
Opening Extract from...

Sidney Chambers and the Perils of the Night

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SIDNEY CHAMBERS
AND
The Perils of the Night

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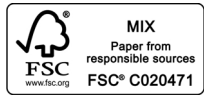

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The Perils of the Night

As the afternoon light faded over the village of Grantchester, the parishioners lit fires, drew curtains and bolted their doors against the dangers of darkness. The external blackness was a *memento mori*, a nocturnal harbinger of that sombre country from which no traveller returns. Canon Sidney Chambers, however, felt no fear. He liked a winter's night.

It was the 8th of January 1955. The distant town of Cambridge looked almost two-dimensional under the moon's wily enchantment, and the silhouettes of college buildings were etched against the darkening sky like illustrations for a children's fairytale. Sidney imagined princesses locked in towers, knights leaving on dangerous quests through forests, and woodcutters bringing supplies to stoke the fires of great medieval halls. The River Cam was stilled in time, its waters frozen and embedded with fallen branches, scattered twigs and dead leaves. The snow that settled on Clare Bridge made the decoration of its parapet rails look like fourteen snowballs that had been left by a giant standing astride a model of an English university. Set back and to the south, across whitened grass, the magnesian limestone that comprised the fabric of King's College Chapel was given extra luminance by the snow that

gathered on the roof and pinnacled standards of its turrets. Wind gusted round the edges of the building, throwing white flurries against the mouldings and mullions of the windows. The stained glass was darkened, as if waiting for something to happen – a new Reformation perhaps, an air raid, or even the end of the world. The stillness of the night was broken by only a few sporadic sounds: a passing car, a drunken shout, the footsteps of university proctors making their rounds. In Sidney's college of Corpus Christi, stalactites clung to the guttering while uncertain weights of snow slithered off the eaves-cornices of Old Court and fell in heavy slabs from the keystone of the main gate. Bicycles lay against spiked railings, the spokes of their wheels frosted white. It was an evening for drawn curtains, hot toddies and warm fires; for sitting in a favourite armchair with a good book and a companionable dog.

Sidney had enjoyed a couple of pints at the Eagle with his good friend Inspector Geordie Keating and was beginning his journey home. It was after ten, and most of the undergraduates were locked in their colleges. Admittance after that time was through the Porter's Lodge and on payment of a 'late-fee' of one shilling. This latitude extended until midnight, after which there was no legal admission. The only option open to those wishing to return to their rooms in the small hours was to behave like a cat burglar and break in. Sidney had done this when he was a student, some ten years before he had become vicar of Grantchester, approaching the college in Free School Lane, mounting the railings by St Bene't's Church, shinning up a drainpipe, and making his way across the roofs and over the conservatory before climbing in through an open window of the Master's Lodge. Soon after this escapade, Sidney had discovered that this was a rather

better known route than he had thought, and that the Master's daughter, Sophie, often left her bedroom window open deliberately in the hope of a little late night entertainment. The practice of night climbing had become something of a Cambridge sport, as students pursued a hobby of illegal mountaineering in the name of 'high jinks'. Onions had been rolled off the appropriately shaped dome of the Divinity School, umbrellas had been left on the Tottering Tower of the Old Library, and a Canadian student at King's had become obsessed by a fanatical desire to put a herd of goats on his college roof.

The possibility of discovery, and the potential penalty of being sent down as a result, had deterred Sidney from taking a full part in such proceedings, but rumours of daring feats of architectural mountaineering still fed the gossip in college common rooms. The university authorities had increased the number of torchlight patrols in an attempt to stamp out the practice, but undergraduates still risked their future university careers in the name of freedom and adventure, conspiring in low voices about the challenge of photographing each other while climbing the Great Gate of Trinity, the New Tower of St John's, or the north face of Pembroke.

The ultimate challenge for those driven by 'pinnaclomania' was an ascent of one of the four octagonal turrets of King's College Chapel. Valentine Lyall, a research fellow of Corpus, was leading an expedition that very night. The consequences were to prove fatal.

Sidney was alerted to the situation by a commotion on King's Parade. Such was its volume that he made an immediate detour, turning right out of Bene't Street rather than his customary left.

Lyall was a seasoned night climber who was well known throughout the university. He was accompanied by Kit Bartlett, his postgraduate student, a blond-haired athletics blue; and Rory Montague, an altogether stockier third-year undergraduate who had been called upon to photograph the expedition for posterity.

The three men were dressed in polo-neck sweaters and gym shoes and the climb took place in two stages, from ground to roof and from roof to north-east turret. Lyall had taken the lead by placing his hands between the clamps of the lightning conductor and pushing himself up twenty feet with his arms. He carried two coils of hundred-foot rope over his shoulder. He used his feet to lever his body outwards and upwards against the wall, while a hand-over-hand movement worked in a semi-contrary motion, keeping him tight against the stone while sustaining his ascent.

