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...IS NO THEFT?

by Matthew Olson

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QUOTATION

**I do not much wish well to discoveries,
for I am always afraid
they will end in conquest and robbery.
Samuel Johnson 1773**

PROLOGUE

Miracle at the Mill

**The Blessed Abbey of St. Benedict and St. Paul,
July 14th. 1513**

Sister Lettice hurried through the slype on her way to her room in the nuns' annex. It was early afternoon but the light was fading fast. The dark storm clouds threatened a deluge of rain. The elderly nun was most anxious to retrieve her missal and return to the Oratory. One huge lightning bolt had just struck close to the Abbey and Sister Lettice had a morbid fear of storms.

Upon entering her room, she was astonished to find an intruder. A small naked girl stood wet and shivering in the corner. Sister Lettice saw with dismay that the child had dripped water all over the floor.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?" demanded Sister Lettice.

The girl stared in fright at the nun and started to whimper.

"You are not allowed in here!" cried Sister Lettice in anger.

The small child made no answer but darted around the nun and out of the room.

"Come back here at once!" ordered Sister Lettice, "Have you stolen anything? Come back thief!"

The child ran down the passageway with the elderly nun in hot pursuit. Crossing the Abbey grounds the child headed in the direction of the mill. Sister Lettice stopped to catch her breath and watched as the child continued her flight.

The sky was completely full of swirling black clouds. Down by the mill she could see a horse and oxen team hitched to a laden cart. Several men were hurriedly unloading sacks of grain and carrying them into the mill. Another great flash of lightning struck the willows across the river. The uneasy draught animals moved off unattended and pulled the cart away from the mill entrance.

Sister Lettice noticed for the first time the motionless figure of another naked child lying on the path by the river. The carter, who had been

bending over the still form, heard the shouts of the men at the mill and ran back to attend to his team.

There are some strange happenings today, thought Sister Lettice, there are naked children all over the Abbey. They must have been bathing in the river and the one on the path looks drowned.

The fleeing child continued down to the river and on to the path. She looked up and down the path and back towards the Abbey as if she was looking for some person or place. Her gaze fixed on the small figure lying on the path and she ran and held the lifeless form. The two bodies fused into one swollen human figure.

Sister Lettice rubbed her eyes in disbelief. I wish my vision was clearer. I think I have just seen a child's soul running free and now return to its earthly body.

She stood in awe at this proof of man's divine and physical being until she became aware of another disturbance. The sacristan and a peasant came from the direction of the Abbey and hurried towards the figure on the path.

She recognized the peasant to be Walter Reeve, Lord De Ashpere's bailiff. That must be his

child lying there; a cruel blow for him to lose his only child.

She watched as the sacristan anointed the child. Suddenly the child sat up and spewed out large quantities of fluid in several convulsive spasms.

"Our Heavenly Father," said Sister Lettice as she made the Sign of the Cross, "and the Saints have God's Mercy on us all. The child is going to survive!"

She watched the rest of the proceedings as the child quickly recovered. Her father wrapped his daughter in his cloak and carried her to his horse.

Sister Lettice became aware that it was now raining hard and she was getting extremely wet. She retraced her steps back to her room and stood looking at the large puddle of water in her room. A line of small wet footprints led away from the puddle and down the passage.

How can the human spirit have a physical form and how can a human spirit be soaking wet?

She stared at the footprints again. The footprints only lead away from my room, she mused, there are none leading in to the room. It is as

if the form in my room had been conjured up by some magical process.

She decided not to speak to the other nuns about what she had witnessed. It could truly be a miracle but I may have been mistaken. I had better still my tongue. I know some in the Abbey think me a foolish old nun and if I broadcast this vision, it will only confirm their opinion. She gave a sigh and went to get a mop to dry up the floor of her room.

CHAPTER 1

Post Fire

Monksbridge Hall, Sunday, September 5th

2135

Joseph woke in the morning after a fitful few hours sleep. The enormity of the previous day's events flooded into his consciousness. Two of his friends had died last night on his property. He would still think of them as his friends despite the harsh words of the previous day. And the police would be here again shortly to continue their investigations.

