

# **The Scroll**

**Bibliomysteries**

**by Anne Perry, 1932-**

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The early winter evening was drawing in. In the antiquarian bookshop well away from the High Street in Cambridge, Monty Danforth sat in his room at the back, working on unpacking and cataloguing the books and papers from the last crate of the Greville Estate. Most of it was exactly what he would have expected: the entire

works of Dickens and Thackeray, Walter Scott and Jane Austin, all in leather-bound editions; many of the Russian novelists, similarly bound; Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Churchill's *History of the English Speaking People*. There were also the usual reference books and encyclopaedias, and some rather more interesting and unusual memoirs and books on travel, especially around the Mediterranean. He did not think much of it would re-sell easily, and it would take rather a lot of space to store it.

The owner of the shop, Roger Williams, was not well and staying at his house further north east, towards the wide, flat fen country. He might decide to auction the whole shipment off in one job lot.

Monty peered into the bottom of the crate to make sure he had everything out of it. There was something rather like an old biscuit drum on one side. He reached in and picked it up. It was too heavy to be empty. He pried the lid off and looked inside. There was definitely something there, but it was hard to make it out.

He took it over to the light and flicked on the switch. A yellow glow filled the room, leaving the corners even more shadowed. There was what looked like an old scroll inside the tin. He teased it out gently and put it on the table right under the light bulb. He unrolled it an inch or two at a time, and stared. There was writing on it, patchy, faded, in several places illegible. He tried to make out words, but it was very definitely not English, even of the very oldest sort. The letters were more like the little he had seen of Hebrew.

He touched the texture of it experimentally with his finger tips. It was soft, smooth and had not the dry fragile feeling of paper, more like vellum. There were several blanks on it, and other places where the words were half-obsured by smudges, or erased altogether.

According to what he had been told, the Greville family had travelled extensively in the Middle East in the nineteenth century and early twentieth. They could have found this scroll anywhere: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Jordan, or what was now Israel.

Just in case it really did have some value, he should photocopy it. That could be useful to get a translation, without sending the original.

He stood up and took it over to the machine. He pressed the switch and it came to life. Very carefully he unrolled the first half of the scroll and laid it on the glass, then closed the lid. He pressed it for one copy. The paper rolled out onto the tray.

He picked it up to check it for clarity. It was blank, apart from a couple of smudges.

That was silly. He tried again, with the same result. He checked the ink, the paper, the settings, and tried a third time. Still nothing.

He took the scroll out and tried it with an old letter from a customer.

Perfect, every detail beautifully clear. It was not the machine. Just as well that, as always, he had his mobile phone with him; the camera in it was really rather good. Digital, of course, and you could check immediately on the result, and print it off on the computer later, if you wished.

He took a photograph of a customer's letter, then looked at it on the screen. It was perfect. Taking two books to hold down the ends and keep the scroll flat, he took the photograph. In the viewfinder it was perfect also, every line and smudge was there. He clicked the exposure once, twice, three times, taking the whole

length. Then he looked at it. The first exposure was blank, so was the second, and the third. The vellum was clear, even to the shadows it cast on the table where the edges were torn or curled, but there was no writing on it whatsoever.

Monty blinked and rubbed his eyes. How was it possible? What had he done wrong?

He was still staring at it when he heard the shop's bell ring. It startled him, although he thought the moment after that it was not extraordinary for a lover of rare books or prints to call after hours. Sometimes it was convenient for someone who could not leave their work during the day. Quite often it was the desire to examine in privacy whatever it was that interested them. But they made appointments. Was there someone coming whom he had forgotten?

The bell rang again. He put the scroll back in the tin out of sight, then he went to the door and looked out through the glass. On the step was an old man, stooped, grey-haired, his face lined by time and from the look of him, perhaps also grief. Beside him was a child of perhaps eight years old. Her face was fair-skinned, blemishless, her hair soft and with the lamplight on it, its gold looked almost like a halo. She was staring straight back at Monty through the glass.

He opened the door. "Good evening. May I help you?" he asked.

The child gave him a shy smile and moved closer to the old man, presumably her grandfather.

"Good evening, sir," the old man replied. "My name is Judson Garrett. I am a collector of rare books and manuscripts. I believe you have just come into possession of the books from the Greville estate? Am I in the right place?"

"Yes, indeed," Monty answered. "But we've only just got it. It's not catalogued yet and so we can't put a price on it. The books are in very good condition. In fact, honestly, I'd say a good many of them haven't even been read."