The accompanying students followed with torches, and, after a brief rest on a broad sloping ledge, they began to 'chimney' up the fissure between two walls, their backs against one wall and their feet against the other, thrusting themselves upwards with their legs. The stone flange against which they pressed their feet was four inches wide and the ascent was performed at an oblique angle. Sidney could see one of the men stop and look down to the iron railings below. He was fifty feet from the ground, with forty still to go.

The university proctors were already at the scene. 'Can anyone go after them?' Sidney asked.

'They'll kill themselves if they do,' one of the men replied. 'We'll get their names when they come down. We don't think they're from this college. They must have been hiding when the

porters did the rounds. This has got to stop, Canon Chambers. They may think it's a sport, but we'll end up taking the responsibility if it goes wrong.'

The climbers gathered at the base of an octagonal turret that rose from the roof in six stages. Some sections were easy to climb, with pierced stone latticework offering opportunity for handholds, but the height of the parapet was forbidding. Valentine Lyall began his traverse round the base of the pinnacle and found a series of air holes in the clover-leaf stonework above the first overhang. They were fifteen inches deep and across, and he could use them as a short ladder. He was now over a hundred feet from the ground.

He climbed up on to the parapet and approached the chessboard stonework near the top of the pinnacle before calling down. 'Careful, men, the stone gets crumbly here. Make sure you have three grips at once; two hands and one foot, or one hand and both feet.'

Rory Montague was losing his nerve. As he approached the second overhang he noticed that there was no handhold for a distance of five feet. 'I can't do this,' he said.

'Don't give up,' Bartlett urged. 'Use your knees. Keep close to the stone. Don't lean out.'

'I'm not going to.'

'There's only twelve feet to go.'

Lyall was already on the second overhang. 'We need a photograph.'

'Not now,' hissed Bartlett.

'Help me,' Montague cried. 'I'm stuck.'

'Don't look down.'

'It's as dark as hell.'

Lyall shone his torch. 'Get round to your right. There's a drainpipe.'

'What if it gives way?'

'It won't.'

'It stops before the parapet.'

'That's only a few feet.'

Montague called up, 'I need the rope.'

'Give me a minute.' Lyall reached the last parapet. He leant outwards at full stretch, grasping it with both hands, and pulled himself up by using the gaps in the stonework until his feet reached the topmost hole.

Bartlett followed and the two men threw down the rope. Montague caught it and used it as leverage to make the final ascent.

Sidney had moved further along the exterior of the north side of the nave to get a better view. Snow fell in his eyes, while the high and distant figures appeared as silhouettes against moon and torchlight. 'There's nothing to protect them if they fall,' he said.

'They never fall,' one of the proctors replied.

'I imagine the descent is much harder.'

'Once they've got back down on to the roof they return through the interior; if they've got a copy of the key, that is.'

'And have they?'

'I wouldn't put it past them.'

'So you'll wait for them at the bottom?'

'Once they're in the roof space they can hide amongst the main timbers until they think we've gone home. Last year a couple of men were in there for hours. We just barred the staircase from the outside and waited until they were hungry enough to give themselves up.'

'You mean there's no escape?'

'No one's managed it so far.'

The wind dropped. Lyall gave instructions to Rory Montague. 'Hold on to the rope and lower yourself down. Use the clover-leafs as footholds, and then make a traverse to your left. We won't be able to see you but we can feel you.'

Montague began the descent. All seemed well until the clover-leaf stopped. He then missed a foothold. 'Bugger.' He pushed himself away from the wall and let the rope take his weight.

'What the hell are you doing?' Lyall called.

'I can't get a foothold.'

'Use a hand. I can't take all this weight.'

'I need both hands on the rope. I'm not strong enough just to use one.'

'Push your feet into the wall. Get the strain off the rope.'

'I'm too far away from the building.'

Montague's left foot hovered against the side of the parapet, trying to find a hold.

He began to sway above the abyss.

A porter shouted up: 'COME DOWN AT ONCE.'

Montague let his hands slide down the rope. He felt his palms burn. His right elbow hit a gargoyle. 'Slacken off,' he ordered.

'What's going on?' Lyall asked.

Montague began a short abseil down the side of the building and found a foothold. There he rested before pulling at the rope again.

'What are you doing?' Lyall called down. 'You have to tell us when you've finished with the rope so I can untie and make my descent. I don't need it.'

'I do,' Montague replied. He wondered where the hell his friend Kit Bartlett had gone.

'I'll lean out and give you some more,' said Lyall. 'We've got enough. Are you safe?'

'I think so.'

'Good. I'll just . . . hell . . . wait . . . oh . . .'

He fell away from the building, backwards through the night air and the snow, past the contorted faces of the silent gargoyles, the body gathering an inevitable momentum until its hard arrival on ground that would never be soft enough to stop death.

