
Opening Extract from...

Sidney Chambers and the Forgiveness of Sins

Written by James Runcie

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'A perfect accompaniment to a sunny afternoon, a hammock and a glass of Pimm's' GUARDIAN

The Grantchester Mysteries

Sidney Chambers and the Forgiveness of Sins

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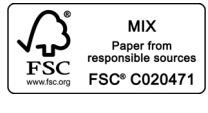

The Forgiveness of Sins

One cold Thursday morning, in February 1964, a man walked into the church in Grantchester and would not leave. He had fled from his Cambridge hotel after waking to discover that his wife had been stabbed to death. He had been sleeping beside her, the door and windows were locked on the inside and a knife was on the bedside table. The man could remember nothing. Now he was claiming sanctuary.

The skies were a sombre grey but the day was filled with light after three days of snow. The vicar, Canon Sidney Chambers, had just returned from walking his Labrador, his baby daughter had croup and a new curate had only recently been installed. The last thing he needed was a crisis.

The stranger had dressed in a hurry, using the clothes he had left on a chair from the previous night: an evening suit, a bow-tie that was loose and draped around the collar, and a dress-shirt. Despite the cold of that Lenten morning he was in a feverish sweat. Beads of perspiration formed beneath eyes that had still not completely woken to the day.

Sidney was sure that the ancient law of sanctuary, in which those accused of murder could be given forty days' protection from revenge and the law, had been abolished in the

seventeenth century. But perhaps there were exceptions, he told himself. He knew it was his Christian duty to speak to strangers and offer compassion.

'My name is Josef Madara,' the man began. He spoke with an Eastern European accent and his gaze was fixed on the middle distance, as if he was speaking to someone dead or far away. 'I am the principal violinist in the Holst Quartet. My wife, Sophie, plays the cello. We were performing last night: Tchaikovsky, Schoenberg, late Beethoven. All was good. We had some dinner afterwards and then a nightcap at the hotel. That is all I remember.'

'Were any other people with you?' Sidney asked, troubled by the intensity of the man's eyes. They appeared caught between colours.

'Only Dmitri and Natasha Zhirkov, the two other members of the quartet.'

'And they play the violin and the viola?'

'We are two couples. Five years we play together.'

'And there was nothing unusual last night?'

'Nothing. It is like a dream. Am I here now, in this church? Is this place sacred? Who are you?'

As a clergyman and now, almost officially, a part-time detective, Sidney was used to unexpected arrivals, unfortunate departures, accident, surprise and the apparently inexplicable. The key thing, he told himself, was not to rush. 'You are safe here,' he replied.

'Can I stay? I am not free from fear.'

'You are welcome to remain for this morning; but there will be evensong this afternoon. You will have to leave the chancel.'

‘But this is sanctuary. I cannot move.’

It was too soon to press a point. ‘We will come on to that,’ Sidney said calmly.

‘If I am here, I am safe.’

‘Perhaps you would like to tell me what happened?’

Josef Madara pulled a pouch of tobacco from his pocket and began to roll a cigarette.

‘Please . . .’ Sidney asked. ‘Not in church.’

‘I know, I know. I am Catholic. It is something to do with my hands.’

‘You were going to tell me . . .’

‘All I remember,’ the stranger continued, ‘is waking up and thinking that something was wrong. I was lying on my side. Then I saw blood. At first I thought I had cut myself. Perhaps the glass by my bed had fallen. I moved but I felt something sharp and looked down . . .’

‘Was it light?’

‘It was grey. I could see darkness against the white of the sheet. A knife. I turned on the light. I saw Sophie and the blood. Her face was in the pillow. I sat on the bed staring. The blood was everywhere. I looked across at the knife. Then I went to the door. I was going to get help but the door was locked and I couldn’t remember where we had put the key. I washed my face. I thought I might still be asleep. The water was cold. I wanted to wake up. But I couldn’t. Or I was already awake. I couldn’t remember anything. I got dressed. The key to the room was in the pocket of my trousers. I drew the curtains to see what the day was like. I don’t know why I did that. I saw a bus. It said it was going to Grantchester. I decided to go there. I would follow its direction. Then I could be free.’

'Were the windows closed?' Sidney asked.

'There was a door on to the balcony. We never went out. There was snow. I unbolted the window and threw the knife outside. My hands were frozen and there was the blood. I closed the window. I put on my coat and saw Sophie. She had a white silk nightdress. It was red. The heart. I think an artery. I could not look any more. I turned out the light. Then I opened the door to the room. I locked it from the outside. I left the key at the reception. I did not say anything. Then I started to walk and I came to this church.'