Garrett smiled and his dark eyes were full of sadness. "It is the case with too many books, I fear. Old leather, fine paper are all very well, but it is the words that matter. They are the wealth of the mind and the heart."

Monty stepped back, holding the door open. "Come in, and we can discuss the possibilities."

"Thank you," Garrett accepted, stepping in, closely followed by the child.

Monty closed the door behind them and led the way to Roger Williams' office where matters of business were discussed. He turned the light on, making the bookshelves and the easy chairs leap to a warmth and inviting comfort.

"Please sit down, Mr. Garrett. If you give me your particulars, I'll pass them on to Mr. Williams, the owner, and as soon as we know exactly what we have, we can discuss prices."

The old man did not sit. He remained just inside the door, his face still cast in shadows, the little girl at his side, her hand holding his. There was a weariness in his face as if he had travelled too far and found no rest.

"There is only one item I'm interested in," he said quietly. "The rest does not concern me and you may do with it as you wish."

"Really?" Monty was surprised. He had seen nothing of more than slight worth. "What is the item?"

The old man's eyes seemed to look far away, as if he could see an infinite distance, into another realm, perhaps into a past beyond Monty's imagination. "A

scroll,” he replied. “Very old. It may be wrapped in some kind of protection. It is written in Aramaic.”

Monty felt a chill run through him as if he had been physically touched by something ice-cold. The child was staring at him. She had clear, sky-blue eyes and she seemed hardly to blink.

Monty’s first instinct was to deny having found the scroll, but he knew that the old man was already aware of it. It would be ridiculous to lie, perhaps even dangerous. He drew in a deep breath.

“I don’t have the authority to sell the scroll, Mr. Garrett, but I will pass on your interest to Mr. Williams as soon as he comes back. If you leave a contact number or address with me, perhaps an email?”

“I shall return, Mr. Danforth,” the old man replied. “Please do not consider selling it to anyone else before you give me an opportunity to bid.” His eyes on Monty’s were steady and so dark as to be almost black. His expression was unreadable.

The child tugged on his hand and her small fingers seemed to tighten on his even further.

“The scroll is of great value,” the old man continued. “I hope you appreciate that?”

“No one else is aware of it yet,” Monty assured him. “It isn’t actually listed in the papers, and I only discovered it... maybe half an hour ago. May I ask how you heard it was there?”

The very faintest of smiles flickered on the old man’s face, and vanished again before Monty was sure whether it was amusement or something more like regret. “Many people know it is here,” he said very quietly. “They will come and offer you many things for it... money, but other things as well. Be very careful what you do with it, Mr. Danforth... very careful indeed. There is power in it you would be wise to leave.”

Again Monty felt the coldness brush by him again, touching him to the bone.

“What is it?” he said huskily.

The old man drew in his breath as if to answer him. The child tugged at his hand again, and he sighed and changed his mind. He looked steadily at Monty, and there was long experience and a knowledge of evil and of pain in his eyes.

“Be careful, Mr. Danforth. It is a dangerous responsibility you are about to take upon yourself. Perhaps you have no other honourable choice. That I understand. But it is a heavy weight. There is destruction and delusion in what you are about to pick up. Do nothing without great thought.”

Monty found himself gulping, swallowing as if there were something in his throat. “How do I contact you, Mr. Garrett?”

“You do not need to. I shall come back.” He shook the child’s hand off him impatiently and turned towards the door, pushing it open.

Monty followed him to the street entrance. He opened it and the old man walked through, the child on his heels. The street beyond was shadowed, the nearest lamp was apparently broken. When Monty looked again there was no one there.

Monty locked the door this time, not just the latch but the deadbolt as well, and went back to his room. He opened the tin again and took out the scroll. The vellum

was soft to his fingers, almost warm. Was it as ancient as the old man had said? Aramaic? Perhaps from the time of Christ?

If that were so, then it could be any of a number of things, real or imagined. How did it come to be in the Greville estate? In their travels could they have found something like the Dead Sea Scrolls?

It was far more likely that they had been sold a fake. How difficult was it to make something of that nature? Or even to find an old scroll which might have been nothing more interesting than instructions to build a house, or lists of a cargo shipped from one port to another? Business writings abounded, just as domestic pottery far outweighed vases for ornament or the worship of gods.

He unrolled it on the table and weighed down both ends, putting it directly under the light. It was not very long, perhaps a thousand words or a little more. That was a lot for a cargo list, and there were no drawings or diagrams on it, so any kind of a plan seemed unlikely.

He peered at it, looking for patterns, repetitions, anything that would give him a clue as to what it was. It was the Hebrew alphabet, which he was vaguely familiar with, but Garrett had said it was Aramaic.

