



## CHAPTER 4

### *A musty old journal*

Jim Eggleton cleared his throat and began to read: “I, Rodney Jacob McDowd, begin this, my journal on this 25th of May in the year of our Lord 1791, having assumed my duties here as the vicar of Ryeport, in the County of Cornwall, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 1791. Only two weeks have passed since that beginning – although it feels more like two years – my life here continues to be uncomfortable and boring in the extreme. Most of the villagers treat me more like a social outcast than a valued member of the community and ignore me whenever possible. I am left with the feeling that I have been condemned and relegated to this remote and God-forsaken place, so that my very existence can be denied. There are no pleasures for me here, no social contact and nothing to look forward to in my present existence. How I hunger for even the smallest distraction to help break the monotony of my dreary routine.”

Sexton interrupted, smiling, as he waved his hand in Eggleton's direction. “Our new vicar is a true descendant of the man that wrote this very journal and roughly the same age too. In fact, it would be easy to accept him as that same eighteenth-century vicar, as he speaks those written words. But that coincidence helps breathe life into the tale. Wouldn't you agree?” Sexton was staring intently into Whitt's heavily lidded eyes as he continued in a quiet, but insistent, tone: “The very essence of those earlier days is with us here today, because of this book. It leaves one with the impression that it is possible to step back into that distant past, and experience the life and times of those early villagers. Touch this journal, and you touch history itself. You can actually experience the years in this book, if you simply relax

and allow it. And I don't mean just the musty odour of this old book either. That is simply an invitation. Those times will actually come to life if you open your mind and allow it. Relax Mr. Whitt; allow the story to transport you. Relax, close your eyes, and touch the journal; allow the story to envelop you. Go ahead man – touch it!” Sexton's manner was quietly intense, almost demanding, as he continued: “You will inhale the ambience of those times with every breath you take. Relax, and touch the journal. You will experience the past as though you actually lived in those times.”

Whitt struggled to resist what he considered another of Sexton's 'programming' directives. How he resented his easy compliance as his eyes closed and he reached out and touched the cover of the old journal. His fingers seeming unnaturally sensitive to the leather, experienced a tingling sensation, more like a mild electric shock. He quickly jerked his hand away, but, feeling rather sheepish, he hastily resumed contact. It was bizarre, but touching the book did seem to stimulate his senses. At first it was just the damp, musty odour of the pages that seemed to grow stronger, but gradually a blend of other smells began to envelop him. First the smell of the sea, unfamiliar until this visit, grew more intense, then a background of other odours, fish and wood smoke mainly, but much stronger than in the village presently. The cries of the seagulls too, were louder and more profuse. Startled by the intensity of the experience, he shot a quick glance at Eggleton hoping for the reassurance of a shared experience, but instead, he was alarmed to see the vicar's image become vague and hazy. His next look at Eggleton did nothing to reassure him because, although the vicar's image was firming up, he was now wearing apparel appropriate for an eighteenth-century vicar and mouthing the words his quill pen was scratching into the journal: “My days here are miserable, and lonely in the extreme and it is largely from a need to occupy my time that I set pen to paper this day. However, I am also resolved to examine these records periodically, to measure both my improving morals and the benefits that I shall bring to this congregation. For, without those improvements, I shall never impress my father well enough to earn my reinstatement in his will.”

The vicar still appeared to be Eggleton, despite his figure remaining 'vaporous', but there was something very different about this man. Was he really the same man that had joined him in sampling Sexton's coffee? This man's face, though very similar in features, was less boyish, and his manner more assertive. There was also a fine white scar running from just under his

right eye, almost to the corner of his mouth. Whitt waited for the image to solidify, but it didn't. The vicar continued muttering as he wrote, pausing only to dip his pen into an ink pot. However, this voice lacked the soft 'Cornish' accent of Eggleton. His voice had the harder, more 'clipped' tones of a Londoner.

"For my periodic self-examinations to be effective and fruitful, I must be painfully self-critical, completing these records with all the fidelity I can muster. Therefore, I shall begin frankly with the admission that I am, at heart, a waster and philanderer; a spoiled and wanton 'child' of twenty-four years, given to self-indulgence and the pursuit of love, or rather, love-making. I confess that my intense pursuit of such pleasures made me inconsiderate, and unconcerned for the needs of others. Obviously that must change – *or, at least, appear to change* – if I am ever to gain restoration to my father's will. I do recognise however, that my largest problem will lie in the fact that I dearly enjoy that lifestyle, and am most reluctant to give it up."

Whitt's mouth was agape, as he looked around him, hoping for some clue that would save his sense of reason. Sexton was standing behind and slightly left of the vicar but he had now been joined by a shorter, shadowy figure and they were both staring at him. Sexton turned to his new companion and said, in a hushed voice, "My first thought was to do this in my 'digs', but I'd overlooked the fact that that was on consecrated ground, so I had to bring Whitt here. But we now have less than two hours." The shadowy figure gave a nod of understanding, and then spread his arms wide, as if indicating the whole area of the kitchen, then swiftly raising his hands above his head he snapped his fingers and disappeared. Whitt couldn't be sure if he had actually seen, or merely imagined the man and began to wonder if Sexton had added some hallucinogenic drug to the coffee. Then, he noticed something that really bothered him; the flames in the vicar's fireplace had stopped moving. They were now quite still – as in a painting.