There was no scream, just silence, the fall, and the dull sound of a landing without echo: a gap in time, filled only with the incomprehensible disbelief of its witnesses.

'My God,' a proctor said quietly.

'Was that Mr Lyall?' Montague asked. 'The rope's loose. I can't see Bartlett. I'm on my own. I don't know how to get down.'

One of the porters called up, 'Take it slowly, sir.'

'DID MR LYALL FALL?'

'Get back down to the roof, sir, and someone will come and get you. Do you know the interior staircase?'

'Where's that?'

'There's a trapdoor in the roof. Wait there and we'll come and get you.'

'I don't know anything about a trapdoor. Where's Kit? What's happened to Mr Lyall?'

The porter did not answer. 'We need to get you down.'

'I don't want to die,' Montague shouted back.

'Who is with you?'

'I've told you. Kit Bartlett. But I don't know where he is. DID MR LYALL FALL?'

'Where are you from?'

'Corpus.'

Montague clambered down and jumped the last few feet on to the roof. He searched the length of the chapel for the trapdoor that led down to the interior staircase. Had his friend Kit already found this or was he hiding somewhere else? How had he managed to disappear so quickly?

An ambulance made its way down King's Parade.

Sir Giles Tremlett, the Master of Corpus, was deeply distressed by the death of one of his fellows and asked Sidney to come and see him the following evening. 'I am assuming that you will be prepared to take the funeral?'

It would be Sidney's third that year already. He saw so much natural death in winter and it saddened him that this was so needless. 'I didn't know Lyall well.'

'Nevertheless, it would be appropriate for a fellow of the college to be buried at Grantchester.'

'I take it he was not a churchgoer?'

'These days, scientists seldom are.' The Master poured out a stiff sherry and then stopped. 'I am sorry. I always forget you don't like this stuff. A little whisky?'

'With water. It's rather early.'

The Master was distracted. Normally he would have a servant present to pour out the drinks but it was clear that he wanted an uninterrupted conversation. A tall man with long clean hands and elegant fingers, Sir Giles had a precision about his manners and exactitude in his dress that diverted any suspicion of the fey. His speech was as crisply ironed as his shirt, and he wore a three-piece suit in dark navy from Savile Row,

together with the regimental tie of the Grenadier Guards. He had fought in the Great War alongside Harold Macmillan, and he was a good friend of Selwyn Lloyd, the Foreign Secretary. His wife, Lady Celia, always dressed in Chanel, and their two daughters had married into minor aristocracy. Decorated with a KBE in his early fifties, Sir Giles was considered to be a key figure in the British establishment; so much so that Sidney wondered if he thought a Cambridge college was something of a backwater.

As a former diplomat Sir Giles was used to the ambiguities of political discourse and the technicalities of the law, but, since taking up his post only a few years previously, he had been surprised how personally academics took to their disputes and how difficult it was to find lasting and satisfactory resolutions to their problems. It was bad enough discussing matters at meetings of the governing body, but now that one of their own had died in mysterious circumstances, he was going to have to rely on all his tact and discretion to smooth things over. 'I was hoping that this could all be kept within the confines of the university, but that wish has proved forlorn. I believe you know Inspector Keating of the Cambridge police force?' he asked.

'I saw him only last night, and I am sure that he will take an interest in the case.'

'He already has. He plans to interview Rory Montague this afternoon.'

'And Bartlett?'

'It is a tricky situation. It was irresponsible of Lyall to take students out on such a night. I know that some of us have done a bit of night climbing in the past but that was when we were students. You would have thought he might have got it out of

his system by now. Rory Montague has been unhelpfully evasive. I was hoping that you might talk to him, Sidney.'

'A pastoral visit? Surely the college chaplain could see to that?'

'No, I'd like you to go. You were there, after all. Of course it hardly helps that Kit Bartlett has disappeared.'

'There is still no sign of him?'

'None. His parents have already telephoned. They seem to know that something is amiss (God knows how) and will start making their own enquiries. They might even go to the press, which is, of course, the last thing we need . . .'

'Indeed.'

'Montague says Bartlett vanished before he started the descent. And there's another curious thing: his rooms are empty.'

'As if he had planned to disappear all along?'

'Exactly so.'

'And therefore Lyall's death may not have been accidental?'

'I don't think it will take the police too long to reach that conclusion, do you? Keating's not stupid and he's bound to interfere. I can only suppose that Bartlett's in hiding. We'll have to talk to all his friends, of course.'

'Did Montague see what happened?'

'He can remember the rope being thrown down to him. After that, he claims his mind is blank.'

'Anything else?'

'He suffers from vertigo so he feels guilty. He says that they wouldn't have used the rope if he hadn't been with them.'

'It makes you wonder why he went up in the first place.'

