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Sidney Chambers and The Shadow of Death

Written by James Runcie

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The
GRANTCHESTER MYSTERIES

SIDNEY CHAMBERS
AND
*The Shadow of
Death*

JAMES RUNCIE

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For Marilyn

The Shadow of Death

CANON SIDNEY CHAMBERS had never intended to become a detective. Indeed, it came about quite by chance, after a funeral, when a handsome woman of indeterminate age voiced her suspicion that the recent death of a Cambridge solicitor was not suicide, as had been widely reported, but murder.

It was a weekday morning in October 1953 and the pale rays of a low autumn sun were falling over the village of Grantchester. The mourners, who had attended the funeral of Stephen Staunton, shielded their eyes against the light as they made their way to the wake in The Red Lion. They were friends, colleagues and relatives from his childhood home in Northern Ireland, walking in silence. The first autumn leaves flickered as they fell from the elms. The day was too beautiful for a funeral.

Sidney had changed into his suit and dog collar and was about to join his congregation when he noticed an elegant lady waiting in the shadows of the church porch. Her high heels made her unusually tall, and she wore a calf-length black dress, a fox fur stole and a toque with a spotted veil. Sidney had noticed her during the service for the simple reason that she had been the most stylish person present.

‘I don’t think we’ve met?’ he asked.

The lady held out a gloved hand. ‘I’m Pamela Morton. Stephen Staunton worked with my husband.’

‘It’s been a sad time,’ Sidney responded.

The lady was keen to get the formalities out of the way. ‘Is there somewhere we can talk?’

Sidney had recently been to see the film *Young Man with a Horn* and noticed that Mrs Morton’s voice had all the sultriness of Lauren Bacall’s. ‘Won’t you be expected at the reception?’ he asked. ‘What about your husband?’

‘I told him I wanted a cigarette.’

Sidney hesitated. ‘I have to look in myself, of course . . .’

‘It won’t take long.’

‘Then we can go to the vicarage. I don’t think people will miss me quite yet.’

Sidney was a tall, slender man in his early thirties. A lover of warm beer and hot jazz, a keen cricketer and an avid reader, he was known for his understated clerical elegance. His high forehead, aquiline nose and longish chin were softened by nut-brown eyes and a gentle smile, one that suggested he was always prepared to think the best of people. He had had the priestly good fortune to be born on a Sabbath day and was ordained soon after the war. After a brief curacy in Coventry, and a short spell as domestic chaplain to the Bishop of Ely, he had been appointed vicar to the church of St Andrew and St Mary in 1952.

‘I suppose everyone asks you . . .’ Pamela Morton began, as she cast an appraising eye over the shabby doorway.

‘If I’d prefer to live in the Old Vicarage: the subject of Rupert Brooke’s poem? Yes, I’m afraid they do. But I’m quite content here. In fact the place is rather too large for a bachelor.’

‘You are not married?’

‘People have remarked that I am married to my job.’

‘I’m not sure what a canon is.’

‘It’s an honorary position, given to me by a cathedral in Africa. But it’s easier to think of me as a common or garden priest.’ Sidney stamped his shoes on the mat and opened the unlocked door. ‘The word “canon” just sounds a bit better. Please, do come in.’

He showed his guest into the small drawing room with its chintz sofas and antique engravings. Pamela Morton’s dark eyes swept the room. ‘I am sorry to detain you.’

‘That’s quite all right. I have noticed that no one knows what to say to a clergyman after a funeral.’

‘They can’t relax until you’ve gone,’ Pamela Morton replied. ‘They think they have to behave as if they are still in church.’

‘Perhaps I remind them too much of death?’ Sidney enquired.

‘No, I don’t think it’s that, Canon Chambers. Rather, I think you remind them of their manifold sins and wickedness.’

Pamela Morton gave a half-smile and tilted her head to one side so that a strand of raven hair fell across her left eye. Sidney recognised that he was in the presence of a dangerous woman in her mid-forties and that this gesture alone could have a devastating effect upon a man. He couldn’t imagine his interlocutor having many female friends.