At this point, the vicar stood up, abandoned his pen, and, making direct eye contact with Whitt, seated himself on the edge of the table and continued his 'journal' as a direct voice communication, as if speaking to a confidant. "My parents were as attentive as their social and business demands would allow, but in truth, we had few interests in common and consequently spent little time together. So, I sought my entertainment elsewhere. But frankly, I quickly tire of the small talk found in most gatherings, unless of course, some members of that company have something more pleasurable than

talk to offer.” He raised his eyebrows and smiled mischievously. “A pretty woman with a well-formed figure would compensate very well.” His gaze drifted upwards, and his expression changed to one of pleasurable reminiscence, accompanied by a self-satisfied smile. Whitt was feeling panicky. “That bloody coffee,” he stammered.

“Frankly, I enjoy the company of the ladies most of all,” confided Roddy McDowd – for Whitt no longer had any doubt that that was who he was listening to. He reached out to touch the vicar, but his hand became so frighteningly cold as it drew close to the image, that he quickly jerked it back before it could make contact, “Damn! Could it be some sort of hologram,” he muttered. But a derisive laugh – seeming to emanate from somewhere inside his head – ridiculed that possibility. The vicar continued, without appearing to notice: “I particularly enjoy those ladies who have a free and uninhibited spirit. In fact, I indulge myself in such company at every opportunity. Unfortunately, that is what brought about my downfall, ruined my financial prospects, and is the reason for my present, miserable situation.”

Whitt felt like a voyeur of a past life experience, but it all seemed so unbelievably real. His mind struggled to find an explanation: drugs perhaps, or hypnotism, illusion or some combination of these things. But the discomfort in his stomach, and the cackling laughter in his head, rebutted each new idea. Reverend Roddy McDowd, however, seemed completely oblivious of his distress and, as Whitt fell back into the wing chair, the vicar continued: “My father had always intended that I would inherit the family business you know, and so, once I had finished my education, he insisted that I join his company. He started me in the most junior position of course; to learn the business from the ground up, just as he had. So, I became the errand boy and general help. Most degrading!”

Visions of the streets of 18<sup>th</sup> century London passed before Whitt’s eyes and he watched in shocked disbelief as the smoky image of Roddy McDowd blended with that of a young man carrying a wicker hamper. “Wine samples,” said Roddy – in answer to his unspoken question – “in the hamper! Wine samples that I am to deliver to a retailer in the West End,” and Whitt felt himself immersed in the new surroundings, as all traces of the vicar’s kitchen disappeared.

The smells of the streets were vivid – the fresh baked bread had a tantalising aroma and the butcher’s shop too had a strong, but less pleasant odour; the manner in which chickens were hung and rabbits displayed,

guttled, but otherwise intact, was disgusting and unattractive. But the most pungent smell of all assailed Whitt's nostrils when they turned a corner and found themselves outside a farriery. A man in a leather apron was cradling a horse's hoof, sole uppermost, between his thighs, whilst a second man used tongs to set a hot, glowing, shoe on the animal's hoof. The resulting smoke was alarming, and the smell – like burning hair – was one that Whitt would never forget. He expected the animal to panic, and break free, but the horse, although restless, was certainly less alarmed than he, as he felt his grasp on his reality slipping away.

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Boredom had set in very quickly for Roddy and he found himself taking longer and longer on his errands. He began stopping at local inns for refreshment, and, hopefully, some titillating company to relieve the monotony of his errand boy duties. Unfortunately, news of his dallying eventually reached his father who, acting on timely information, caught him in the company of a working girl in the middle of the day – and a most personal involvement. He was sent home, embarrassed and in disgrace, his income suspended, and confined to the house to contemplate the error of his sinful ways.

With no money, and his confinement, he was obliged to suffer his punishment with such good grace as he could muster. However, with a sorrowful display for her benefit, he was able to convince the young maid, to take pity on his wretched loneliness. After two weeks of self-evaluation he was allowed to resume his duties. Unfortunately, four months later, the maid's father, cap in hand, came to see his father. His unmarried daughter's shameful condition was now obvious and he made enough of the disgrace that had been brought upon his family that Roddy's father provided enough compensation to encourage a local man to marry the girl and then arranged for the newlyweds to 'have-a-place', in domestic service, with a friend of his, living some fifty miles north of London.

The gossip mill was working overtime and his father's embarrassment in the city, as also amongst his friends and neighbours, was causing him much distress. His rage was frightening and Roddy was grateful for his mother's claim that she had been on the verge of dismissing the girl herself, 'for her flagrant flirtatious attitude towards him.' It was expected that the limitation of language, plus a hard taskmaster relationship and absences from home, would teach him to be celibate, hardworking, and repent his

wanton ways. So he was sent to France to be under the tutelage of one of his father's associates. However, he had a gift for speedy learning, and the willingness of some young ladies at the winery to teach him, made light of those limitations.

Unfortunately, one of those ladies was the young bride of his new employer, Monsieur Beaucaire. This man was roughly the same age as his father, yet through an arranged marriage had taken as his wife, a beautiful young lady of only eighteen years. Possibly because their ages were so similar, she confided to Roddy about her desperate unhappiness, saying that her husband treated her more like a possession than a wife. He, *of course*, had felt compelled to comfort her. He had tried to resist her affections, but the more he rejected her, the louder she would cry and eventually, for fear that her crying would alarm the servants, he gave in. Yet despite Roddy's assertions, he delighted in conveying that it had been necessary to do so more than once and the consequences of his behaviour.

"M'sieur. Beaucaire came home unexpectedly one day, and found us in bed together." He would tell his audience while fingering the thin scar that ran down his cheek. "This is a souvenir of that event. The man struck me with an ornament from the night table. Luckily I dodged most of the blow. It barely missed my eye."