Joseph climbed wearily out of bed and dressed. Miriam was still asleep. She lay on her back with the bed-clothes rising and falling gently over her large pregnant abdomen.

Downstairs Joseph connected on the video-phone to the home of his Department Chairman. The professor's daughter, Alice Bates, answered the video-phone.

"Hello, Joseph. What can I do for you so early on a Sunday morning?"

Joseph was not in the mood for pleasantries. He also wished that Alice would not use his first name. It was improper for a student to be on first name terms with a lecturer.

"I need to speak with your father please, Alice. There has been a fire on my property."

"Goodness me, Joseph! The house hasn't burned down has it? No, I can see it hasn't, you are speaking from the house."

"It wasn't the house. Be a good girl and fetch your father."

Alice left to find her father. Joseph had no wish to be patronizing but he didn't want to encourage Alice. Several months had passed since he had rebuffed her audacious proposal and she still acted as if they had a relationship!

Professor Bates came hurrying to the video-phone in his bathrobe.

"Good morning, Joseph. Whatever is the matter? Alice tells me you have had a fire. Nothing too serious I hope."

"I'm sorry to disturb you at home like this but I wanted you to know before the rumors start on campus. A shed on my property caught fire during

the night. Unfortunately Eric Gabriel and Ralph Lord were trapped inside and burned to death."

"Gabriel and Lord from the Science Department?"

"I'm afraid so. They were down here for the weekend."

Professor Bates looked visibly shaken.

"That's dreadful! What a terrible tragedy. How did you manage to get out?"

"Luckily, I wasn't in the shed but asleep in my bed when the fire started. I had decided not to watch the experiment last night."

"Do you know what caused the fire?"

"Not for certain! They were using the ultra high frequency laser from the University. I assume that it caught the shed on fire. The laser was destroyed in the fire along with everything else."

"Dear me, Professor Winchester is going to be very upset. His two best researchers killed and valuable University property incinerated. Does he know about the accident?"

"I'm not sure. I imagine the police will inform him as the head of the Science Department."

But even if they don't, the news is going to be all across the Campus by Monday."

"What were you doing with the Science Department equipment on your property?"

"Gabriel and Lord were doing experiments on the time space continuum. I merely provided the location. They said that the old Abbey grounds were ideal for their experiments."

Professor Bates thought for a few moments. "You realize that this will make your position at the University very delicate. I told you previously that Professor Winchester disliked you. This tragedy is not going to make things easier."

"I'm not afraid of him. My immediate problem is the police who are making extensive inquiries. They have asked me to remain at Monksbridge for the time being. I won't be able to come back to Oxford for a few days until the police have finished."

"Take all the time you need. I'll see that your teaching duties are covered until you return."

"Thanks for all your help. I'm sorry to be such a nuisance."

"No trouble at all. Have you contacted your lawyer? I would make sure that you don't say anything to the police that you could regret later. You will have to consider possible civil lawsuits in addition to the police investigation."

"No! I haven't called him. I didn't even think about the possibility of legal action. I'll call straight away. Thank you once again. I'll keep in touch."

"I'm distressed to hear about the deaths. Please accept my condolences. I'll do my best to stifle any rumors here on the campus until you get back."

Joseph broke the connection and immediately called Francis Lewis. Joseph groaned when he saw the message on the screen. Francis was unavailable. Joseph left a detailed message briefly explaining the fire, the deaths and the reason for his call. He apologized for disturbing the lawyer on a Sunday but asked him to return the call as soon as possible.

There I've done everything I can. It's a good thing that Francis represents the Monksbridge Trust as well as the family. I only have to deal with one lawyer.

Joseph went into the kitchen and prepared breakfast. He carried a serving upstairs for Miriam who was still in bed.

"You remember that the police are coming back to ask more questions this morning?"

"Yes, I do remember about the police but I will stay in bed until they are gone. I don't want to answer any questions."