He really had very little idea of what he was doing, and no chance at all of actually reading it, yet he found it almost impossible to look away. Was this some passionate cry of the soul from the tumultuous times of Christ? An account of power and sacrifice, of agony and resurrection?

Or was it simply somebody's laundry list which had chanced to survive, principally because nobody cared enough to steal it?

Monty's imagination created pictures in his mind, men in long robes, sandals, dusty roads, whispers in the dark, blood and pain.

The light flickered and the shadows in the corners of the room moved, wavering and then righting themselves again. He half-expected someone to materialize out of the air, the darkness to come together, intensify and take form. Who could it be? Mephistopheles—to tempt an all too fragile Faust? With what? Forbidden knowledge?

"Don't be so damn silly!" he said aloud. "It's a power brown out! All you need to do is make sure your computer's backed up!" He had always had a weird imagination, a sensitivity to the presence of evil. He told the most excellent ghost stories to the great entertainment of his friends. He was known for it, even loved. People liked to be given a frisson of fear, just enough to get the adrenalin going.

His best friend, Hank Savage, a pragmatic scientist, teased him about it, although even he conceded that evil was real, just not supernatural. No angels, no devils, just human beings, some with rather too much excitability and a tendency to blame others for their own faults. Who easier to blame than the devil?

Monty picked up the scroll and rolled it tight, the vellum soft under his fingertips. Perhaps it was not all that old after all. It certainly wasn't dried up or likely to crack. He put it back in the tin, and then placed the whole thing in the safe, just as a precaution.

It was time he went home and had some supper, and a nice, prosaic cup of tea, or two, strong and with sugar.

The following morning was Saturday and his presence was not necessary at the bookshop. The rest of the Greville estate could wait until Monday. Monty really

needed to see Hank Savage and ask his opinion. It would be perfectly sane and logical. There would be no emotional silliness in it, no heightened imagination.

He found Hank pottering in his studio at the back of his lodgings. It was a large attic room with excellent light where Hank enjoyed his hobby of cleaning up and framing old drawings and prints which he bought, often as job lots at auctions. He made a certain amount of money at it, which he gave away. His purpose was the relaxation he gained, and the triumph now and then of finding something really lovely.

He put down the blade with which he was cutting matt for a drawing and regarding Monty with wry affection.

"You look like hell, Monty. What's happened?" he asked cheerfully. Clearly Monty looked worse than his restless night justified.

"Came across an old scroll," Monty answered, sitting sideways on the edge of a pair of steps piled with papers. Hank was a scientist and his mind was exquisitely ordered. His rooms were correspondingly chaotic.

"How old?" Hank was irritatingly literal. He was tall, rather too thin, with dark hair and mild blue eyes. Monty had brown eyes, and to put it in his own words, not tall enough for his weight.

"I don't know. It's in Aramaic, I think, and I can't read it." Monty was highly satisfied with the sharp interest in Hank's face. "It's on vellum," he added for good measure. "I found it in a biscuit tube at the bottom of the last crate of books from the Greville estate."

"What is it listed as?" Hank asked, abandoning the framing altogether and giving Monty his entire attention.

"It isn't listed at all. I tried to photocopy it. Nothing came out."

"Maybe your printer's broken? I don't suppose it would be a very good idea to take it anywhere else, if it really is as old as you think. Photograph it, until you get someone in to fix the copier," Hank replied.

"I tried to photograph it. It didn't come out." Monty remembered the strange chill he had felt at the time. "And before you suggest it, there's nothing wrong with my camera. Or with the copier either, actually. They both work fine on anything else."

Hank frowned. "So what's your explanation? Other than gremlins?"

"I don't have one. But within half an hour or so of my finding the thing, the oddest old man turned up, with his granddaughter aged about eight, and offered to buy it."

"How much?" Hank asked dubiously. "You didn't sell it, I trust?"

"No, of course I didn't!" Monty said tartly. "I hid it before I even let them in. But you didn't ask the obvious question!"

"Who was he?"

"No! How did he know what it was and that I had it?" Monty said with satisfaction. "I didn't tell anyone and I certainly didn't show anyone."

"Didn't Roger know?" Hank was now both puzzled and very curious.

"Roger wasn't there. He's away sick. Has been for several days."

"Well what did this old man say?"

"His name is Judson Garrett, and he wouldn't leave any address or contact. He just said not to sell it to anyone else, and that it could be very dangerous."

Hank's eyebrows rose. "A threat?"

"Actually it sounded rather more like a warning," Monty admitted, remembering the old man's face and the power of darkness and pain in it.