Eventually he made his way back to London but his Patron's letter had preceded him and his father's moods were now fluctuating between deep depressions and towering rage. He laid into Roddy with his walking cane as soon as he saw him. Had it not been for his mother's intervention he might have killed him. His Mother managed to get him out of the house and into a friend's home. There she tended his cuts and bruises, whilst trying to find a way to keep him in the family circle. However, his Father was adamant. He was dishonoured, disavowed and disinherited. His father's attempt to allow the scandal at home to fade into distant memory had only been worsened and his father was now concerned that his relationship with Beaucaire, a cornerstone of his business, might be destroyed. His mother tried desperately to pacify her husband but he flew into a rage every time Roddy's name was mentioned.

Eventually he grew tired of coming home to a crying wife, and promised to try to find a way to remedy the situation, provided it did not add to the embarrassment that the gossip mongers were causing in the city. His first thought was to send his son to the colonies with a small allowance, on the

strict condition that he never return to England. However, this distressed his wife so much that he had to give up the idea. His parents were loyal and devoted supporters of the Church and the Bishop, a personal friend and lodge brother of Mr. McDowd Sr. So, in desperation, he sought the advice of this good friend.

“Your Grace, that boy is not like normal men. Certainly not like you or me.” But that was the moment that inspiration came to him. “Tell me, Your Grace, do you believe that one’s character is mainly due to breeding, or training?” A scheme was forming in his mind that might well solve his problems at home, and eliminate any future responsibilities from his problem son.

His wife was shocked, when he returned home, by his change of heart. He told her: “I have been talking with our friend Bishop Mason, and we have come to the conclusion that our son should have another chance. As you know, the Bishop is a man of considerable wisdom and insight and together we have devised a plan to help save our son’s soul. No man likes to abandon his own son my dear, but you must admit that the provocation has been extreme. I could not possibly survive another episode such as the last two and certainly my business could not. However, I would like to provide an opportunity for our son to redeem himself. If I could be sure that Rodney had managed to curb his appetites, and was prepared to knuckle down to a hardworking, moral, lifestyle, I might restore his allowance, and possibly reinstate him in my will, but only if his behaviour merited such action.”

She had hurried to her husband’s side to kiss him and tears of joy filled her eyes, as she gave thanks to the Good Lord for enlightening her husband and prompting him to welcome the return of their prodigal son. “Indeed; all thanks to our Good Lord my dear,” he replied, “for it is He who will save our son. As to the return of the prodigal, that can await the proving of his repentance.”

“I do not understand husband. What do you have in mind?”

“Our son, my dear, will enter the priesthood. That is if he ever wants to be a part of this family again, together with such privilege as goes with that membership. I have already made the arrangements with the Bishop. If Rodney agrees – and you can ask him tomorrow – then he will report to our church for an interview with the Bishop next Monday morning, at eight o’clock sharp. If the Bishop approves of his attitude, then Rodney

will report immediately to Theological College – another favour – to begin his training. We are fortunate indeed to have a man such as the Bishop to call our friend.” Roddy’s mother was stunned. Her mind had gone blank. Even such a staunch defender of her son as she, had trouble believing he could modify his appetites to that extent. However, his father made it clear that this was the only solution that he would allow and she knew him well enough, to know that he’d not change his mind.

Roddy’s only recourse now was to apply himself hard enough to show his penitence and so earn reinstatement in his father’s will. Eventually, he believed he would control his own fortune, provided that he play his cards right in the short term, and he reasoned that once his father passed on, he could leave the church and go his own way again.

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At eight a.m. sharp the following Monday morning, Roddy reported to the Bishop’s office. He had always known how to impress people and so proceeded with his pious and penitent attitude to make that reverend gentlemen begin to wonder if his father was overstating his delinquent ways. Following his plan, he then studied hard, passed his examinations with flying colours, and was assigned to a small parish north of London, as an assistant to the ageing vicar. Unfortunately Father Dexter, upon catching him engaged in some lighthearted conversation with one of the young ladies of the choir – who did seem rather well disposed towards him – and, having been advised of his fondness for the fair sex, complained to the Bishop. It was decided that, given the fragile state of his morals, London was too dangerous an environment and the Bishop used his influence to transfer Roddy to a diocese in Cornwall where a vacancy had occurred through the sudden death of a vicar in a small village. So, he was ‘promoted’ – to his own parish – Ryeport! It was not a good beginning; neither his father nor Bishop Mason wanted him and he was soon to learn, his new Bishop, and parish, didn’t want him either.

A hackney carriage took Roddy from his parent’s house to the Coaching Inn and from there he began his four-day journey to Nextwest, in Cornwall, where he would report to his new master, Bishop West. It was not a good meeting. His reputation had preceded him, and Bishop West made it clear that he was there under protest. His first mistake, or indiscretion, would be his last. He was then handed off to an assistant, the ‘chubby’ Reverend Tubbs, who had been ‘filling-in’ at Ryeport since the demise of Roddy’s

predecessor. Tubbs arranged that they would dine together at the Nextwest manse where he would spend that night in the guest room. Dinner was pleasant and the manse was comfortable enough. Reverend Tubbs proved to be an easy going fellow who was plump, a little boring, and obviously lacking in self-confidence.

He introduced himself as: "Reverend Percival Archibald Tubbs: Tubbs by name, and 'tubby' by nature." He blushed at his feeble joke. "In informal situations I'm known as Tubby. Please feel free to use that nickname. Percival is rather much, wouldn't you agree? I'm afraid you will find your accommodation in Ryeport rather Spartan, Rodney. The village is very poor and the people are on the rough side. Not my cup of tea I'm afraid. Yours neither I suspect. However, one must make the best of things, don't you agree? I will help if I can. Beware of the Bishop however. He is not a forgiving man and very critical. I get the impression that he is not well disposed towards you. Although, I must confess, I don't know why." Tubby's expression seemed to be an invitation to enlighten him which Roddy didn't accept.