Joseph went back downstairs to the kitchen to finish his breakfast. He had just cleared the table when the front door bell rang. He checked the view port and saw two police officers standing there. He opened the front door and invited them into the sitting room.

The older man introduced himself. "I'm Sergeant Hooper from the Monksbridge Police and this is Constable Somerset. We need you to make a statement if you don't mind, Sir. Do you have a lawyer?"

"My family attorney was not available when I called this morning. I'm sorry but I'm not prepared to make a statement without him." At that moment the video-phone trilled. "Excuse me while I answer."

Joseph was reassured to see the face of his lawyer on the video-phone. "Thank you for returning my call, Francis. The police have just arrived to ask more questions about the fire."

"I'm glad that I called back in time. I can't be physically present but if you switch your transmitter to wide view I can monitor the interview and interrupt if I think your rights are being infringed."

Joseph turned to the police officers. "My lawyer wishes to monitor the interview by video-phone."

The police sergeant looked uncomfortable. "You may have your lawyer present by electronic communication."

Joseph switched the transmitter to room view. "This is Sergeant Hooper and Constable Somerset from the Monksbridge Police. Are you able to get a clear view and reception?"

"I have an excellent connection, Joseph. Please continue."

Sergeant Hooper turned to Joseph. "I must warn you that your statement will be recorded and automatically transcribed by an auto-dictate. You

will receive a permanent record of our conversation in due course."

Francis Lewis interrupted from the video-phone. "I take it that neither the police officers nor you Joseph have any objection to my recording the proceedings from here?"

"It's fine with me," said the sergeant.

"And I have no objection to either recording," said Joseph.

"When did you last see your two friends?" asked the sergeant.

"It was sometime yesterday after lunch. We had a discussion about further research together for yesterday evening but I declined to help."

"And what was the nature of this research, may we ask?"

"I don't pretend to understand it fully. They had an expensive piece of equipment called an ultra-violet frequency laser that they had borrowed from the University. They were initially illuminating the old stones from the Abbey in an attempt to detect stored radiation."

"Was any of this research successful?"

"Not as such but lately they were trying a new experiment. Something to do with time space dimensions. They were more successful there from what I understand."

"Why did you refuse to work with them in the evening?"

"Because I spent most of the day upstairs with my wife; she is pregnant and not feeling well. Doctor Hutto said she has to rest."

"Why were they in the shed so late at night?"

"Because the experiments only worked after dark; they told me it was because there was less cosmic radiation."

The Police Sergeant paused to review his notes. "Can you explain how the shed caught fire?"

"I am not sure but the whole structure was made of wood. Perhaps something went wrong with the equipment."

"Tell me about the items stored in the shed. The Fire Department seemed to think that they might have been highly flammable."

"I don't know exactly what they were but, according to my grounds-man, those materials have

been in there ever since the shed was erected by the University of Central England. There was a research team down here doing archeological mapping over ten years ago."

"Why were the shed and materials still on the premises after all this time?"

"Somehow the project lapsed but they never came back to remove their property. The Bursar at Central University could probably give you the details of the shed contents from their inventory."

"We will get in touch with him this coming week but I have another question. Was it possible for the shed door to be locked from the outside? Was there any way that the two young men could have been deliberately shut in there?"

"I don't know of any possible method. The door had two locks but both could be unfastened from the inside without a key. There was no other way of securing the door and it opened inwards. I am sure that if Ralph or Eric had been able to get to the door they would have been able to open it easily."

"That is all the questions I have for now. I want you to listen as P.C. Somerset plays back your

statement on the auto-dictate machine. We will get the hard copies made later for you to sign."

Joseph sat quietly as he listened to the replay of their conversation in the flat monotonous tones of the auto-dictate machine. The police would be transferring that record into their central computer.

"Have you anything to add to your statement?"

"I can't think of anything else. What is to happen now?"

The sergeant turned to the constable, "Turn off the auto-dictate. The statement is finished." He spoke to the video-phone, "I must ask you to turn off your recording, Sir." He watched the video-phone until the red record light vanished and then he turned back to Joseph.