'He was their photographer,' the Master explained. 'And I imagine he was keen to impress. Kit Bartlett is a charismatic figure and Lyall was his tutor.'

'Pacifists used to do foolhardy things in the war to prove they weren't cowards.' Sidney remembered two cheerful friends who had worked as stretcher-bearers, refusing to kill enemy soldiers, acting with daring courage on a Normandy beach before they were blown up in front of him.

'I don't know if that will be Montague's story or not. I am also not sure whether it is helpful if he confesses to any responsibility. It could lead to a manslaughter charge and we don't want that.'

Sidney finished his whisky. 'We do, however, want the truth.'

The Master was irritated. 'The last thing this college needs is a scandal. We have already had a generous response to the appeal on our six-hundredth anniversary and I do not want to put that into jeopardy.'

'We have to ascertain what happened.'

'That, I recognise. We will behave with authority and fairness. It will be my official position.'

'Then I must assume you have an unofficial position?'

'It is a delicate matter, Sidney.'

'Then perhaps you could explain?'

'I am sure Inspector Keating will keep himself busy. Investigating. Asking questions.'

'He certainly will. What of it?'

The Master gave Sidney what he hoped was a confidential look. 'I'd like you to tell me what he thinks. I would like some warning if his enquiries become too detailed, particularly regarding the personal lives of those involved. I wouldn't like him to delve too closely, either into their relationships or their political interests.'

'I thought Lyall was married?'

'He *was* married, yes. But I think that was very much for show. I am sure you don't need me to spell things out.'

'You want me to keep watch over the police investigation?'

'I wouldn't put it like that. But I want you to be our college liaison. Inspector Keating knows and trusts you.'

'He won't trust me if he finds out that I am telling you everything he's up to; and he certainly won't take kindly to the idea of me spying on police procedures.'

'I don't think we need to put it as strongly as that. One needs to be very careful in Cambridge, as you know perfectly well, about the use of the word "spy". It leads to unsavoury speculation and we have quite enough of that already.'

Sidney was aware that the university had still not recovered from the ignominy of 'the affair of the missing diplomats', the former graduates Burgess and Maclean who, it was assumed, had defected to Moscow four years previously. Keating had been consulted about their disappearance and had protested that he hadn't been given full-enough access to the investigation. Since then, things had certainly developed. There had also been rumours that another Cambridge Apostle, Kim Philby, was 'a third man' after his resignation from MI6 in 1951, and Keating had made it clear that he thought the newly formed KGB, led by Ivan 'The Terrible' Serov, regarded the university as a fertile recruiting ground.

'I didn't know that Lyall was working for the security services.'

'I didn't say that he was.'

Sidney waited for the Master to explain but he did not. 'You can't expect me to talk in any detail about all of this. Some things are best left in the dark. I am sure there is a discreet way in which we can conduct the matter.'

'I am not sure there is, Master. After a death . . .'

Sidney knew there was a murky side to the relationship between the university and both MI5 and MI6 but he had always steered clear of asking too many questions about it. He recognised the appeal of recruiting intelligent agents but wished that it could be kept until after the students had graduated. It was too easy to exploit people who could not anticipate the consequences of their enthusiasm for intrigue; and, once they acquired a taste for secrecy and deceit, they could not always be relied upon to stay on the same side.

'I thought you priests dealt in grey areas all the time. Very few moral dilemmas come in black and white. It's a question of trust. Loyalty too.'

Sidney was not at all sure that he liked where the conversation was heading. 'I am perfectly aware of my loyalties, Master.'

'To God, and your country; your college and your friends.'

Sidney put his empty glass of whisky back on the drinks tray. 'May they never come into conflict. Good evening, Master.'

The snow returned once more, covering the ice on the roads and pavements, so that any movement across its surface was hazardous. Few people dared look up and ahead for long, offering only muted greetings to those they knew, preferring to concentrate on securing each footstep against a fall, eager to escape mishap and get home. Such careful responsibility was a far cry from Sidney's childhood enthusiasm for tobogganing with his brother and sister on Primrose Hill before the war. Then danger was a thrill, but now that he was older and into his thirties, he would have preferred to use the wintry conditions as an excuse to stay at home and concentrate on his next sermon.

The last thing he wanted was another tortuous inquiry. He had only just returned from a short holiday in Berlin with his friend Hildegard Staunton. She had been excellent company and it had been a relief to get away, both from his clerical duties and his criminal investigations. Indeed, he was still living in something of a post-holiday afterglow, and so he was as keen as the Master to ascertain that the events on the roof of King's College Chapel had been unfortunate rather than sinister.

Rory Montague had his rooms in New Court, on a staircase close to the Porter's Lodge. Sidney was not looking forward to the meeting because he found it difficult to provide consolation and extract information at the same time.