'Why here? There are others.'

Madara's response was puzzled. Had Sidney not been listening? 'Because of the bus.'

'And you have told no one?'

The man had little left to say. 'I like the colour of the stone here; and the glass. When was the church built?'

Sidney needed more information. 'As far as you know, your wife is still in your room?'

'She must be.'

'The hotel maid will discover her body.'

'Unless Dmitri and Natasha . . . they will knock. Perhaps they will find her.'

'When were you due to leave?'

'Today.'

It was after eleven o'clock, and Josef Madara had the settled look of a man who had decided that his day's work was done. Sidney needed help and he thought of Inspector Keating. 'I must tell a friend of mine what has happened.'

'I stay here.'

'For the time being, yes.' Someone was at the North Door.

'It is good of you to come to my church,' Sidney concluded, trying to be as honest as he could. 'And I can assure you that we will look after you. I will have to lock the building. It is not something I like doing, but at least it is the middle of the week, and it will be for your protection. What was your room number at the hotel?'

'It was on the second floor.'

'Your name again?' Sidney checked.

'Madara. My family are originally from Latvia.'

'And I can trust you to wait here, Mr Madara?'

'The Church is my hope,' the musician replied. 'I see the cross of Jesus before me and I know that he is coming down to greet me. Against the light, he comes.'

The figure that emerged from the darkness was not, however, the Lord and Saviour of Mankind, but Malcolm Mitchell, the new curate. Having previously challenged his parishioners with Leonard Graham's intellectual demands (one of his sermons on Kierkegaard had been entirely incomprehensible), Sidney had chosen, as his replacement, a larger-than-life, cake-loving, model-railway enthusiast.

Malcolm Mitchell had a ready smile and a boyish excitement, prepared at any time for the opportunities God gave. He sat down next to Josef Madara and asked, quietly and patiently, if there was anything the man needed. Would he like a cup of tea or a glass of water? Was he warm enough? Perhaps he required a blanket? Even when the church heating was on, he said, it was hard to feel any warmth.

Sidney explained the situation, made his farewells and bicycled across the frozen meadows to his friend, Inspector Geordie Keating, at the police station. He could already hear the

exasperated reaction in his head. 'Sanctuary! Murder! Why didn't you telephone? It would have been a hell of a lot quicker.'

Keating's response would have been justified but the unusual nature of the situation made Sidney want to discuss it in person. The gritters were out on the roads, the first snowmen had begun to appear across the town and Geordie was on his third cup of tea of the morning. 'This is trouble, isn't it?' he asked.

'I am afraid so. I think you will want to come with me to the Garden House Hotel.'

'I have had my breakfast, Sidney – an inadvisable kipper – and it's too early for lunch. What has happened?'

'I am not sure.'

'Even when you're not sure, you worry me.'

'Then please help me find out what's happened. You have time?'

'Sometimes I think you take advantage of our friendship.'

The hotel was a modern building on the River Cam and its distance from the police station allowed Sidney enough time to brief his friend as they walked down Mill Lane. It was a bitter morning, without birdsong, the traffic sparse and subdued as people made their way fearfully through the streets. An old man fell, a child cried, a young girl slipped, screamed and laughed. Inspector Keating asked the hotel manager if he wouldn't mind showing them up to Josef and Sophie Madara's room on the second floor. A coach party huddled at reception, reluctant to step out into the world.

As they climbed the stairs, Sidney dreaded opening the door. He imagined the sheets awry and covered in blood, a female body eviscerated: a chaos of hatred.

And so it came as something of a surprise to find a perfectly ordered room with the bed made, suitcases packed and clean towels left out. There was nothing amiss.

'Are you sure we've got the right room?' Keating asked.

'This is 211,' said the manager.

'Look. Here is Madara's violin,' Sidney noted. 'And a suitcase. Their name is on the luggage label.'

'Any sign of the wife's clothes?'

'I'll open it.'

Inside was a skirt, blouse, underwear and a make-up bag. There was, however, no sign of Sophie Madara's cello. 'Perhaps she left it at the concert hall?' Sidney suggested.

'I can't believe you are wasting my time with a nutter's cock and bull story.'

'I believed him, Geordie.'

'Sometimes I think you accept things too readily.'

Sidney had a sudden thought about Easter: the discovery of the empty tomb, the linen left unfolded like a napkin in the middle of a meal, the symbol that Jesus would return.