"What I have to say now is completely off the record."

"Isn't this a breach of police protocol?"

"Your family has been in these parts for a long time and your uncle was well liked. You and your lawyer need to know this for your own good."

"Know what?"

"We are only making a preliminary inquiry today," replied the sergeant, "I must advise you that the Camford University authorities are very upset at the deaths of these two men. They are insisting that the whole matter be investigated at a Regional level by the Oxford police."

"Surely it is a local matter," protested Joseph.

"Someone on the Faculty has influence with the Chief Constable. There is an old statute on the University Charter which gives the Oxford Police widespread jurisdiction in University matters. It's out of our hands."

"What does this mean?"

"It means that there will be a thorough and painstaking investigation. I'm assuming that these deaths were a terrible accident but others are suggesting murder or murder and suicide."

Joseph felt his stomach drop. The whole affair was getting out of hand. He felt guilty without reason. He had nothing to do with the fire.

"Don't look so upset," continued the sergeant, "at least the inquest will be held in

Monksbridge amongst local people. They can't move that to Oxford."

"I suppose I should be thankful for small mercies," replied Joseph. "What will happen next?"

"A forensic team will be arriving soon from the Oxford Police. I must ask you not to go down to the scene of the fire until they have finished. I have an officer on duty to prevent anyone tampering with the evidence."

After Joseph had seen the Police officers off the premises, he came back into the sitting room where Francis Lewis was still waiting on the video-phone.

"I didn't know you were married Joseph!"

"I'm not but I hope to marry in the near future. I'll introduce you to Miriam at a more convenient time. Don't you think that was a strange interview?"

"I'm glad I was able to sit in. It was nice of them to warn us. It sounds as if someone at Camford University is out to make trouble for you and it may spill over to involve the Trust."

"I know who that someone is; it must be Professor Winchester. He had a lifelong feud with

my father and has transferred his hatred to me. He doesn't want me at Camford."

"I'm sorry to hear that but forewarned is forearmed. Don't give any interviews if I'm not present. We must be careful to safeguard our interests."

The Oxford forensic team arrived later in the morning. They parked a large Magmobile with "Oxford Forensic Team" painted in yellow letters on the side. The Toomeys drove onto the property behind the Magmobile. He hurried around to his employees' cottage and arrived just as Mr. and Mrs. Toomey alighted from a lecmobile.

"What are all the police doing here, Master Joseph?"

"I'm sorry to tell you but there has been a terrible accident last night. The storage shed caught fire with Eric and Ralph inside. I am afraid they were both burned to death."

Mrs. Toomey put her hands to her mouth in shock. Mr. Toomey paled. "I'm sorry to hear that. They were such nice men but why the forensic van and all the way from Oxford?"

"The police are doing a very thorough investigation at the request of the Camford University authorities. You must not go down there. We are forbidden by the police to enter the scene until they have finished."

"But what about visiting time this afternoon? Me and my wife have made a special effort to be back in time to open up the grounds."

"The grounds will be closed until the police have finished. I should be grateful if you would put the closed notices out by the gate. I need you to be on duty to make sure no one tries to enter. Once the news of the tragedy spreads, I am sure we will have plenty of inquisitive thrill seekers."

"Very good, Sir. I'm sorry to hear that your friends died."

While Joseph was walking back to the house he realized that he had not told the Toomeys about Miriam. He hesitated and half turned but decided he could tell them later. He continued his walk to the house and went upstairs. Miriam was still asleep. Joseph went to a back bedroom and watched the Oxford police at work. They appeared to be taking extensive video-graphs of the scene of the fire.

They had placed colored markers all over the site as reference points.

After he tired of watching, he descended to the sitting room and attempted to read. Feeling restless he stared out of the window and was startled to see the police carrying two covered stretchers up the path.

He felt a sudden pang of remorse. Those must be Eric and Ralph's remains. I wish I could have persuaded the pair of them to return to Oxford and not attempt to retrieve the Jeweled Bible. But I did warn them that it would be dangerous. A pity they couldn't heed my warning.