Mrs Morton took off her gloves, her stole and her hat, laying them on the back of the sofa. When Sidney offered her a cup of tea she gave a slight shudder. ‘I am so sorry if this seems forward but might you have something stronger?’

‘I have sherry, although I am not that keen on it myself.’

‘Whisky?’

This was Sidney's favourite tippie; a drink, he tried to convince himself, that he only kept for medicinal purposes.

'How do you take it?' he asked.

'As Stephen had it. A little water. No ice. He drank Irish, of course, but I imagine yours is Scotch.'

'It is indeed. I am rather partial to a good single malt but I am afraid that I cannot really afford it.'

'That is quite understandable in a vicar.'

'You knew Mr Staunton well, I take it?'

'Do you mind if I sit down?' Pamela asked, walking towards the armchair by the fire. 'I think this is going to be a little awkward.'

Sidney poured out the Johnnie Walker and allowed himself a small tumbler to keep his guest company. 'It is clearly a delicate matter.'

'We are not in church, Canon Chambers, but can I presume that the secrets of the confessional still apply?'

'You can rely on my discretion.'

Pamela Morton considered whether to continue. 'It's not something I ever imagined telling a priest. Even now I am not sure that I want to do so.'

'You can take your time.'

'I may need to.'

Sidney handed his guest her whisky and sat down. The sun was in his eyes but once he had established his position he thought it rude to move. 'I am used to listening,' he said.

'Stephen and I had always been friends,' Pamela Morton began. 'I knew that his marriage wasn't as happy as it had once been. His wife is German; not that it explains anything . . .'

'No . . .'

‘Although people have commented. It seemed an odd choice for such a handsome man. He could have chosen almost anyone he wanted. To marry a German so soon after the war was a brave thing to do, I suppose.’ Pamela Morton stopped. ‘This is harder than I thought . . .’

‘Do go on.’

‘A few months ago, I went to the office to pick up my husband. When I arrived I discovered that he had been called away. There was some fuss about a will. Stephen was alone. He said he was going to be working late but then he suggested that we go out for a drink instead. It seemed perfectly innocent. He was my husband’s business partner, and I had known him for several years. I had always been fond of him and I could see that something was troubling him. I didn’t know whether it was his health, his money or his marriage. I think that’s what most men worry about . . .’

‘Indeed.’

‘We took a drive out to Trumpington, where I suppose Stephen thought that we were less likely to meet people we knew and we wouldn’t have to explain to anyone why we were having a drink together. So, thinking about it now, I suppose it all began with something complicit.’

Sidney was beginning to feel uncomfortable. As a priest he was used to informal confession, but he could never quite reconcile himself to the fact that it often contained quite a lot of detail. There were times when he wished people wouldn’t tell him so much.

Pamela Morton continued. ‘We sat in the far corner of the pub, away from everyone else. I had heard that Stephen liked a drink or two but the speed surprised me. He was on edge. It

was the usual chatter to begin with but then he changed. He told me how tired he was of his life. It was a strange thing to say; the intensity of his feeling came on so suddenly. He said how he had never felt that he belonged in Cambridge. He and his wife were both exiles. He said that he should have gone straight back to Ireland after the war but that the job was here. He didn't want to sound ungrateful to my husband for giving it to him, and besides, if he hadn't, then he would never have met me. When he said that, I started to worry. I wondered what I would have to tell my husband, and yet there was something compelling about the way he spoke. There was an urgency, a desperation and a charm to it all. He had a way with words. I've always admired that. I used to act, you know. In a small way. Before I married.'

'I see,' said Sidney, wondering where the conversation was going.

'Despite the blarney, I knew he was telling me that his life was a shambles. Anyone who heard him speak might have thought that he was beginning to be suicidal but they would have been so wrong.'

Pamela Morton stopped.

'You don't have to tell me everything,' Sidney answered.

'I do. It's important. Stephen spoke about how he longed to get away and start again somewhere else. Then, when we were still in the pub, he looked me in the eye for a long time before speaking and . . . oh . . . do you mind if I have a drop more? Dutch courage, you know.'

