

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Joe Forbes' Assumption

Joe Forbes awoke to a Saturday morning that fair dazzled with glorious sunshine. Above him the sky was blue and glistening in the shining light of a northern spring day. He looked up and wondered at the sparkling beauty of it and did not move. It was so beautiful that it made him want to cry (at least, *something* gart him want to greet.) He looked up at it and smiled. It was some time before the thought crept, kinda sidewise like, into the murk of his brain, that where he could see that sublime patch of heaven, there should have been the cracked plaster of his bedroom ceiling.

Now our Joe was not what you would call a man of imagination; he took a long, deep, scientific look at the patch of blue, concluded he was seeing things again, and turned onto his side.

But this time, that didn't help, for instead of the dust-covered bedside table with the alarm clock that had stopped at 3.36 more years ago than he could remember, and the bedroom wall with the fading rose-patterned wallpaper and the plastic crucifix with his long-disused rosary hanging from it, he saw a sheer, blank wall of deep brown earth. He waited till the jangling of bells that his movement had set off inside his cranium subsided, squeezed his eyes up tight shut, held them that way, and then opened them. First the left, and then the right.

But that didn't help either. The wall of earth was still a wall of earth, and the patch of blue, he quickly confirmed, was still a patch of blue and not a lath and plaster ceiling in need of refection.

It occurred to Joe that there was something not quite right here, and he sensed a thing that approximated fear. And then he heard voices, sweet, angel's voices, that descended to him from on high. The cold hand of dread gripped him tighter. So this was it, then. He raised his head. Someone—or something—banged on the top of his skull with the vigour of a Gordon Highlanders Drum Major and it was several minutes before the echoes died down and he could think again.

He understood now. He was in Purgatory (where else did they have pain like that?) and the powers of light and dark were fighting over his soul. Well, okay, so maybe Joe wasn't the brightest spark on the planet, but he sure knew that where he was it was cold and damp and smelled of farts, and up above it was clear and blue and shining and there were magical beings with sweet voices, and he had no trouble working out where *he* would rather be. With a superhuman effort he heaved himself to his elbows, fighting off the hammering in his head and the waves of

nausea, and sat up.

When he opened his eyes, he found that his nose was just above the level of a grassy sward. There were, as he had feared there might be, gravestones all around him. Right in his line of vision and not ten feet away, were the angels. Well, so he presumed, though their attire was not quite what he'd expected. They were acting angelically enough, arranging some wild flowers in a jam-jar atop the neighbouring grave. The suits with bell-bottom trousers and the paisley ties were a surprise, but then Joe (who was rational to the point of the obtuse) figured that they must have some queer-like fashions in heaven, too.

The angels appeared to have no interest in him; they were probably too busy saving the soul of the occupant of the next lair. But pretty soon Joe began to be impatient, for he felt that he had suffered enough to pass through Purgatory onto the next stage of his journey. He decided to attempt communication. Remind the angels that he was there, like. In case they forgot. For a moment he thrashed around the rusty recesses of his aching harns in search of a phrase that might suit, and then he smiled and nodded.

What he tried to say was "Hail Mary, Mother of God." What actually came out is not easy to transcribe, but it married many of the qualities of the bark of a rutting stag with the hoot of the steam whistles of the ferries that had, in his childhood, plied to and fro across the Tay.

It did *not* have the desired result. The two angels spun round, looked at Joe, looked at each other, dropped the jar of flowers, looked at Joe again, opened their eyes wide and their mouths wider, screamed, and fled. Joe, in despair, raised his hands onto the ground, tried to pull himself up, slipped, and fell back. As he blacked out, two thoughts filtered through to him:

The first was "Ach yer jokin, daa tell me the bastart Proddies wis recht efter aa."

And the second was "Y'ken A could sweir A've seen they twa somewey afore."