Keating turned to the manager. 'Has the room been cleaned?'

'I can't be sure. The covers aren't arranged in the usual way. The toiletries have yet to be replaced. Perhaps it's the new girl. I'll make some enquiries.'

'Is it possible the couple never slept here at all?'

'Someone has been in the room.'

'Then either Madara, or his dead wife, must have tidied up.'

Sidney wondered if he had been tricked. He had always thought himself a good judge of character. In fact, he prided himself on his ability to distinguish between truth and

falsehood. But if Madara was not a fantasist, who would have come into a locked room and how could they have tidied up the scene of the crime without anyone noticing? More importantly, where was the victim?

The manager explained that it was a busy hotel. There had been a fiftieth birthday party the previous night. It would have been almost impossible to remove a dead body.

'I have never known anything like it,' Sidney fretted.

Keating tried to be generous. 'It's unlike you to make a mistake.'

'I would never claim to be perfect. But I felt sure Madara was telling me the truth.'

'Where's the wife then?'

'I don't know. Perhaps it didn't happen here but in his home?'

'It's more likely she's left him,' Keating continued. 'They had a row and your man dreamed that he killed her without doing anything of the sort. Did you ask if he was taking any medicine?'

'No . . .'

'And could he have been drunk, or not himself?'

'I can only judge what was put in front me: a man in distress, convinced that he had unwittingly stabbed his wife to death.'

'I don't suppose he had the knife with him.'

'He said he threw it out of the window . . .'

'Talk about a wild-goose chase . . .'

'I *believed* him, Geordie.'

'Perhaps his wife wasn't staying with him at all.' Keating turned to the hotel manager. 'Did anyone see her?'

'I can ask . . . I wasn't on duty yesterday.'

'We need to speak to whoever was. You say he slept in the room?'

The manager checked the bed. 'Someone did.'

Sidney confirmed, 'Madara told me.'

'And if his story is true then perhaps he was the one that tidied up afterwards; and he was too shocked to remember anything he was doing?'

'He told me he just left.'

'But we can't be sure of anything he has said.'

'So why make all this up, Geordie?'

'I don't know. Perhaps it's because he wanted a bit of drama, or someone to talk to. Either that or he wanted you out of the way. Perhaps he's going to rob your church?'

'It's quite an elaborate way of doing things.'

'Nothing surprises me, Sidney. Do you want me to come and talk some sense into him?'

'I don't think there's much we can do here.'

They were about to return to the staircase when a couple emerged from the room next door. They appeared furtive, as if they had been caught in the act of leaving without paying their bill. Sidney noticed that they carried musical instruments along with their luggage.

'Are you, by any chance, members of the Holst Quartet?'

'How do you know?'

'You seem to be leaving in a hurry.'

'Who are you?' the woman asked.

'Never you mind who he is,' Keating interrupted. 'I am a police officer.'

'Are you departing?' the hotel manager asked.

'Our friends seem to have left already,' Dmitri Zhirkov said.

'We thought that we would wait for them as we normally travel together but I suppose they've decided to go on ahead.'

He was taller and thinner than Josef Madara, with receding hair, a slight stoop and round silver-framed glasses. Sidney remembered a friend telling him that just as couples sometimes grow to look like each other, so musicians matched their instruments. You never saw a fat flautist, she said, or a thin tuba player, or even an introverted percussionist. Looking at the couple, he wondered how much this was true, and if the missing woman was as shapely as a cello.

'I think we need a bit of a chat,' said Keating.

The manager took everyone down to one of the hotel's hospitality rooms. There was more space there than in his office, he said, and they would not be disturbed for a good half hour.

The room contained the remains of the celebration from the previous evening. Deflated balloons were still tied to the chairs. Smeared plates, half-empty wine glasses and overflowing ashtrays were scattered across the tables. It needed an airing but someone had probably decided that it was too cold to do so. Sidney thought they should check how many of the guests had spent the night in the hotel and if it was worth keeping them in. He mentioned the idea to Keating but the inspector reminded him that there was no sign of any crime.

'We'll just ask some questions and then check if Sophie Madara has gone home or back to her mother's. I don't suppose you offered your man the use of a telephone?'

'Madara thinks his wife is dead and that he killed her. Why would I suggest that he telephone her?'

While coffee was poured and biscuits offered, the Zhirkov

couple repeated that they had assumed the Madaras had gone back to London. They were anxious to return themselves as they were due at an orchestra rehearsal on Monday.

'Is that the only thing you are worried about?'