'Of course.'

'You must find this all rather seedy. You know what I am going to say, don't you?'

Sidney poured out the drinks. ‘No, I don’t think I do,’ he said quietly. ‘Please go on.’ He had learned never to stop a narrative in full flow.

‘Stephen told me that he couldn’t stop thinking about me; that every part of his life without me was a misery; and that he loved me. I couldn’t believe it. He said what a miracle it was that we had the chance to be alone so that he could tell me. He only lived for the times when we saw each other and that if only we could be together then his life would have purpose and meaning and he would drink less and be happy.’

Pamela Morton looked up, expecting Sidney to ask what she had done. ‘Go on . . .’ he said.

‘As he was speaking,’ Pamela continued, ‘I felt this strange heat inside me. I don’t know where it came from. I thought I was going to faint. My life seemed to fall away from me. I hadn’t ever thought about it before but he was saying all the things I thought myself. I could see that my life did not have to be a dead end in a small provincial town. I could begin again. We could run away, escape our own past and live without history, pretending that there had been no war, we had lost no friends and that we had no family. We could just be two people with the future before them. We could go away, anywhere, Stephen said. He had some money saved and all I had to do was think about it. He didn’t want to rush me. All he wanted was for me to say yes . . .’

‘And did you?’

‘I thought it was mad and impossible. I was frightened and thrilled at the same time. He talked about getting back in the car and driving away there and then, down to the coast, and taking a boat across the Channel. I didn’t know what to say. He told me to imagine how we’d laugh, thinking of the havoc we’d

wrought. We could drive all the way through France, staying at hopelessly romantic hotels while everyone else continued with their humdrum lives back in Cambridge. We would be free. We would go to Nice and the French Riviera and we would dress up and dance on warm summer nights under the stars. It was crazy and it was wonderful and although we knew we couldn't leave there and then it was surely only a matter of time. Anything was possible. Everything could change.'

'When was this? Sidney asked.

'It was just after the Coronation. The pub still had its bunting up. Four months ago.'

'I see.'

'I can understand what you're thinking.'

'I am not judging you in any way,' Sidney replied, knowing that he was not sure what to think. 'I am listening.'

'But you must wonder. If we were that impetuous why has it taken us so long? My children have left home but, even so, I thought of them. Then, as soon as we got back home, I became frightened of what it all meant. I began to lose heart. I couldn't quite believe what had happened. Perhaps it had been a dream and Stephen had never said those things, but then we started to meet each other in secret and I knew that it was the only thing I wanted to do. I was obsessed. I could not believe that no one had noticed any change in me. "Surely they can tell?" I thought to myself. I hardly dared to believe that I was getting away with it. The more it went on the more I couldn't wait to leave. I was no longer myself. In fact, I didn't know who I was, but I told Stephen that we had to be sure that we had everything settled before we could do something so rash and that we should go in the New Year.'

'And he agreed?'

‘As long as he saw me, he said, he believed that anything was possible. And we were happy.’

‘And no one else knew of your plans?’

‘I have a friend in London. She . . . it’s difficult to explain, Canon Chambers. She let me pretend that I was staying with her . . .’

‘When, in reality?’

‘I was in a hotel with Stephen? I’m afraid so. You must think me very cheap.’

Sidney was taken aback by her frankness. ‘It is not for me to pass judgement, Mrs Morton.’

‘Pamela. Please, call me Pamela . . .’

It was too soon for such familiarity. Sidney decided to try not to offer his guest another drink.

‘So you see why I have come, Canon Chambers?’

Sidney couldn’t see anything at all. Why was this woman telling him all this? He wondered if she had got married in church, if she had ever considered her marital vows and how well she got on with her children. ‘What would you like me to do?’ he asked.

‘I can’t go to the police and tell them this.’

‘No, of course not.’

‘I can’t trust them to keep it a secret. My husband is bound to find out and I don’t want to stir things up.’

‘But surely this is a private matter? It is no concern for the police.’

‘It has to be, Canon Chambers.’

‘But why?’

‘Can you not guess? I can’t believe Stephen killed himself. It is totally out of character. We were going to run away together.’

