeal.”

“So now, as you know, the organ has begun to prepare. There are more pipes with sound every night. The war gives us more pipes every day, it seems. I’ve heard them play a bit

of a song already, not very well, but I could tell the song. That's fine with me. I'm ready for the performance too, very soon."

Stephen had to ask, even if he knew the answer. "When is the performance?"

The fragile priest put on his glasses, looked Stephen in the eye, and said, "When I die."

As if to reinforce the vicar's conviction, Stephen heard the organ go live. Slowly, at a majestic pace and a note at a time, the instrument played *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*. The vicar closed his eyes and conducted the music with his age-engraved hands. "Ah... They're getting better at it. I heard this a week ago, and they were falling out of time all the time. Now they work together beautifully..." he said as he enjoyed the music.

Stephen felt admiration and kindness towards the old man, who was strong enough to accept the advent of his death with such dignity. He no longer had any fear of the organ, as he'd come to understand the basic truth about the nocturnal music played without earthly hands. He smiled in the dark.

When the last note of the song, played much longer than its intended length, finally died out in the shadows of the church, the vicar stood up. "Come, Stephen, it's time we left them to practice on their own." Stephen walked with him out of the church and into the yard.

When Stephen got in his bed, he expected to roll around for a long time, but fell asleep right away instead. In the morning he was greeted at the gate of his cottage wall by a distraught Mrs Wilson. "Father Newman, you must come quick! Reverend Morris had a stroke just now, when he was having his tea! Doctor West is with him – please hurry!"

Stephen rushed up to the vicarage and to Reverend Morris's room. He was lying in his bed, and Dr West was taking his pulse. "Ah, Father Newman. Looks like you'll be running the parish from now on. It was a heart attack, probably a mild one, but dangerous nevertheless. I told him months ago he was working too hard, but he wouldn't listen."

The Reverend opened one eye and said, "Donald, kindly leave me to run my parish without any nagging about how I do it."

Dr West said, "If he's able to talk like that, there's hope yet. However, he's now confined to bed until I say otherwise. Mrs Wilson will take care of you, we know. And Father Newman, I want you to make sure this man doesn't attempt to partake in any church business for a few weeks." He collected his bag and left.

Stephen did exactly as he was told, and due to his apprenticeship he was able to assume the parish priest duties without a hitch. During the day he ran the shop, and in the evenings he kept Reverend Morris company. They talked until late every evening it seemed, and Stephen came to see many things in a new way.

One night he gave the Reverend his medicinal cognac, as ordered by Dr West. As he had a little whiskey himself, he asked, "Reverend, what was the music the organ played to your predecessor?"

Stephen saw a cloud appear on the brow of the old man. "I never told this to anybody. I'd also like this to remain secret from the parish, if you don't mind –".

"You don't have to tell me. Sorry I asked", Stephen said. He had another sip and felt the fire in his taste buds.

"No, actually you should know this. Reverend Redstone passed away on September 27, 1898. We had dinner, just like you and I have had for the past six months. I bade him goodnight and started on my way to my cottage, but as he waved me goodbye at the door, he fell on his face, and stayed there. He died on the spot. Some passing villagers came to the door, helped me take him to his bed and went to get the doctor, but it was useless of course."

The old priest asked for more cognac, and Stephen poured him a little. "When the doctor left, I hurried to the church. The Reverend had told me of the organ, and I'd heard the single notes – mind you, I was just as frightened by them as you – but I'd not connected them to the impending death of the Reverend. So there I was, standing in the middle of the aisle, facing the organ. I had a candle in my hand."

Stephen poked the dying fire to get some more light into the room.

Reverend Morris went on. "As I stood there and waited for something to happen, nothing did for a good while. Then I heard one of the flue pipes give a sound. It was very, very low. And then it started."

Stephen sat on the edge of his chair. "What started?"

"*Confutatis... Maledictis... Flammis acribus addictis.*" The old man sang Mozart's *Requiem* in a soft voice. "It certainly wasn't the *Kyrie*. Oh, how I wanted to leave right then, but I also wanted to hear what would happen."

Stephen felt his mouth was cotton-lined. Wrongdoers thrown into the flames of hell... instead of glory of God?