There was also the dilemma at the heart of the event. He could understand the idea of some amateur climbing for high jinks. He had done it himself. But for a fellow of the college to encourage his students to attempt such a risky ascent on a dark and snowy night in the middle of winter seemed the height of madness.

Why on earth did they want to do it? he wondered. Could it simply be the excitement: the idea that action is life and here was jeopardy at its most distilled? Was it, as he imagined mountaineering to be, the hypnotism of an immense terror drawing them on, the narrowness of the gap between life and death, the fact that one slip or a lapse in concentration could result in a fatality?

Montague was a nervous, barrel-chested boy with curly brown hair, tortoiseshell spectacles and a small mole on his left cheek. He wore a tweed jacket, a mustard-coloured sleeveless jumper and a dark green tie over a Viyella shirt. There could hardly have been someone who looked less like a climber, let alone a man who might wilfully plan the death of another.

Sidney introduced himself and began with an apology. 'I am sorry,' he said. 'I know you must have had a difficult time.'

'Why have you come?' Montague answered. 'Am I in trouble? Do people think it was my fault?'

'I was asked if I could talk to you.'

'Who by?'

'The college. And I assure you that anything you tell me will be in confidence.'

'I've already made one statement. I should have known it would not be enough. I can't think why it happened.'

Sidney knew he would have to choose his words carefully. 'If you do not want to add anything to what you have said already then, of course, I understand. I know it is a distressing time. I merely wanted to say that I am at your disposal, should you wish to discuss anything more.'

'Why would I want to do that?'

'I have some experience with the police. I think it was hoped that I might be able to help smooth things over.'

'There is nothing to smooth over, Canon Chambers. It was an accident. Mr Lyall fell. It was a stupid thing to do and I suffer from vertigo. We shouldn't have been up there in the first place.'

'And why were you?'

'Kit thought it would be a laugh. He knew his tutor did that kind of thing. They were close.'

'And you and Bartlett were friends?'

'Everyone loves Kit.'

'And do you know where he is now?'

'I thought he'd gone home.'

'It seems he has not. That is a cause of considerable anxiety; both for his parents and, I imagine, for you.'

'He probably thinks I can look after myself.'

'And can you?'

'I don't know.'

'How did you get involved in all this, may I ask?'

'Mr Lyall knew I came from a family of mountaineers. My father was one of the youngest ever men to climb the north face of Ben Nevis in winter and on the ice. Now my brothers have all done it. I'm not so keen myself.'

Sidney looked across the room to a neatly stacked boot-rack. 'I see that you own a pair of climbing boots.'

'In my family, everyone has to have them.'

'Have you always had a fear of heights?'

'I don't mind up on the dales or on the fells in the Lake District. It's a sheer physical drop that I can't stand. Anything steeper than a 1 in 5.'

'And on the roof of King's?'

'I panicked.'

'Even if you could not see all the way down?'

'That made it worse.'

'I wonder why you went up in the first place?'

'To prove myself. To try and get rid of the fear . . .'

Sidney stopped for a moment, thinking that the answer had come too easily. He needed to press on. 'Can you remember what happened?'

'I had the rope and I couldn't find a foothold. I asked Mr Lyall to slacken off and give me some more rope and I heard a cry. Then I thought I heard Kit scramble down. I'm not sure. It was dark.'

'Despite the moon and the snow?'

'I could only see things that were close.'

'And you were there to take photographs?'

'Yes, although I never got my camera out.'

'You didn't take a single exposure?'

'No. I was going to do so but then everything went wrong.' There was a silence before Rory Montague added a further thought which, perhaps, he did not mean to say aloud. 'I hate this place.'

Sidney was surprised by this sudden turn of emotion. 'Have you always felt that? "Hate" is a strong word.'

'Kit's been kind to me. Mr Lyall too. He told me that it doesn't matter where you're from if you have strong beliefs.'

'And what are they?' Sidney asked.

'I'm not one for joining the Chapel Choir, if that's what you're after.'

'I meant *political* beliefs.'

'I believe in equality. We can't live in a country where there is one law for the rich and another for the poor.'

'I understand,' said Sidney, familiar with the appeal of radical politics to the young.

'You say you "understand",' Rory replied. 'But the Church is part of the establishment. There comes a time when a man has to decide which side he is on.'

'I don't think it should be a question of sides.' Sidney answered more defensively than he had intended. He did not like to be considered something he was not. 'I think it's a question of fairness and justice.'

'Then we should agree with each other.' Rory Montague almost smiled. 'Although I am a member of the Communist Party.'

'Some people would keep quiet about that. I admire your frankness.'

'I am not ashamed. The revolution will come to this country one day, Canon Chambers. That, I can promise you.'