'At the moment, yes.'

'Then let me give you a little more to concern you,' Keating warned.

Natasha Zhirkov leaned forward as she listened to the inspector, her dark hair cut in a bob that had been sharply styled to break up the roundness of her face. 'Josef is very highly strung, Inspector,' she explained with unusual calmness. 'I am sure he is making all this up.'

'He's . . . he's what you might call eccentric,' her husband continued.

Neither asked how their colleague was, or how he could have got himself into such a state.

As the conversation went on, Dmitri Zhirkov kept repeating that he wanted to get back to London. His wife tried to bring the interrogation to a close. 'I'm sure you don't need very much from us, Inspector. Being a police officer, you must have been able to work out what's happened?'

'Were there tensions in the quartet?' Keating persisted. 'What is Mrs Madara like? Why would her husband say that he had killed her or why might she disappear?'

'Shouldn't you organise a search before asking these questions?'

'I have already made a telephone call,' Keating assured them. Sidney knew that this was not true. They had not been apart since the discovery of the empty bedroom.

Sidney asked if the couple would come to the church and

talk to Madara. Perhaps the fugitive would tell his colleagues a little more than he had said already?

'I very much doubt it,' said Natasha.

'But he is your friend.'

'You wouldn't have thought so if you had seen us all last night.'

Dmitri Zhirkov stopped his wife. 'I hope you are not going to start on that.'

'Why not?'

Sidney checked. 'I thought you were playing in a concert?'

'We were; and it went perfectly well. It was what happened afterwards . . .'

Keating interrupted. 'You had an argument.'

Natasha Zhirkov was looking out through the steaming windows to the snow on the grass, the parked cars. It was a day that had already seen the best of the light.

'What was it about?' Sidney asked.

'It's awkward,' said Natasha Zhirkov, as the hotel maids entered the room and began to take down the balloons, clear away the plates and empty the ashtrays. One of them turned on the Hoover to clean the carpet.

'I never imagined it was going to be easy,' Keating replied. 'If it was simple we would have finished by now.'

'You might as well tell him,' Dmitri Zhirkov cut in. 'He'll find out soon enough. This bloody vicar probably knows already.'

'I have an idea,' Sidney began, without quite being able to decide if he did or not. It always happened when he was tired. He would begin sentences and then hope that the sense would come to him halfway through what he was saying.

'Josef thought that we should break up the quartet . . .' Natasha began, perhaps hoping that the noise of the hoovering would drown out her words.

'And why was that?' Sidney asked.

'He blamed our playing; even when it was Sophie making the mistakes.'

'And you told him so.'

'We hinted . . .' her husband added.

'But he didn't understand . . .'

'So we spelt it out . . .'

'And then we all started talking at the same time. It wasn't very edifying.'

'You can't unsay things after an argument, can you?' Dmitri Zhirkov concluded.

Keating aimed for clarity. 'But you don't think this dispute could have led to murder?'

'I don't know, Inspector. You can't always predict these things, I imagine. And if Josef did what he said he did . . .'

'He hasn't actually confessed,' said Sidney, surprised that their colleague's alleged death should have such little effect on the couple.

'Then what has he said?' Natasha Zhirkov asked. 'How much has he told you?'

Sidney offered to go ahead and check that the fugitive was still in the church and that Malcolm was coping. He didn't want to repeat the hotel experience by leading Inspector Keating to a second venue where someone had vanished; although he did half hope that his sanctuary-seeking guest might have gone back to London. Perhaps the eccentric musical couple had

reunited after an unusual tiff, a terrible night and a hopeless fantasy?

No more snow had fallen but, with a further drop in temperature, any slush had frozen. It was too risky to bicycle home. It was safer for Sidney to walk with his head against the wind across the meadows. His hands were cold, his feet were damp, his cheeks red and his ears so frosted that he was not sure he could hear properly. He had forgotten his hat and he remembered his father telling him how much body heat escaped through the head. There was no such thing as bad weather, only the wrong clothes.

'As soon as you feel the cold, it's too late,' he had told his son. Well, it was certainly too late now.

Sidney tried to think of the sermon he had to prepare for the first Sunday in Lent. He wondered if he could utilise the surprise he had felt at seeing the empty hotel room and imagine the shock Mary Magdalene experienced on finding the empty tomb of Jesus.

