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Opening Extract from...

Where Dead Men Meet

Written by Mark Mills

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WHERE DEAD MEN MEET

MARK MILLS



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In Memory of Christopher

Yet meet we shall, and part, and meet again
Where dead men meet, on lips of living men.

Samuel Butler

England

Chapter One

Had Sister Agnes been less devout, she would have lived to celebrate her forty-eighth birthday.

Not that celebrating such milestones had ever come naturally to her. She had no difficulties with Easter, steeping herself in Christ's selfless Passion, living His suffering as best she could; but even His birthday seemed trivial by comparison, let alone her own. If she played along, it was purely for the sake of the children, whose small faces lit up like beacons whenever Sister Beatrice produced one of her chocolate cakes from the orphanage's ancient oven, its sponge as dense as brick (and almost as tasteless).

There had been no birthday cakes at the Carthusian nunnery where Agnes had taken her sacred vows at the age of nineteen. No, there had been seemingly endless hours of prayer and silent meditation within the confines of her tiny cell, and meals handed out through a hatch to limit the distraction of human contact. The devotional rigours of the order had ultimately proved too much for her, and despite the passage of the years, and the gratifying sense of

purpose that three decades at St Theresa's Orphanage had brought her, she had never quite been able to shake off the feeling that she had somehow fallen short in the eyes of the Lord.

This was the reason she still rose dutifully from her bed at midnight, as she had back at the nunnery, to offer a prayer to Our Lady. It was also the reason she heard the dim but distinct sound of breaking glass – a bright tinkle, not unlike the Angelus bell – cutting through the silence of the sleeping building.

Nearing the foot of the main staircase, she paused, straining her ears, wondering if perhaps she had imagined the sound, somehow brought it into being. No. Another noise, different to the first, a vague sort of shuffling. Someone was definitely at large on the ground floor. One of the children up to no good? It certainly wouldn't be the first time.

The light leaking beneath the door to Mother Hilda's study lay like a silver thread in the deep darkness of the corridor. The floorboards groaned beneath her feet as she approached and pressed her ear to the door. Silence. She thought about knocking, but she had never known Mother Hilda to be up at this hour, so she entered unannounced.

She just had time to take in the filing cabinet that had been forced open, and the scattering of grey folders in the tight pool of light thrown by the desk lamp, when a hand clamped around her mouth.

The man must have heard her coming and taken up a position behind the door. 'Ssshhhh,' he soothed, his lips

close to her ear. 'Don't make a noise. I don't want to hurt you. Do you understand?'

Trembling, she nodded. The door closed behind her and she found herself being forced towards the overstuffed armchair near the fireplace. 'Sit down,' said the man, removing his rough hand from her mouth. She only looked up at him once she had adjusted the woollen shawl around her shoulders against the draught from the broken window.

He was short, with a thin, eager face and lank, sandy-coloured hair receding at the temples. She had seen a pistol before – her grandfather's service revolver from his time in the Crimea, the one with which he claimed to have dispatched eight Russians in a single afternoon – but she had never had one pointed at her.

Scared before, she now felt strangely calm, unthreatened. She was under the protection of someone infinitely more powerful than this desperate little man in a gaberdine overcoat.

'If it's money you're after, you've come to the wrong place. We barely have enough to feed ourselves.'

'How long have you been here?'

'Excuse me?'

'The orphanage. How long?'

She detected something in his accent now, a faint foreign clip that she might have been able to identify if she had travelled the world more widely.

'Almost thirty years.'

'That's good,' he replied. 'A boy was left here in 1912 . . . a baby . . . left on the steps.'

Her heart gave a sudden lurch. 'So many of them come to us that way.' The lie tripped off her tongue with an ease that surprised her.

'It was winter. January.'

'If you say so.'

She remembered. How could she not? She was the one who had heard the urgent knocking and hurried to the entrance door. There had been a shallow blanket of snow on the ground, and the tracks in it had led her eye to a tall, shadowy figure standing some distance away in the twilit gloom of the driveway. Only when the man turned on his heel and disappeared into the darkness did she notice the small bundle at her feet: her own little Moses, swaddled in a crocheted blanket, asleep, peaceful and untroubled, even then. His gift to her.

'I need a name,' said the man.

'Do you have any idea how many children pass through our hands?'

'I also need to know where he is.'

She saw the many letters from Luke neatly bundled in the box beneath her bed, and her curiosity finally got the better of her. 'Why?'

The man hesitated. 'I have a message from the person who left him here.'

There was a shared acknowledgement in the look they traded: that a message carried by a man who came skulking in the night, gun in hand, was not a message worth receiving.

'Leave it with me,' she replied. 'I'll see what I can do.'

The man grunted, then tucked the pistol away in the

pocket of his overcoat, and for a moment she thought she had worn him down with her dignified resistance.

'I'm sorry, but I don't have much time.'

He produced an object from his other pocket. Shaped like a policeman's truncheon, it appeared to be made of leather.

She would have been less afraid if there had been malicious intent in his eyes, but all she detected was an emptiness that spoke of weary resignation, even boredom.

Her last thought before it began was that this was a test, a kind of penance, and that she would show herself equal to the suffering He had endured.