The following morning Tubby drove them to The Harbour Light Inn in Ryeport and introduced Roddy to the owner, Ernie Chandler. 'Ernie' was a large, powerfully built man, with a barrel chest and arms and legs like young trees and he seemed annoyed by their arrival. Tubby treated Roddy to lunch at the inn whilst they waited there for his housekeeper, Bessie Drew. Eventually, a robust, ruddy complexioned woman, who appeared to be in her mid-forties, arrived. She wore a patched apron, over clothing that had obviously seen better days, and her attitude was one of bored resignation, leaving Roddy with the impression that she would rather be anywhere else than there. She and the innkeeper had a quiet conversation, giving occasional, disapproving, glances in their direction, without acknowledging them in any way. Eventually, the innkeeper brought her to their table, and introduced her. Mrs. Drew then took them on a hurried tour of the very basic church and Roddy's even more primitive cottage. It was a grudging, cheerless, reception and Tubby was obviously relieved to say goodbye.

"Oh, by the way," he said in parting. "You do have a pony and wagon you know. It's just like this one, and stabled at the inn, in exchange for its occasional use by the innkeeper. Actually, the pony spends most of its life grazing behind the stable. His name is 'Slondosh'. I can't imagine where that name came from – most unusual. Bye now. Come and see us if you need anything."

He smiled, waved a quick farewell, and was soon out of sight on the twisting, tree-lined road back to civilisation. Roddy watched him disappear, feeling that he'd been abandoned in hostile territory, at the mercy of his enemies. That night he ate at the inn, but was offered nothing in terms of companionship or conversation. There were no introductions. Later, his housekeeper sat across from him with a mug of ale and questioned him about his family and previous experience. Apart from that, he was ignored. Once the meal was over they walked back along the broad harbour front to the cheerless three roomed cottage. The only comforts appeared to be a dying fire and a well-worn wing chair, set on a scrap of threadbare carpet. There were few furnishings, and minimal comforts. Mrs. Drew informed him that she would come by every morning, top up the water butt, and prepare his breakfast. Lunch and supper too if he wanted, but she thought he might want to vary that by eating at the inn.

“Of course, you will also have to prepare Sunday’s sermon, Father. But I imagine you already have something in mind. You must have prepared some before now.” Her offhand remark and tone of voice seemed to imply that she doubted if he could write his name, let alone a sermon. His new home consisted of a bedroom, living room, and scullery. As far as provisions were concerned, there was the butt of water in the scullery and a small cupboard, which she had stocked with some bread and cheese, butter, milk and half a dozen eggs. Outside there was a woodshed and a few paces away, an outdoor privy.

Mrs. Drew put more logs on the fire, bade him goodnight, and left him alone to contemplate his good fortune and enjoy the comforts of his new home. Once she left, Roddy did find one saving grace; a small cupboard that held a few bottles of wine left by his predecessor and he resolved to taste that as soon as possible. “Just to make sure it hasn’t spoiled of course,” Roddy said smiling rather wearily, and raising his eyebrows. He felt abandoned, friendless, and very sorry for himself.”

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The Cornish coast is notorious for unpredictable, violent, storms and squalls. These conditions, coupled with the rocky coastline, and submerged rocks, make the area a particularly hazardous one in which to earn a living from the sea. During Roddy’s first evening in Ryeport, there occurred just such a storm.

Ryeport's small fishing fleet – an assortment of boats ranging from twenty to thirty feet in length – had been fishing all day with poor results. 'The Lucky Lady', a thirty-foot boat, had ventured two miles farther out to sea than her closest rival, 'Sunset' – owned and manned by the Carter family. During the late afternoon The Lucky Lady had found a good-sized school of herring. The skipper, Timothy Ozmund, and his mates, Will Tarret, and Mrs. Drew's fourteen-year-old son, Mick, were so busy with their nets that they failed to notice the steadily darkening sky and sporadic gusts of wind. When these warning signs finally registered with Tim, he straightened up and looked west. Dark, ominous looking clouds were being driven towards them by a freshening wind, slowly blotting out the descending sun. The wind gusts grew stronger and the rolling swell began to develop a heavier pitch. The danger signs were now very clear. "Cast the rest loose lads; we're running for home; looks like rough weather's comin' in." The Skipper's crew mates responded quickly to the urgency in his voice, as they too cast anxious looks at the gathering clouds.

Tim looked towards the shore and saw that the other boats were already running for home. Less occupied by smaller catches, they had become aware of the signs before Tim and were already making good speed towards the harbour. Carter's 'Sunset' was still farther west than they, but closer inshore. By the time Lucky Lady's gear was stowed, and she was heading for the harbour, the sky was heavily overcast and white crests were being whipped onto increasingly high waves, and salt spray was stinging their faces. The 'Lucky Lady' was heavy with her good haul, and consequently unable to make her best speed. Tim was proud of the fact that his was the most successful boat operating out of Ryeport. Some said he was just lucky but others would admit that he was a smarter and more daring skipper than most. He would venture farther, work longer and use his seamanship and experience to improve his crew's earnings.

A flash of lightning off to the west was quickly followed by a crash of thunder. Tim tightened his grip on the tiller as his crew trimmed the boat, in an effort to squeeze every last ounce of speed from her. The weather and visibility was worsening rapidly and Tim realised that he would need the guidance of the beacon fires on either side of the harbour entrance, to guide him into the harbour's safe channel. It was during a previous storm, nearly two years ago, that one of those beacons had been doused by heavy rains, and Tim had been obliged to guess which of the two fires was lit. If it was

the eastern beacon – the one on his right of the harbour entrance that was alight – he would have to steer left of it to find calm water. However, if the western beacon was the lighted one, steering left of that would commit him to disaster in the rocky bay known as Sorry Cove. On that first occasion he had reasoned that the lighted beacon would be the more easily serviced eastern one, on the right of the harbour entrance and had steered to the left of it. Unfortunately, he'd guessed wrong, and committed his boat and crew to Sorry Cove. A lightning flash had revealed his mistake, but too late for him to make a course correction. Faced with almost certain destruction on the rocks of Sorry Cove, Tim had gambled on steering his boat through the narrow gap in the western cliff that divided Sorry Cove from the safe entrance. That gap is known locally as 'The Chute'.