Nan looked up at the sound of running feet and saw, through her kitchen window, Wullie and Ian belting past at full steam. She narrowed her eyes. She was not at all persuaded by the boys' recent conversion and remained convinced that they were Up Tae Somehing. She went back to her ironing. She was a troubled woman, Nan. Despite all their deliberations, she and the other members of the Hag's Huddle had yet to come up with a sure-fire scheme to get Sye and his cousin together. Worse, since Sye had presented a bin-liner full of salmon to Rae on the Thursday evening, there had been no report that they had even met each other. And had they done so, *everyone* would have known. Nan dearly hoped that this was not going to be another of her son's passing fancies, and you can rest assured that the network was working flat out on the problem.

Agnes was proud of her abilities as a cook. And she had good reason. She was a woman of talent and imagination; who knows to what heights she might have risen anywhere else in the world but Auchpinkie? But it was rare for her to have the opportunity to show off even before her fellow villagers, since their idea of refined cuisine ended at mince and tatties and deep-fried haddock and chips. So, despite the fact that the canny side of her told her that she was a mug and she should charge the buggers for the food, once she had accepted that, in the interests of economy and having a good party, they would eat of the salmon donated by Big Sye, she determined that she would prepare it herself. In any case, she had seen the inside of too many of her neighbours' kitchens to trust anyone else with the task.

She had perhaps not been quite prepared for the scale of the operation, which she had only fully realised when Big Sye had trundled three barrowloads of salmon across the square the evening before and decanted them into a huge mobile troch that was usually used for the dishes. But Agnes was a hardy soul who made a point of never showing the slightest surprise at what the villagers might do, and certainly not of being defeated by them.

She had pored for hours over her thick catering textbooks, noting and adapting recipes and techniques as she went along. One thing she was determined about—this repast was to be one that would be remembered. Smoked salmon paté, salmon mousse, salmon en croute, salmon baked, poached, in pies, in sauces, glazed, moulded, you name it. If salmons could be turned into it, it was there. The pride of place upon the board was to go to an enormous salmon paté, moulded into the shape of a four-foot long salmon, and covered with thinly sliced lemons and a glaze of reduced fish stock. It was so big it had had to be cooked in three parts and then married up later.

Copelands Funeral Directors and Morticians of Brechin had the task of arranging the technical side of the affair. They had picked up Lanky Boab from the mortuary at Arbeg Infirmary on Friday, and they had turned him out proper. One of his suits had been cleaned, and was almost unrecognisable. And Boab himself looked healthier than he had for twenty years, with his cheeks delicately rouged and his lips carefully lipsticked. He was to be delivered to the kirk at Auchpinkie at nine-forty-five so that the mourners could pass and pay their last respects before the service began at ten-thirty, with the burial an hour later. At nine o'clock the driver and his assistant creaked into life, brought the coffin out on its trolley and slid it into the back of the venerable Daimler hearse. The driver swept a speck of dust from the gleaming bonnet with his impeccably white-gloved hand, and they set off.

The Reverend James Jameson was adjusting his robes in his dressing room when he heard the frantic hammering on the front door. "Joan, dear, can you get that?" he called. But Joan was out in the garden and did not hear, so the Reverend sighed, finished dressing and made his way downstairs. The hammering on the door had reached a frantic tattoo, and he flung it open with some ire. There was no one there. "What the...?"

"Please sir, help," came a small voice from below. He looked down. Willie and Ian were kneeling on his doorstep. Their faces, pale with terror, stared up at him.

"What on earth are you doing now?" he demanded, his irritation patent. "I have a service to conduct this morning. Can't this wait?"

"Oh, no, no, yer refference, sirr, it'll no wait ava," squeaked Ian, nodding his head vigorously. "Somehin awfy's jist happened."

"Something—like what? What have you been up to? And please stand up. You're giving me a slipped disc."

"We done like you said yer refference sir, honest we did." said Ian, scrambling to his feet and looking around nervously. "We've been really *guid*. A even mowed ma gran's green like she's been askin me tae. An we've never the eence poked the skale an wiv *even* done wir hame-work." This last was impressive.

"An A pentit the fence i the back green," added Willie. "An then this morn we went ti pit some flooers on his granda's grave an, an,..." He grew even paler and swallowed.