It must have been astonishing to have expectations so subverted; to be so bereaved, confused, lost and then finally exhilarated to discover the resurrection. How could that shock of faith be re-created today, Sidney thought, in, say, an anonymous hotel room, a home, a school or a factory? What would it mean to tell Josef Madara that the wife he thought had been dead was not lying in their room but alive again, however miraculous that might seem; that hope could remain even in the most desperate of situations?

His momentary optimism was dispelled by the familiar sight of Helena Randall talking to the churchwarden. An ambitious journalist from the *Cambridge Evening News*, she at least had

prepared for the weather and was dressed in a duffel coat, wellington boots, fur mittens, what looked like a Russian fur hat, and a long scarf.

'Since when did you start locking your church?' she asked. 'I thought it was supposed to be open for prayer at all times. Your lovely new curate won't let me in. He's very diligent.'

'How did you hear about this?' Sidney replied, determined not to let her get the upper hand.

'I am an investigative journalist. Have you forgotten?'

'Did Geordie tell you?' (Helena had been flirtatious with the inspector for years and Keating still had a soft spot for her.)

'I never reveal my sources.'

'What do you want?'

'Access, if you don't mind.'

'You are not normally so keen to enter a place of worship.'

'Well you don't *normally* provide anything so intriguing.'

'I am not sure it is our role to entertain,' Sidney replied. 'There are other venues that await your pleasure . . .'

'We have spoken about this before, Canon Chambers. The public has a limited appetite for religion, particularly when the atmosphere in your church is so drearily Victorian.'

'Matters of morality, eternal life and the certainty of death are hardly dreary.' Sidney looked for his keys and began to unlock the door.

'You can't take the public's interest for granted,' Helena continued. 'They have so much more to do with their leisure time these days. They're also less afraid of eternal damnation. The old frighteners don't work any more. Are you going to let me come in or not?'

The police joined them before Sidney could answer. On

seeing Helena, Keating muttered an 'I might have known' before announcing that Dmitri and Natasha Zhirkov had asked to talk to their colleague at the station. They wanted time to collect their thoughts. In the meantime he had telephoned Inspector Williams in London, who had agreed to send a couple of men round to the Madara flat to see if there was any sign of the missing wife.

'Is our man still inside?' he asked.

'I haven't been able to ascertain,' Sidney replied.

'What's kept you?'

'I have been speaking to Miss Randall.'

'I suppose it's simpler to have her working with us rather than against us.'

'I've always proved my worth in the past,' Helena smiled. 'And you both love me really. You're just reluctant to admit it.'

'Don't count on it.'

'You'll miss me when I'm gone.'

'Where are you off to?' Sidney asked.

'I can't stay in this backwater much longer.'

'Cambridge isn't a backwater.'

'It's hardly London.'

'You want the big city and the bright lights?' Sidney asked.

'One big scoop and I'm there,' Helena replied. 'And this could be it.'

'I wouldn't be so hasty,' Keating snapped back. 'All we've got so far is an empty room, a mad fantasist and an unlikely story. You can wait here while we talk to him and then we'll decide what to do.' He turned to Sidney and gestured to the open doorway. 'Shall we?'

They walked into the nave. The soft winter light took away

all sense of modernity. It could have been a hundred years ago. Malcolm Mitchell was reading quietly in a pew, pretending that the situation was perfectly normal. He had fetched a blanket and given the fugitive a cup of tea and a slice of cake. Josef Madara was praying.

Sidney wondered if the stranger had heard their approach and deliberately positioned himself in a state of penitence. Tears had fallen over his cheeks and his eyes (viridian) now appeared large and sorrowful. He looked like a cross between an El Greco painting and Alan Bates in *Whistle Down the Wind*.

'Did you find her?' he asked, without looking at his visitors. 'Is she still there?'

'She is not,' Sidney replied.

'Then God must have taken her.'

Inspector Keating stepped forward to introduce himself. 'I think we have to find a more plausible explanation.'

'I left her in the hotel room.'

'And was her cello still there?' Keating asked.

'It was. She never leaves it anywhere.'

'Well it's gone now.'

Keating was about to ask the man to describe the crime scene when Sidney jumped ahead of him. He wondered how Madara had met Sophie, how long they had been married and had she loved anyone before him? Did she have fans and admirers? Were there things that she never told him about? Did she have secrets? How much time did they spend apart? Did she ever go missing and did he always know where she was?

Madara kept to his story. His wife was the sweetest woman. She was a Madonna and he was the sinner.

'In killing her?'

'No,' the man corrected himself. 'Before then.'

'What do you mean?'

'It is too much to explain. Many terrible things.'

'An affair?'

'You know?'