Tim had gambled and won. Luck had been with him that stormy evening. Despite the poor visibility, he had timed his critical right-handed turn perfectly, and his boat had ridden an incoming wave that carried it safely over the hazardous rocks just below the surface and through The Chute into safe water. Several of the local fishermen had navigated The Chute successfully in empty boats, when the tide was favourable. But Tim Ozmund is the only man that brought a loaded boat through The Chute during a storm and lived to tell the tale. In fact, his boat had been lifted so high on that incoming wave, that the top of her mast had speared the footboards of the bridge over The Chute.

The men at the inn had ridiculed Tim's story of their journey through The Chute at first but had had to 'eat crow' when the beacon master, Archer, brought Tim's masthead pennant to the inn, and told the story of how he'd found it jammed in the footboards of his bridge over The Chute. That was something that even Tim had been unaware of until then. That same pennant was flying now at the masthead of Tim's new boat, 'Lucky Lady.' Much patched and repaired, that banner was priceless to this superstitious fisherman. But Tim's first boat, 'Lucky Lass' had been smaller, and their catch had been lighter when he guided her through The Chute that stormy night. He knew better than any other skipper, the dangers of entering Sorry Cove with a heavy boat. The Chute would be a dangerous option tonight.

"Keep a sharp eye out for the beacons lads," Tim yelled. "We should see them soon." With more than a mile to go the full fury of the storm was now upon them. The sky was very dark, and the heavy driving rain stinging their faces was rendering visibility very difficult. Each man muttered a

quiet prayer and Mick and Will Tarret touched the crucifix fastened to the mast as they secured their safety lines.

Joshua Cobbe's boat was the first to enter the harbour entrance. It eased into the calmer water behind the western cliff as the beacon above them blazed its brightest. Minutes later Archer's straining eyes made out the boats of Tyler, Andrews and O'Sullivan, rounding the cliff into the quieter water. Seven boats still remained outside the harbour, and still there was no light from the eastern beacon. Visibility was less than a hundred yards, in a driving rainstorm. That reduced visibility would make it impossible to correct an errant course from close inshore. Then lightning revealed the distinctive rig of Morris's ketch as it rounded the cliff into the protected water, and thunder shook the ominously dark sky. That boat was followed by one other that he could not identify, and again he looked anxiously towards the east. "Where is that eastern light? Why hasn't Rookan lit his beacon?" During another flash of lightning, and an almost simultaneous crash of thunder, Archer glimpsed shadows rounding the western cliff but he could not recognise the boats. The waves were ten feet high now and growing higher every minute. "Those boys followed each other in," he muttered. "Pity those poor buggers that were further out, especially with no second beacon to guide them. Someone from the inn should be checking on Rookan by now. I wonder what the problem is."

On that eastern cliff-top, Jamie Rookan was lying face down beside the unlit beacon. He had been sleeping beside his fireplace when that first crash of thunder had startled him from the comfort of his dreams. Jamie had lost no time in cramming his portly form into oilskins, and rushing out of his cottage and up the rough steps to his beacon. He had just reached the beacon when a sudden crushing pain in his chest robbed his lungs of air and his legs of their strength and he fell face first, onto the unlit brazier. He laid there unconscious, blood welling from a gash that ran across his cheek from chin to ear. Jamie's wife, Emily, knew nothing of her husband's problem, and he would often spend a couple of hours at his beacon, so she was not alarmed. But as she passed the seaward window, the usual reassuring glow from his beacon wasn't there, only darkness and a feeling of dread, based on a lifetime of hard experience, gripped her. She hurried up the cliff steps, to the brazier, to find her unconscious husband, soaking wet and barely breathing. The brazier was still unlit, and Jamie's smashed oil lamp lay beside him on the ground. She could see Archer's beacon blazing

brightly across the channel, and prayed that someone would come by to see why Jamie's was still unlit. Despite her husband's plight, she would have to light the brazier first – so many lives could depend on it. Frantically, she threw the wet kindling out of the brazier and replaced it with fresh dry kindling from the shelter. Then she used her lantern to light two pitch torches which she stuffed under the kindling, almost choking in panic as the driving wind and rain tried to defeat her attempts to start the fire. Archer, at the western beacon, heaved a sigh of relief as he saw the beginnings of a flame across the harbour entrance. Emily's fire was building nicely, and she was trying to help her stricken husband, when three men from the village arrived on the scene. One remained to tend the light, whilst the other two struggled down the steps, with the unconscious Jamie. Emily, meantime, was hurrying her weary legs into as fast a pace as she could manage, stumbling and falling over the rough ground to Doctor Hudson's cottage, fearing that he would be too late to save her husband.

"One beacon again," said Tim, bitterly, as he struggled to control his heavily laden boat. He shielded his eyes against the stinging rain as he stared into the darkness, searching for a clue as to which beacon was lit. "I'm getting too close to change course. Which side should I choose this time? Some lightning would help right now," he said. "If I could get a glimpse of Archer's bridge I would know which beacon is lit. I'll go left. The western beacon is always the most likely to fail, because of its exposure." He eased the tiller to starboard, bringing the boat left of the lighted beacon, as the shadowy bulk of the cliff loomed larger. "Committed now," he muttered grimly.