"And what," queried the minister with evident annoyance. "Get on with it, laddie."

"An the Deil hisselt come ti git wis! Jings, A never thocht we wis that bad, yer refference."

"*WHO?* Who did you say came to get you?"

"The Deil! *Ye* ken, yer reference, Auld Nick."

"The Devil? On Monday it was God and now it's the Devil? My word you two are favoured. What on earth do you take me for?"

"Yer a meenister," observed Willie, without the slightest trace of irony. "An it wis Cloots aa recht. A'm shair o hit. In the kirkyerd. We seen him, he come risin up ooty the grun recht afore wis, so he did. He wis, he wis horrible so he wis. He wis aa bleck....."

"Aye, bleck wi soot fae the *Fire*, A dootna," interjected Ian in a voice that shook with portent. "An his hair wis aa staunin up on hits ends an his een...."

"Aye ye wanty see his een, yer reference sir. They wis, they wis hidjus, sae thi wis. They wis brecht reid an they wis stickin ootin his nut like bull's-een."

The Reverend James Jameson shook himself. He knew not whether to laugh or to be furious, and could only stand with his arms folded, his eyes moving from one urchin to the other while they spoke.

"Aye an his lips wis aa bleck an his teeth wis aa yellae an his voice...." Ian rattled on.

"Aw, dinnae, dinnae, it wis— it wis that *scary*. Ken like a, like

a wild beast.”

“Aye an some fowk dae cry him The Beast, daa they, yer refference, sirr? Auld Nick A mean. Izzat how?”

“Enough! That is quite enough!” The minister clapped his hands in exasperation at their relentless clamour. “Do you two really expect me to believe that the Devil himself has manifested *in person* in the Auchpinkie kirkyard at half past nine on a Saturday morning?”

The boys looked at each other, thought about it, and nodded. “Aye, yer refference, sirr. That’s jist exactly hit. We seen him.” Ian made it sound like an everyday occurrence. He nodded and waved his hand in the direction of the kirkyard just to make sure the minister had got the message.

Willie leaned forward and quavered. “Aiblins he’s still there!”

“Well then,” said the minister somewhat drily, looking at his watch. “We have just enough time to go and see if he is indeed still in residence in my kirkyard before the service begins. Shall we go?”

“Aw, naw,” wailed the boys in unison. “Ye *canna*...!”

“Oh yes but oh! We are going to sort this nonsense out right now. And what better way than to beard the Devil in his very lair.” The Reverend Jameson chuckled at his own witticism. He was rather prone to doing so, although Joan thought it impolite. She herself came sauntering around the side of the house at that moment, and he called out, “I’m going to the church now dear. To attend to a little something. I’ll see you along there a little later, shall I?”

Nan looked up from her ironing again. There was the minister, with a hand firmly grasping the respective collars of Willie and Ian, making full speed the other way with his black gown flowing resplendently from his shoulders. She clucked her tongue. Disapprovingly. All this cerry on afore a funeral.

The Reverend Jameson approached the open grave, literally dragging the boys by their scruffs. His own heart, despite himself, knew a frisson of fear. His hapless captives both had their eyes screwed up tight and they were whimpering like kittens and their hands were so tightly clasped in supplication that the knuckles were white. The minister noted the broken glass jar and the strewn flowers and nodded grimly. That much, at least, was true. His pace slowed as he made the last few steps. He peered into the grave and let out a gasp of surprise, and at the same time let go of the collars. But the boys were by now far too terrified to run. They screwed their eyes tighter shut and prayed as many prayers as they could remember. Then they heard the minister laugh.

Willie cracked an eye just open and looked around through the filter of his eyelashes. He could not see into the grave, but he could see that the minister was apparently in paroxysms of mirth.

“He’s gone sterk ravin gyte at the very secht,” thought Willie in awe, shutting his eye hurriedly. “A kent he should niver hiv keekit doon thir.” He squeezed up his eyes ferociously, lest Cloutie should try to prise them open by main force.