‘So what are you suggesting?’

Pamela Morton sat up and straightened her back. ‘Murder, Canon Chambers. I mean murder.’ She fought to find a handkerchief from her handbag.

‘But who would want to do such a thing?’

‘I don’t know.’

Sidney was out of his depth. It was all very well for someone to come to him and confess their sins but an accusation of murder was a different business altogether. ‘This is quite a dangerous thing to suggest, Mrs Morton. Are you sure that you really think this?’

‘I am certain.’

‘And you have told no one else?’

‘You are the first. When I heard you speak in the service about death and loss I felt sure that I could trust you. You have a reassuring voice. I am sorry I don’t attend church more often. After my brother was killed in the war I found it hard to have faith.’

‘It is difficult, I know.’

Pamela Morton spoke as if she had said all that she had to say. ‘What I have said is the truth, Canon Chambers.’

Sidney imagined his guest sitting through the funeral service, restraining her grief. He wondered if she had looked around the congregation for suspects. But why would anyone have wanted to kill Stephen Staunton?

Pamela Morton recognised that Sidney needed to be convinced. ‘The idea that he took his own life is absurd. We had so much to look forward to. It was as if we were going to be young once more and we could be whoever we wanted to be. We would start again. We were going to live as we have never lived. Those were the last words he spoke to me. “We will live

as we have never lived.” Those are not the words of a man who is going to shoot himself, are they?’

‘No, they are not.’

‘And now it’s gone. All that hope. All that wasted love.’ Pamela Morton took up her handkerchief. ‘I can’t bear it. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cry.’

Sidney walked over to the window. What on earth was he supposed to do about this? It was none of his business; but then he remembered that, as a priest, *everything* was his business. There was no part of the human heart that was not his responsibility. Furthermore, if Pamela Morton was correct, and Stephen Staunton had not committed what many people still believed to be the sin of suicide, then an innocent man had been unjustly killed and his murderer was still at large.

‘What would you like me to do?’ he asked.

‘Talk to people,’ Pamela Morton answered. ‘Informally if you can. I don’t want anyone to know about my involvement in all this.’

‘But who shall I speak to?’

‘The people who knew him.’

‘I’m not sure what I can ask them.’

‘You are a priest. People tell you things, don’t they?’

‘They do.’

‘And you can ask almost any question, no matter how private?’

‘One has to be careful.’

‘But you know what I mean . . .’

‘I do,’ Sidney replied, as cautiously as he could.

‘Then you could keep what I have said in mind and, if the moment comes, perhaps you might ask a question that you might not otherwise have asked?’

‘I am not sure that I can make any promises. I am not a detective.’

‘But you know people, Canon Chambers. You understand them.’

‘Not all the time.’

‘Well, I hope you understand me.’

‘Yes,’ Sidney replied. ‘You have been very clear. I imagine this must have been terrible. To bear it alone . . .’

Pamela Morton put her handkerchief away. ‘It is. But I have said what I came to say. Are you sure I can rely on your discretion?’ she asked, looking up at him, vulnerable once more. ‘You won’t mention my name?’

‘Of course not.’ Sidney answered, already worrying how long he could keep this secret.

‘I’m so sorry about all of this,’ Mrs Morton continued. ‘I’m ashamed, really. I couldn’t think how to tell you or the words that I was going to use. I don’t know anything at the moment and I’ve had to keep so quiet. I’ve had no one to talk to. Thank you for listening to me.’

‘It is what I am called to do,’ said Sidney and immediately wondered whether this was true. It was his first case of adultery, never mind murder.

Pamela Morton stood up. Sidney noticed that, despite the tears, her mascara had not run. She pushed back that strand of hair again and held out her hand.

‘Goodbye, Canon Chambers. You do believe me, don’t you?’

‘It was brave to tell me so much.’

‘Courage is a quality Stephen said I lacked. If you find out what happened to him then I hope you will inform me first.’ She smiled, sadly, once more. ‘I know where you are.’

‘I am always here. Goodbye, Mrs Morton.’