The hoped-for lightning flash came seconds too late. "My God; it's the West beacon. We're going into Sorry Cove again." The muscles in Tim's stomach tightened, as that brief illumination confirmed his worst fears. "Lighten the boat lads," he screamed. "Lighten ship! Lighten ship!" But his crew could not hear him for the wind and rain. They too had seen the bridge over The Chute during that flash of lightning. They 'crossed' themselves, as they looked back at their skipper. Then, as if to confirm their fears, they saw a small glow from the eastern beacon. They groaned, checked their safety lines, and tightened their hold on the rigging.

Once again, The Chute would be their only chance. They would be going in fast and the timing of their angled entry would have to be perfect. Tim would have to swing the boat almost broadside to the following waves just before The Chute. "Too late to reduce sail," he muttered as he aimed the

boat a little further left, trying to compensate for the waves pushing them to the right. Timing would be critical. If he turned the boat too soon the waves would roll the broad-sided boat over, and into a trough. He could use some lightning right now but the storm didn't oblige. For a few seconds the boat would ride high on a wave and the beacon would appear at almost eye level. Then they would drop back into the trough and the beacon would seem to climb high above them on their way down. This was making the boat very hard to control. "Maybe we'll get lucky again and just break our mast on Archer's bridge," Tim muttered hopefully. Then a flash of lightning revealed that he was too far left and too close in for a hard corrective course. He tried to carefully ease the boat into the correct alignment without having the following waves roll them broadside. His first alignment had been good but he had over compensated for the drift. As the boat descended into a trough, he fought to hold his target line for that critical turn into The Chute, with only memory and the glow of the beacon to guide him. "We're going to make it!" He yelled, forcing as much conviction into his words as he could muster. "We're going to make it!"

The next wave rushed The Lucky Lady, slightly broadside, into The Chute and she was lifted high as she entered the portal, until her mast speared the footboards of Archer's bridge. A flash of lightning burnt the image of his boat, dangling by its mast from Archer's bridge and bracketed on either side by the cliffs, into Tim's memory. There was complete darkness, as the mast snapped and the boat fell. Then a following wave hammered the partly broadsided boat into the landward side of the narrow Chute, smashing in the port side before spewing the wreckage from the boat and the bridge, into the calmer water of the harbour entrance. Tim Ozmund and Will Tarret were cast free of that wreckage and were struggling in the water, but Mick Drew had been thrown head first into the cliff and then trapped underwater in a tangle of ropes and fishing nets, until another wave drove the shattered remnants of the boat into the harbour channel.

Archer, in the beacon hut above, heard the noise of the wreck and, hanging onto his safety line, he struggled to the bridge to see what had happened. He would have stepped onto the space vacated by the destroyed bridge had an opportune lightning flash not revealed the damage. Only a few footboards remained and they were dangling from the safety net on the eastern side. That lightning flash also revealed a masthead pennant, that Archer knew only too well, jammed in the remains of those dangling footboards.

His heart ached for the three popular men that manned 'The Lucky Lady'. He began yelling their names at the top of his lungs, hoping to hear an answering voice from the rocks below, but none came and it was too dark to see anything. Any would-be rescuers would have to work virtually blind in the turbulent, rock-strewn, waters around The Chute. But that would only happen if they knew a boat had been wrecked there, which of course, they didn't. And it was no longer possible for him to cross the gap and tell the villagers about the wreck. He would have to wait for a rescue party himself. Until then, he would be tending the beacon, safe and dry in the hut. He later confessed that he felt guilty just for thinking that.

A role call at the inn revealed that two boats were still missing: Tim Ozmunds's Lucky Lady, and the Carter's Sunset. Despite the best efforts of the fishermen, it was impossible to search beyond the harbour. The weather precluded the use of sail and their lanterns were all but useless in these conditions and so the boats were forced to return to the landing to await calmer weather. However, Joshua Cobbe, his brother Ben's, and O'Sullivan's boats were away at the first hint of daylight and others were close behind. Ernie stood at an attic window of his inn, his telescope focused on the remains of Archer's bridge and the hut. Smoke was still coming from the chimney but there was no sign of Archer. He wondered what had destroyed the bridge and if his friend might be lying dead or injured on the rocks below.

Now, thinking ahead, Ernie hurried to Archer's stable and harnessed the horse to the flatbed wagon, in case injured men might need to be carried to their cottages. The light and the weather were improving steadily by the time Cobbe's boat arrived at the harbourside entrance to The Chute. It was there that they found the shattered remains of The Lucky Lady. Mick Drew's broken body was visible just below the surface, held there by snagged nets and rigging. "My God; they came through The Chute again," said Cobbe, looking up at the demolished bridge. They cut Mick free and gently brought him aboard, he had been dead for hours and was freezing cold. Joshua Cobbe was choked with emotion. "Poor Bessie," he said, "First her husband and now her only son."

Then they heard a shout from O'Sullivan's boat. They had spotted two men on some rocks on the other side of the channel, further east. Will Tarret had managed to snag his safety line to a spur of rock and was lying there, on his back, with his legs under Tim's arms, and his feet hooked across his body. That desperate hold was the only thing preventing the unconscious

skipper from slipping back into the water. Will was drifting in and out of consciousness himself, but resisted the rescuers effort to disengage his legs from around Tim. "It's alright Will. We've got Tim, you can let go now. Let us get you boys home." Dave O'Sullivan (Sully) was moved to tears by the injured man's refusal to let go of his friend. Eventually they managed to get Tim into Sully's boat and Morris took Will aboard his. As they turned towards the jetty Joshua Cobbe called to them: "We've got young Mick, lads. The poor lad's beyond our help." Sully called back: "Tim and Will are in a bad way. We'll get them to Doc. Hudson as fast as we can." Cobbe called to the other boats that were arriving: "Tim's boat got smashed up coming through The Chute. Young Mick is dead and Tim and Will are in bad shape, we'll get them back to Doc Hudson. See if you can find Carter and his boys."