Sidney was not sure if this was a threat or if Montague was speaking for effect. It was odd to volunteer this information so readily. If there was any connection with the KGB, however implausible that might seem, then the boy was hardly likely to draw attention to his membership of the Communist Party; and, by the same token, if he had been recruited on 'our side', such a move was an equally obvious act of attempted infiltration. Surely Montague's only fault, if fault there was, was one of political naivety?

Sidney dined in college on braised lamb, hoping the weather might ease, and was late back to the vicarage. Although the nuts, fruit and alcohol of the traditional 'combinations' after dinner had waylaid him, he was confident that he would be home in time to take Dickens out for his nocturnal constitutional. As he bicycled carefully through the gritted streets, he remembered that his dog had not shown much keenness to be out in the snow. In fact he had been a little lacklustre of late and Sidney worried there might be something wrong with him. It had been a while since his regular check-up with the vet.

Apart from one light in the kitchen the house was in darkness and it seemed colder than it was outside. Dickens greeted him with his usual mixture of affection and expectation and carried one of Sidney's slippers in his mouth as he followed him into the kitchen, circling his bowl in the hope of a second dinner.

A pan of milk was warming under a low gas flame. Sidney's curate was making his night-time cocoa. 'We've had a bit of an adventure,' Leonard began.

'Both of you?'

'I'm afraid so. I went out to see Isabel Robinson. You are aware that she has been ill?'

'I am, but I thought that, being a doctor's wife, she would be well looked after.'

'I'm not so sure. Doctors sometimes neglect those closest to them. We can all be guilty of that from time to time.'

Sidney wondered whether this remark was meant for him, but let his curate continue. 'When I returned, the window of your study was wide open and there was a breeze blowing. I thought that perhaps Mrs Maguire had been giving it an airing, but she doesn't come after dark. Then I noticed that some of your papers had fallen on to the floor. It could have been the wind, of course, but Dickens had a copy of *The Cloud of Unknowing* shoved in his mouth. It must have been a ploy to shut him up. Not that he is much of a barker.'

'You mean we've had burglars?'

'Yes, but nothing appears to be missing. Perhaps they were disturbed by my return. It is a bit of a mystery.'

'Have you called the police, Leonard?'

'I presumed you had just been with them. And I couldn't be sure it means a break-in. As I said, I don't think that anything has been taken. Perhaps you should check?'

Sidney left the kitchen and walked into his study. Nothing seemed to have been removed. The silver cufflinks that he thought he had lost remained on a corner of his desk; the jazz records that he so loved were stacked by the gramophone (the burglar was clearly no fan of Acker Bilk); and the porcelain figurine of a girl feeding chickens, *Mädchen füttert Hühner*, that Hildegard had given him stood in its usual position on the mantelpiece.

'Extraordinary,' Sidney remarked as he returned to the kitchen with Dickens padding behind him.

'I can't think why anyone would want to burgle a vicarage,' Leonard answered, 'especially in such dreadful weather. Besides, people must know we can't have anything worth stealing. It's rather an affront, don't you think?'

'You've lost nothing yourself?'

'As far as I can tell.'

'Perhaps your collection of Dostoevsky put them off?' Sidney asked, trying to cheer himself up.

Leonard pretended that he had not heard the remark, raised his lips to his cocoa and blew on it. 'Still too hot,' he observed. 'Maybe they were looking for something specific or someone was trying to frighten us. It might even be a warning of some kind. Is there anything I should know about?'

Sidney had to decide how much to confide in his curate. 'I don't think so,' he began, but then set off on a different track. 'Why do you think people betray their country, Leonard?'

'That's an odd question at a time like this . . .'

'I was thinking.'

'Are you referring to the communists?'

Sidney sat down at the kitchen table. 'I could understand it before the war, perhaps. It was all part of the fight against fascism; too many members of the British establishment were keen on Hitler. Many of them were anti-Semitic. To fight against them from within must have been considered as working for the greater good. But it's hard to understand why people might do it now.'

'I don't think the British establishment has changed all that much,' said Leonard. 'Communism will always have its attractions.

People are fired up by ideas of equality. They want to change the world. Sometimes I suppose they want to take revenge.'

'I also wonder if some people pretend to be communists when they are not?'

'That would be very perverse, wouldn't it?' Leonard asked. 'Why would anyone want to do that?'

'That's what I may well need to find out.'

Sidney took Dickens out and tried to let events settle in his mind. He felt uneasy and he could not quite work out why. It wasn't just the death of Lyall, or the possible burglary, but the sense that this was the beginning of something more sinister; something he could not predict or plan for.

He walked out of the vicarage, down the wide high street with its thatched cottages, its village school, pubs and garage, and took the narrow snowy path behind the Green Man, down to the meadows and frozen river. There were few remains of that day's activity: a completed snowman with coal buttons, eyes, mouth and carrot nose; the tracks of a toboggan; a circled cluster of footsteps from what might have been a snowball fight. Looking back to the easterly edge of the village, Sidney could just make out the silhouette of a group of bombed-out buildings that had still not been rebuilt since the war. The snow covering looked like giant sheeting left by removal men who had forgotten all about them.