"And the thing is, the organ never got past that phrase. It repeated three times, just those notes, every time louder than the previous one. And then –"

Stephen asked, "What happened then?"

The old man appeared strained. "Stephen, I don't know about you, but I've felt the presence of God quite a few times. This time I felt a presence too, but it certainly wasn't God. That's all very well, I'd had my fill of the whole affair anyway, so when a cold wind blasted up the aisle and went by me, through me, extinguishing my candle, by God, I ran. I ran out of the church and across the churchyard and down the road, and only stopped by the bridge. I'm not ashamed to tell you that. I was never more scared in my life."

Stephen wondered whether he could ask anything, but felt he had to. "But why would they play *Confutatis*?"

Reverend Morris closed his eyes. "When I went through the parish books later, I found he'd been misappropriating parish funds. I do not know what he did, but in the course of his

work here, more than four thousand pounds were unaccounted for. He'd had an accomplice; the accountant helped him, but he fled the town as soon as Reverend Redstone died. I didn't cause a fuss over the money." The old man lay back on the pillows. "That was when I decided, when I go, the organ must have something else to play."

Stephen smiled in the dim light. "I'm sure they will have, Reverend. Quite sure. You must rest."

As Stephen prepared to leave, the Reverend asked him to bring a book from the study. He told Stephen he'd find it on the corner of the desk. Stephen did as he was asked, and took the book to the hands of the Reverend, smiling as he passed the book to him. His last glimpse of the old priest was of him opening the book with great care.

After midnight, Stephen was woken up by Mrs Wilson. "Oh, Father Newman, he's gone", she said in tears. Stephen collected his bag and went to see the vicar.

In death, he looked as peaceful as any man could after spending a lifetime in the service of other people. Stephen read a prayer and covered the vicar with a sheet, and consoled Mrs Wilson. As soon as Dr West appeared to take care of the formalities, and Stephen felt it appropriate to do so, he excused himself and went to the church. As his predecessor, he felt he should have only one candle, stand in the middle of the aisle, and see what happens.

As he stood in the silent church, in the sphere of light of his candle, he heard nothing for a while, but then, as if out of dense fog, he could discern low tones. Slow and majestic they emanated from the darkness that shrouded the organ, but soon he was able to recognise the song.

*Blest, I may now look on thee, oh, my native land,
and gladly greet thy pleasant pastures...*

Stephen smiled. The organ played on alone, note after beautiful note, in perfect harmony. Wagner's immortal music filled the house of God and the *Pilgrims' Choir* echoed in the dark recesses. Tannhäuser returned to meet his love, only to find her dead.

*... now I lay my pilgrim's staff aside to rest,
because, faithful to God, I have completed my pilgrimage!*

Stephen closed his eyes. He knew the opera well enough to remember how Tannhäuser finally obtained God's forgiveness. It was indeed a better song than that played to Reverend Redstone; one of lost love, of pilgrimage, and of work fulfilled.

*The salvation of pardon is granted the penitent,
in days to come he will walk in the peace of the blessed!*

He listened, focusing on the flawless organ rendition of the mighty chorus, until the volume subsided and the chorus of pilgrims passed him on their way to Heaven. Stephen opened his eyes to see his candle flicker in the soft rush of air that passed by, and indeed, through him, up the aisle and towards the altar. He stood alone in the church long after the music ended.

All of a sudden Stephen remembered his last meeting with the Reverend. He made his way to the vicarage and to the room of Reverend Morris. Nobody had picked up the book that had fallen from the dead man's hands to the floor. Stephen kneeled down to it.

In between the pages there was a photograph of a woman. Stephen looked at the woman, who was very beautiful, but appeared thin and pale.

On the picture was an inscription:

"Feb. 27th 1897, To my dearest Richard, forever yours, Catherine".

Stephen took the picture and the book, and went to the study. He found the place of the book after some searching, and then he went to the fireplace. Mrs Wilson had had a fire burning there in the evening as always, and the red embers were still glowing dim. Stephen took one last look at the photo, then laid it on the embers. As it caught fire and turned into crumpled black ashes and the woman in it disappeared in a wisp of smoke, he smiled.