'With Natasha Zhirkov?' Sidney asked.

'Yes.'

'And your wife knew?' Keating checked, impressed by Sidney's intuition.

'I'm not sure.'

'Did Dmitri Zhirkov?'

'Definitely not.'

'Well, whether he does or not, at least three out of four of you knew,' said Keating. 'And if your wife really is dead, then every surviving member of the quartet has a motive for killing her. I think you'd better come with me to the station.'

'But here is sanctuary.'

Keating spared Sidney the trouble of answering. 'We are no longer in the Middle Ages, Mr Madara. Other people need to come to church too. You can't have it all to yourself.'

'There can be no forgiveness. I am a miserable sinner.'

'Then we can talk about your sin at the station.'

Helena was waiting in the church porch. She was writing in a pair of fingerless gloves that must have been under her mittens and she looked up from a shorthand notebook that was filling up fast. Sidney wondered how much, if anything, she had overheard. 'Can I come too?' she asked.

'Of course not,' Keating answered, all too testily. 'We'll brief you when we can. Don't get your hopes up.'

'Charming. Have you anything to go on?'

'I am sure you can make it up.'

'I'd rather have the facts.'

'And so, Miss Randall, would we.'

Once they reached St Andrew's Street, Keating told Sidney what was on his mind. 'How much is this wish fulfilment? If Sophie Madara really is dead, then why is your man telling us this? And if he didn't kill her, then how did one of the others, or anyone else for that matter, get into a locked room? Why didn't Madara wake up during the attack; and why wasn't he killed at the same time?'

'Whatever his story,' Sidney replied, 'we have to find the wife. If she is dead then it's a full-scale murder investigation. And if she's alive . . .'

'Perhaps she can tell us what the hell everyone is playing at,' Keating completed the sentence. 'Have you ever known the like?'

It was mid-afternoon by the time Sidney returned to the vicarage for a baked potato and some cold ham. His mood was not improved by the fact that they had run out of chutney. What he really wanted was a warming stew and a hot toddy but it was Lent, he was not drinking, and he was in no position to make demands.

Hildegard had abandoned all hope that they might eat together and was settling their daughter for an afternoon nap. Anna was recovering from croup. Neither parent had been getting very much sleep, walking the floor in the night, holding their child close. (She was not yet three months old; a baby who was only just beginning to respond to feelings other than hunger

and pain, contentment and sleep.) What was Sidney doing involving himself in this latest incident?

'I don't have any choice, my darling. Josef Madara just walked into church.'

'Can't Inspector Keating deal with it?'

'He needs my help.'

'I need it too. I am tired.'

'Is something the matter?'

'I don't think so. I was worried. It's nothing; only the lack of sleep perhaps.'

'Nothing?'

'Sidney . . . do you think we will ever leave this place?'

'We can't stay for ever.'

'And where will we go?'

'Wherever the Lord takes us.'

'He moves in a mysterious way?' Hildegard asked.

'Although not as mysteriously as some of his subjects. I wish there wasn't so much to do. It all gets in the way of being with you.'

'I should say I am used to it. But I don't want to get to a stage where I don't mind.'

'Neither do I.'

'I don't mean to worry you,' Hildegard continued. 'And I'm sorry. I don't like complaining. At least we are tolerant of each other's faults.'

'We are.'

She smiled. 'Even if one of us does have more than the other.'

'Life, God willing, is long, Hildegard. These things even up over time. I hope you're not keeping score?'

'I am. One day there will be a great reckoning. One that will be even more frightening for you than the Last Judgement.'

'I look forward to it, then.'

'Why, Sidney?'

'Because when it is all over the subsequent peace will be wonderful.'

He kissed his wife and made for the study. He was behind on his Easter preparation and this new case had only made the situation worse. He thought of Harold Macmillan's explanation of the precariousness of political life and the unpredictable nature of events that could destabilise the most organised routine. No matter how diligent he was as a vicar there was no end to the amount of time he could spend on the spiritual care of his congregation. Unlike a builder or a decorator who could stop in the hours of darkness or when a project was over, the labour of being a priest was never complete.

He cleared out the grate and began to lay a fire. As he did so, he could hear Hildegard singing Anna a lullaby.

'Guten Abend, gut' Nacht
Mit Rosen bedacht
Mit Näglein besteckt
Schlüpf unter die Deck.'

His wife had such a beautiful voice. What was he doing, sitting at his desk worrying about a case in which he had already become involved when he could have been enjoying the company of his wife and daughter? What had happened to his priorities?

* * *