Back at the landing Ernie had arrived with the cart and makeshift stretcher. "Where's the vicar?" he asked looking around the assembled villagers. Having been without a vicar for several weeks, no one had thought to call and advise their new vicar of the situation and he was asleep in the fireside chair in the cottage, completely unaware of the villager's latest tragedy. Then Ernie saw Jane Cobbe, Benjamin's young daughter. "Quickly Jane, run and fetch the new vicar," he called. "Hurry, there's a good girl!"

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Roddy, who was totally unaware of the storm, having drunk almost two bottles of his predecessor's wine in an effort to relieve the misery of his new surroundings, was rudely awakened by someone pounding on his door, and shouting: "Vicar! Vicar!" He had a pounding headache, a miserable pain in his stomach, and a disgusting, gummy, film coating his teeth. "Just a minute," he yelled, but that shout caused a pain to run from his right shoulder, up his neck and stab his brain. He realised he was about to pay the price for overindulgence in the wine, and groaned as he struggled out of the chair where he had spent the whole night. Unfortunately, on his first step in an effort to retain his balance, he knocked a glass of wine off the table, splashing the contents over his breeches and stockings. Cursing, wet, and uncomfortable, he stumbled to the door. A flushed and anxious young girl stood outside. "Come, Vicar. Come right now," she yelled. "You're needed at the landing." She reached through the opening, grabbed his wrist, and tried to drag him through the door into the drizzling rain. Only his other hand's firm grip on the door jamb prevented that from happening.

“What’s the matter? Who are you?” he asked. She ignored his question. “The jetty, come to the jetty. My daddy and the other men are looking for the missing fishermen. They need you now. Hurry! Right now, hurry!” Her voice was impatient, and she gave him another violent tug on his arm. “Let me get my coat,” he said. “What fishermen?” Once he had his coat, she would brook no more delay, but got behind him and pushed him into the street. Moments later they were running through the rain together with every step he took sending a searing pain through his head to add to his misery. He had hated this place from the first moments he had set eyes on it but it seemed that every fresh minute here would build on that misery. He began to wonder if reinstatement in his father’s ‘will’ could ever compensate for all his discomfort.

A crowd was gathered at the jetty, waiting for two boats soon to come alongside. A woman – whom he later discovered to be Archer’s wife, Kathleen – was the first to recognise the limp figure in the bottom of Cobbe’s boat and her hand swiftly flew to her mouth. Mick Drew’s awkward posture, together with the downcast expressions on the faces of the boat’s crew, confirmed her worst fears. Kathleen put an arm around Bessie Drew’s shoulder just as she too, recognised the oilskin clad figure of her son, and began to weep. Gentle hands lifted the young lad onto the jetty and Bessie Drew dropped to her knees beside her son and looked up anxiously at Joshua. The big fisherman responded with a slight shake of his head and some of the women began to weep, whilst others turned away shaking their heads, as though refusing to accept this tragedy. Bessie Drew cradled her son’s head in her lap as she gave a quick, despairing glance into Kathleen’s sad face. Not a word was spoken; Kathleen just gave her friend a gentle squeeze, as they both knelt beside the dead boy and Mrs. Drew’s tears fell uncontrollably, as she tried to clean and dry her son’s face.

The other injured fishermen were now being lifted onto the jetty and one very pregnant and almost hysterical, young lady tried to get to her knees to help her man. Fortunately, there were plenty of caring neighbours to support her. Then Jane’s insistent young voice demanded their attention: “I’ve brought the vicar!” she shouted, causing some of the crowd to turn their attention to Roddy. Then one of the men shouted angrily: “The bastard’s drunk; just look at him: wine-soaked clothing and obviously the worse for drink and looking like he’s spent the night boozing in a gutter. While our men were dying in the storm he sat comfortably in his cottage, getting

drunk. I'll kill the bastard!" He broke from the crowd and quickly clamped his hands around Roddy's throat. Fortunately, the innkeeper was close by and pulled him off, but he was badly shaken.

"Enough of that Bannerman," said the innkeeper. "Have some thought for Bessie. She's the one having the toughest time here today." Several other men looked threatening and anxious to take over where Bannerman had left off. Mrs. Drew lifted her tear stained face to Roddy. "Why? Why did God take my son, Father? He took my husband only two years ago. Mick was all I had left; why did he have to take him too?" Then her manner abruptly changed to anger: "With all the evil people in this world, why did God have to take my son? Mick was a good boy; so tell me: why did God have to take my son?"

Roddy was totally shaken. He had anticipated meeting his parishioners after Sunday's service, in a calm and civilised introduction, but was confronted by them as an angry, grieving mob, who blamed him for their tragedy and were anxious to punish him for that in a most violent and extreme way. It was true that he had been oblivious of the storm and the disaster but he was hardly responsible for it. He dropped on his knees beside his distraught housekeeper. "I'm so terribly sorry, Mrs. Drew," he said. "I honestly knew nothing of this tragedy until moments ago. What can I do to help?" He was well aware of his shameful appearance; it was unforgiveable, especially for a man of his calling, and he felt totally wretched. But his discomfort earned him no sympathy from this devastated gathering. "I'll tell you what happened," screamed his antagonist, Bannerman – but the innkeeper, Ernie, quickly clamped a big hand over the man's mouth. "Give Bessie some peace Jack," Roddy heard him hiss into the man's ear. "We can deal with him later. Right now we can help Bessie most by helping him. She has to be our first concern today."