He sat back in the arm chair unable to decide on his next course of action. The old books were locked safely in the gun room but it was not a good time to produce them. He would have to wait until the commotion about the deaths had subsided. But he had them as insurance in case the University tried to dismiss him. He was jolted out of his reverie by the ringing of the door bell. An Oxford Police Officer was standing on the doorstep.

"We are going to lunch now. We will be back later to sift the debris. The scene is still closed to everybody."

"When will you be finished?" asked Joseph, "I wish to clear the area and open the grounds to visitors."

"In a day or so. We will be removing all debris for testing in our laboratory."

"Is that necessary?" asked Joseph.

"Not usually, but I have orders from the Superintendent to remove everything. I will inform you when you can re-open the grounds."

The doorbell had woken Miriam and she came down for lunch in one of Joseph's dressing gowns. "The police are still working on the scene of the fire. They will be back this afternoon and again probably again on Monday," said Joseph, "We are not to go down there."

Miriam gave a little shudder. "I don't think I want to. Are the corpses still down there?"

"No, they have been taken away. The police are sifting through the site looking for clues to the fire."

"But we know how the shed burned! It caught fire when Eric and Joseph opened up the connection between the two worlds."

"Yes but we can't tell the police. We would have to reveal the whole story and someone might claim the books."

"Who else could possibly have a right to the books?" exclaimed Miriam in alarm.

"Many people!" replied Joseph. "The police could seize them for evidence and the Crown could demand them as treasure trove because of the silver clasps on some of the books." Joseph thought for a moment. "I think the Vatican could argue that they still belonged to the Catholic Church."

"But we don't want to lose the books now after I went to so much trouble! What can we do?"

"You must be circumspect in what you say to anyone. Don't mention that we have the books or that Eric and Ralph were trying to recover the Jeweled Bible!"

"I'll keep quiet. I wish I had something to wear besides my nun's robe."

"We can get you some clothing tomorrow. Until then you will have to keep wearing the dressing gown."

"Then I may go back to bed after lunch. I have not slept so well in many weeks."

"You do remember that Doctor Mayo and his nurse are coming this afternoon?" Joseph reminded Miriam. "And that you are not to tell them how you got here!"

"The Doctor's visit had slipped my remembrance," replied Miriam, "but I do remember that if I can't answer their questions then I'm to pretend I've lost my memory. I'm also to say that I have lost my identity cards if any one asks for them."

"That's correct!" said Joseph. "Tell them that the fire and the deaths have been a great shock for you. Tell them anything to stall inquiries; pretend you have temporarily forgotten many things. Tell them you left your identity cards in the shed and they burned up in the fire."

Lunch was over and they were clearing the dishes when Doctor Mayo arrived with Nurse Birdwell. "Now Miriam let us go up to the

bedroom," said Doctor Mayo, "I can examine you properly lying on the bed."

Joseph started to follow them up to the bedroom but Doctor Mayo exclaimed. "We don't need you Joseph! Nurse Birdwell will be my chaperone. I think your wife deserves some privacy."

Joseph had mixed feelings about Miriam being alone with them but realized that he could not be with her every minute. She would have to be alone with other people sooner or later. He hoped she would remember everything he had told her.

Inside the bedroom Miriam sat down on the bed. "What do you want me to do?" she asked. "I don't understand why you need to see me so soon. I have not started birthing my child."

"Prenatal care is compulsory by law. You have been very negligent. We need to ask you some questions about your health. After that I wish to examine you to make sure that you and the baby are healthy."

Nurse Birdwell took out the computer and plugged it into the video-phone.

"I need your medical card," said the nurse.

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"I've lost it somewhere," said Miriam, "I think it might have been burnt in the fire."

Nurse Birdwell gave a sigh of exasperation.

"Give me your full name and date of birth then!"

"Miriam Reeve. I can't remember when I was born" replied Miriam.

Nurse Birdwell gave a little gasp.

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