Sidney tried to concentrate on something altogether more enjoyable, but found his thoughts about Hildegard and his recent German visit were equally unsettling. He wondered if it was snowing there too, what Hildegard might be doing, and when on earth he was going to see her again. He missed her far more than he had anticipated, and wished she were with him.

After the death of her husband, Hildegard had been the catalyst for Sidney's adventures in crime. He had felt an almost inexpressible sorrow on meeting her and they had begun to share an intimacy that was yet to be defined. She understood what he was thinking better than anyone he knew. She was also able to get away with asking questions that would have been too direct if posed by anyone else.

'Do you think you might, in your heart, be embarrassed about being a clergyman?' she had said.

Sidney wondered if she was right, and if he might feel less anxious (and less distracted by crime) if he had more status; if, eventually, perhaps, he was a bishop.

'A clergyman cannot be proud,' he answered.

'Of course not. But he must have the confidence to do his job well. Like a doctor.'

'That is not to say that there aren't ambitious priests, of course.'

'How ambitious are you, Sidney?'

'I think I aspire to a clear conscience.'

'That sounds almost too good to be true.'

'It is the truth as I see it; an honest answer, I hope. Perhaps because I gave it to you quickly, it is what I most mean.'

Hildegard took his arm. It was another cold night and they walked on through the Tiergarten, past street stalls selling *bockwurst*, toasted almonds, chestnuts and *glühwein*.

'I like being with you,' Hildegard said. 'You can be so serious and then sometimes I think you are in a world of your own. I wish I could go there.'

'Well,' Sidney replied. 'I can always take you. But what about you? What will you do?'

'The future seems so far away,' Hildegard answered. 'For now, the present moment, here, now and with you, is enough.'

Back in Grantchester, Sidney knew that he had to be careful not to romanticise the memory of what had happened. He reminded himself that Berlin had also been unsettling. He was forever showing his papers. Armed guards at sector checkpoints were continually asking him to prove that he was who he said he was.

Recalling it all now, as he walked Dickens home across the snow-filled meadows, Sidney began to think about loyalty and how hard it was to lead two very different lives at the same time, one in England and the other in Germany. But then, he continued, the idea of duality was also at the heart of Christianity. You had to be both a man and a Christian, and if there was ever a conflict between the two then it was his duty as a priest to put his acquired identity, as a man of faith, above his own essential nature.

Sidney was not sure how successful he had been at doing this. There were times when it would have been far easier to act on his own instincts, and in accordance with his innate personality, but the idea, surely, was that these had to be sacrificed in order to fulfil a more important calling.

He wondered if people working in the field of espionage thought in the same way, perverting the religious impulse, perhaps, putting their conscience above their country, believing in a higher purpose or a different destiny for which they were prepared to betray everything they pretended to hold dear.

Valentine Lyall's funeral took place ten days after his death. Although Sidney had not known him well he was able to talk to a sufficient number of his colleagues to draw up an

informal portrait of the man. A keen mountaineer, Lyall had been born in Windermere in 1903, and had been too young to fight in the First World War. Since then, however, his work in radiology at Strangeways Research Laboratory in Worts Causeway had brought him international recognition. His research into the deleterious effects of radioactive isotopes, and the biological impact of atomic explosions, had been of inestimable benefit to the Ministry of Defence; but Lyall had also been determined to uncover the benefits of that same technology in peacetime, putting the similarities between war armament and protection to good use. Consequently, he had written extensively on the application of radiation action in biological and medical investigations.

This gave Sidney the substance for his funeral address; that good could yet come from evil, that darkness could be turned into light.

He was tempted to take his text from the Book of Isaiah. *They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more.* However, Sidney knew that his academic, and therefore judgemental, congregation would find this too obvious and so, in recognition of Valentine Lyall's love of mountains, he settled for something braver, especially given the context of the man's death. He chose to speak on the subject of Matthew, chapter 17, verse 20: *If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place: and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.*

It was worth the risk. Every time Sidney spoke to the more doubtful, humanist or cynical members of the university he found himself becoming more aggressive about his faith.

Not that he knew everyone who had come to the service. Despite the aspersions cast about his private life, Lyall had once had a wife; and although she had left him shortly after the war and lived in London, she returned for her former husband's funeral and sat with his sister in the front row. The two women were joined by the Master of Corpus, several senior fellows, and staff from the Strangeways Research Laboratory.

Sidney's sermon went well. He had learned that the best way of unsettling the non-believer was to attack with certainty, acknowledging doubt before hitting home with the necessity of faith.