Bannerman, angrily tore himself free of the big man's grasp, and walked away. "I'm going home," he said, almost choking on his words. Some of the crowd patted him on the shoulder, but he shrugged them off and carried on walking. Roddy was living in a nightmare, dragged from a drunken sleep, and rushed into a situation where people were injured and dying and he was being held responsible for that. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Drew," he repeated, and gently rested a hand on her shoulder. "I knew nothing of this tragedy. Honestly. I'm so terribly sorry. If there is anything I can possibly do to help – anything at all, please tell me."

“Tell your God to give my son’s life back,” she shouted angrily in his face. “That’s what you can do. That’s all I want from you. Tell Him I want my son back. Can you do that? We’ve always done right by the church and your religion and this is the response we get. I’m going home,” she sobbed. “I’m taking my son home.” She rose to one knee, turned her back on him, and tried to lift her son off the ground, but Ernie quickly restrained the grieving woman. “Bessie, let me carry Mick home. We’ll leave the wagon for the other men to take Will and Tim home. I can carry Mick. Better this way.” Bessie nodded tearfully, and the big man picked up the lad as though he were a baby. Bessie stood beside him, holding one of her son’s cold hands. Ernie looked over his shoulder at Roddy. “You’d better come too vicar. I can’t vouch for your safety back here.” Kathleen Archer took Bessie’s free hand and they walked together along the harbour front. He stumbled along behind them like a stray dog hoping for the comfort of a kind word. Ernie’s daughter, Meg, was weeping at the edge of the crowd, and he called to her: “Meg. Please go to the Rookens’s lass and tell Doc Hudson about the injured. You could stay there and help Mrs. Rookens for a while. Tell the doctor that Will and Tim are in a bad way.”

“Alright, Dad,” sobbed Meg, and hurried away.

Gentle hands lifted the injured men onto the wagon and the pregnant lady, obviously the wife of one of those men, was holding her man’s hand as she stood beside the wagon. Just as they were leaving, there was a shout from beyond the jetty. Everyone turned to see a boat, with a broken mast and jury-rigged sail approaching, followed by other search boats. All three men in the damaged boat were safe and waving. “The Carters are all alright,” yelled a man from one of the search boats. Ernie heaved a sigh of relief. “Well, that, at least, is good news. But what the hell am I going to do with this useless fool of a preacher.”

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“Whoa, Meg, hold up, girl!” Doc Hudson raised a hand to stay the teary-eyed Meg. She was half running, head down, and showing no intention of stopping as she tackled the uphill slope to Rookens’s cottage. “What news, young Meg? Who are those tears for? Tell me what’s going on Meg; there’s a good girl.”

“Oh, Doctor.” Meg burst into a fresh fit of sobbing, almost choking on her words: “Mick Drew is dead and Tim Ozmund and Will Tarret are being

taken to their cottages on Mr. Archer's wagon. They are hurt real bad. Dad said I should see if you could be spared from Mr. Rookens's bedside to see to the injured. I'm to stay with the Rookens in case I can help, or run errands." The old doctor's shoulders slumped. "So I can do nothing for young Mick," he said, shaking his head, "Poor Bessie! Who is worst off Meg, Tim or Will? Did your dad say?"

"I believe it's Tim Ozmund, Doctor. No one said who was hurt most, they both looked really bad but I think Mr. Ozmund is the worst off." Doc Hudson patted the girl's copper coloured hair. "Thank you Meg. I shall go to Tim first then. I'm so sorry about young Mick lass. He was a good lad. We'll all miss him. How is his mother?"

"She was terribly upset doctor – really broken up. My dad was carrying Mick to their cottage; Mrs. Archer was with them. Oh, the new vicar too. There was not time to talk. The villagers were mad at the vicar though. They said he was drunk."

"Really! Well, thank you Meg. Please tell Mrs. Rookens I'll be back later; after I've done what I can for the other men. You're a good girl Meg. We're lucky to have you." He turned and walked towards the jetty. It seemed to Meg that he was trying to hurry, but was too tired. Then he turned and called back to her. "Any news of the Carters, Meg?"

"They're safe doctor," she replied. Doc Hudson acknowledged with a wave of his hand, and they continued on their separate ways. Emily Rookens was waiting at the door when Meg arrived and she had to retell her news. Emily sat at the table and began to cry. "It's our fault," she said. "I should've checked on Jamie earlier. They could have all been safe if I'd lit the beacon sooner." Meg put her arm around the distraught woman. "Oh, Mrs. Rookens, it's nobody's fault. No one expected your husband to collapse like that. He's always been strong. No one would have guessed he would fall ill so suddenly. You've got enough troubles of your own, don't borrow more." Emily gave a weary sigh before looking up at Meg. "You're right lass. What's done is done. I've got to look after my own troubles now." She wiped her eyes, put on a resolute expression, straightened her shoulders and walked into the bedroom to be with her husband.

About half an hour later she called excitedly: "Meg! Meg! He's stirring. Come see, lass." Meg hurried to the door. Sure enough, Jamie Rookens was moving his head and looking as though he was rousing from a deep sleep.

“Meg, Doc Hudson left some herbs and things in a bag on the dresser. He said to boil them in a cup of water and let Jamie sip it, when he comes around. Will you do that dear, please – boil the herbs that is – in a cupful of water?” Meg hurried to make the herbal tea. Meantime, Emily continued moistening Jamie’s lips with a cloth soaked in brandy, giving a little squeeze every so often – especially when she saw signs of life from her stricken husband. “Not exactly doctor’s orders,” she muttered. “But it’s got Jamie licking ‘is lips. What works can’t be bad, can it? Signs of life at least.”