And then the boys heard the minister say, when he had recovered himself, “Forbes? Is that you? Forbes? Are you all right? Forbes! *Forbes!* Wake up, man. I say, your resemblance to the Devil had never struck me before. But now it’s been pointed out, well, heh, heh, you know, you make rather a fine devil. Forbes! Wake up! Forbes!”

“A didna ken the Deil wis cried *Forbes*,” gasped Ian, too amazed to remain silent.

“Wheesht!” snarled Wullie out of the corner of his mouth. “D’ye want ti get us roastit an aa?”

Joe had had a large black void since his last conscious thought. And now he heard his summons and remembered where he was. A great smile spread across his face as he realised that his name was being called from above and he opened his eyes to take in the glory. The first thing he saw was the imposing figure of the Reverend James Jameson blotting out the sky above him, his black robes flapping gently in the breeze. The smile froze and he had another thought. From which he deduced, in passing, that he was no longer unconscious.

“Ach, bluidy hell,” went this thought, “Is that no jist typical o the bastart Proddies? No enuch ti ken they wis recht, like, luik fa they’ve pit on the welcomin comattee. Yon drivellin Embro git. At’s really rubbin yer neb in it til ye.”

And then another thought forced its way into his thumping head. It occurred to him that he had no recollection of the minister’s death; so how was it that he had got to heaven in advance? As a matter of fact, he distinctly remembered speaking to the man only..... When he started digging..... Digging the grave for Lanky Boab..... Joe made his eyes scan his limited field of view, not without suffering. There was a shovel, just on the edge of vision, stuck in what appeared to be (from his perspective) an upside down heap of earth, with a jacket that bore a strong resemblance to his own hanging on it. There was something shiny sticking out of the pocket, something that seemed strangely familiar. He took a few moments to assimilate this, and then looked up again. The minister appeared to be reaching a hand down to him. Joe decided that Proddie or no, this was not the time to spurn a helping hand, and he reached up his own. There was a peal of thunder and a flash of lightning inside his aching head. But he did not let go his grip, and, with much suffering, dragged himself to the edge of the hole, which was only about three feet deep. Slowly, and with a good deal of help from the minister, he levered himself into a sitting position on the grass with his legs still hanging over the side.

There he remained, in silence, allowing the sun to penetrate

the chill of the grave, until the pounding subsided. Then he turned and examined the shiny object in his jacket pocket.

It was an empty forty-ounce bottle of *Hundred Pipers*.

“Ah, Holy Mother, dis this mean A’m no deid efter aa?” Joe groaned and dropped the bottle. “Here’n wis A no jist gettin ti hink it mecht be a no bed idear?”

He squinted up through the sunshine that hurt his eyes. The angels were back, he noted, but they had been transmogrified into those little buggers Wullie Swankie and Ian Teviotdale, both standing stock-still with their eyes shut and their hands clasped in attitudes of prayer. Joe realised, dimly, that his saviour was trying to communicate with him. He turned his bloodshot gaze to the man, with an expression of piteous suffering upon his phizog. He could see the minister’s lips moving and he could hear the voice, but the words could have been in Icelandic for all the sense Joe’s thundering head could make of them. He lifted one cheek and farted noisily.

“Oooh, it’s really too much!” exploded the minister, driven to excess by this latest assault upon his dignity. “Forbes, I have to bury a man in that hole in two hours, and it’s not half dug yet!” He regarded Wullie and Ian venomously. “Will you two kindly open your eyes at *once*,” he snapped. “And for pity’s sake *stop praying*.”

There was such a tone of adult authority in his voice that the boys, contrary to their habit, did exactly as they were told. Both dropped their jaws in amazement at the sight of Joe Forbes sitting at the edge of the grave, shaking his head slowly from side to side and wondering if he was really going to die, and if it would not be in any case a preferable alternative to his present condition. For once in their lives they were too confounded to think of anything to say.

“You two,” said the minister in a weary voice, “Go down to the Hotel and ask Agnes for two pails of cold water. I think our man Joseph here needs to freshen up.”