The wake was held in Cherry Hinton Road. Lyall's sister, Hetty, offered guests some rather tired-looking cheese sandwiches, followed by tea and cake, whisky or sherry, while Sidney took the opportunity to have a quiet word with a woman he had never met before.

Alice Lyall, now Bannerman, was a surprisingly tall, elegant woman with magnificent Titianesque hair that had been swept back and curled. Although she could clearly dominate a room she took pains not to, either embarrassed or tired by the effect she could have on a man. She was going to stay for as long as it was polite to do so, and Sidney knew that he would have to choose his words carefully if he was going to acquire information.

'When we first moved in, I thought that we would live here for ever,' she explained. 'I imagined the children going to the Leys or the Perse and that I would become a don's wife, one of those grass widows you see on their bicycles all over town trying to look as if they belong in a world of men. Now, of course, it turns out that I am merely a widow; of sorts.'

'You didn't have children?'

'Not with Val, no, although that is hardly a surprise. I have had two boys since.'

'Your husband didn't mind you coming today?'

'I didn't particularly want to come. But when you've been married to a man you have to find a way of coming to terms with what has happened. You have to forgive him in the end.'

'Did Mr Lyall require much forgiveness?'

'I don't think this is the time or the place to discuss the failure of my first marriage, do you, Canon Chambers?'

'I am sorry. Please "forgive" my indiscretion.'

Alice Bannerman took no notice. 'It's not easy to be married to a liar. I am glad you did not mention it in your address.'

'That would not have been appropriate. I presume you are referring . . .'

'There's no need to spell it out. Everyone knows he preferred men.'

'Everyone suspects. That is different.'

'God forbid anyone at the university ever telling it like it is.'

Sidney did not like to press matters. 'I am sorry to have troubled you.'

'You are not troubling me. In fact, I am grateful. I am also sorry to have been short with you. It's not been an easy day and I do hate Cambridge. Thank you for taking the service.'

Sidney was surprised that so many women tended to think in this way. 'Do you think your former husband did too?'

'Hate Cambridge? I am sure he loved it.'

'Many people find it difficult: the lack of privacy, the two different worlds of town and gown.'

'Oh surely, Canon Chambers, there is a hierarchy of etiquette and a constellation of social codes.'

'Yes, I can see that,' Sidney tried to be conciliatory. 'No one quite knows what the rules are.'

'There are worlds within worlds when you think about it. Although I never expected to understand my husband on the subatomic level, I must say.'

'You are a scientist?'

'I started off as Val's research student.'

'I didn't know that.'

'When you look as I do, Canon Chambers, very few people credit you with intelligence. Even at this esteemed university, people tend to go by appearances.'

'As a priest, I try not to.'

'Well, even as a priest, I think you probably have rather a long way to go, if you don't mind my saying so.'

Sidney was shocked by this directness. He suddenly felt rather sick. In fact, he worried that he was going to *be* sick. Perhaps it had been one of the cheese sandwiches. 'If you'll excuse me . . .'

Alice Bannerman appeared to guess his intentions. 'The bathroom is at the top of the stairs on the right.'

The walls on the way up were tacked with Ordnance Survey maps and black and white photographs of mountains. Once in the bathroom, Sidney washed his face to quell his nausea. The small hand-towel was damp on a ring beside him. He looked to see if there was another and then noticed a small bathroom cabinet. He wondered if Lyall had kept any Alka-Seltzer or cod-liver oil to settle his stomach. When he opened the cupboard he found that it was half-filled with prescription medicines: mechlorethamine,

triethylenemelamine and busulfan. He would have to telephone his father to check what they meant but he was almost sure that they were medicines for cancer.

He opened the window to get some air and then drank a glass of water. He took a few deep breaths and decided to go home as soon as possible.

'So soon?' Alice Bannerman asked.

Sidney could not leave quickly enough. It was early afternoon, but already it was almost dark, the only light coming from the street lamps and the snow. When he got back to the vicarage, he decided, he would make himself a cup of tea and sit by a warm fire in the half-light and pray quietly. Then he would talk to Leonard.

How does a man behave when he knows that his death is imminent?

Sidney had seen evidence of changes in behaviour in wartime; the courage and recklessness of men who knew that they could die at any moment. But was it the same in peacetime and when the risks were less? Did it matter what the stakes were, or was the context immaterial? And does a man, who knows that death is certain, give less, or perhaps even more, consideration to the moral consequences of his actions? Does the murderer fear the death penalty?

'Not very often. I would have thought,' Leonard replied as he contemplated the issues that Sidney raised. He was eating a crumpet. 'I suspect that the act of murder must be an overwhelming desire. It countermands every alternative. Dostoevsky asks this question in *Crime and Punishment.* For the central character, Raskolnikov, murder is an experiment in morality. It gets to the heart of this very question.'

'I imagine it does.'