"Did he say why he wanted it?" Hank was still turning it over in his mind.

"No. But he said others would come after it, but he didn't give any idea who they would be."

"Did you look at this scroll, Monty?"

"Of course I did!" He took a breath. "Do you want to see it?"

"Yes, if you don't mind, I really do." There was no hesitation in Hank's voice, no fear, none of the apprehension that Monty felt. There were times when Hank's total sanity irritated him intensely, but now it was comforting, even a kind of safety from the shadows in his own mind.

At the bookshop Monty opened the safe and took out the biscuit drum. The scroll was exactly as he had placed it. It felt the same to the touch as he pulled it out, dry and slightly warm. He unrolled it on the table for Hank to examine.

Hank looked at it for a long time before finally speaking.

"I think it's Aramaic, alright, and from the few words I can recognize here and there, it seems to be during the Roman occupation of Jerusalem. It could be the time of Christ. I see quite a lot of first person grammar, so it might be someone's own account of what they did, or saw ... a kind of diary. But I don't know enough to be certain. You need an expert on this, Monty, not only to translate it but to date it and authenticate it. But before you do any of that, you must call Roger and tell him what you have. Have you tried again to get a copy?"

"No. Use your phone if you like," Monty suggested. "See if it's any better. You're pretty good technically."

Hank gave him a quick glance, sensing the difference between 'technically' and 'artistically'. But he did not argue. He took his cell phone out of his pocket, adjusted the settings, looked through the view finder and took three separate photographs. He went back to the first one to look at it, frowned, turned to the second, then the third. He looked up at Monty.

Monty felt the chill creep over his skin.

"Nothing," Hank said quietly. "Blank."

"I'll call Roger," Monty grasped for the only useful thing he could do. He picked up the telephone and dialled Roger Williams' number. He let it ring fifteen times. There was no answer.

He tried again the following day, and again Roger did not pick up. Monty was busy cataloguing the rest of the books from the Greville estate when he became aware of someone standing in the doorway watching him. He was round-faced, broad-browed and smiling benignly, but there was a gravity in his dark eyes, and a very definite knowledge of his own importance in his posture. He was dressed in a clergyman's cassock and he had a purple vestment below his high, white collar.

Monty scrambled to his feet. "I'm sorry, sir," he apologized awkwardly. "I didn't hear you come in. Can I help you?"

The man smiled even more widely. "I'm sure you can, Mr. Danforth."

Monty felt a sudden stab of alarm like a prickle on his skin, a warning of danger. This prince of the church knew his name, just as the old man of the previous evening had done. He had not questioned it at the time, but he did now.

It was Roger's name on the door and on the company letterhead. Monty's name appeared nowhere. And why had they not assumed he was Roger? Wouldn't that be the natural thing to do?

"You have me at a disadvantage, Your Grace," he said rather crisply. "I am quite sure I would remember if we had met."

The man smiled again. "I'm sure you would. And yet you greeted me correctly, and with courtesy. There is no need as yet for us to go beyond that. I imagine you also know why I am here. You are not only knowledgeable on books of all types, Mr. Danforth, and an intelligent man, you are also, I believe, unusually sensitive to the power of evil, and also of good."

Monty was flattered, and then frightened. He was an excellent raconteur and could tell ghost stories which held his audience of friends spellbound... for an evening's entertainment and fellowship. That was hardly something to spread beyond his own circle, which did not include bishops of any faith, Catholic or Protestant. His friends were largely academics like Hank, or else students and artists of one sort or another.

The bishop continued to smile. "You have in your possession at the moment a very unusual piece of ancient manuscript," he continued. "It is part of an estate, and you will in due course offer it for sale, along with the rest of the books, which are insignificant in comparison. No doubt they are in good condition, but editions of them can be obtained in any decent bookshop. The scroll is unique. But then you know that already." His eyes never moved from Monty's face.

Monty was colder, as if someone had opened a door onto the night. Any idea of denying his knowledge melted away. He had to swallow a couple of times before he could speak, and even then his voice sounded a little high-pitched.

"Something as unusual as the scroll will have to wait for Mr. Williams." It sounded like an excuse, even though it was perfectly true. "I imagine you would like it verified as well. It looks old, but no expert has examined it yet, so I have no idea of price. Actually, we don't even know what it is."

The bishop's smile did not waver, but his eyes were sharp and cold. "It is an ancient and very evil document, Mr. Danforth. If it were to pass into the wrong hands and become known to others the damage it could do would be measureless. I assure you, whatever price an expert might put on it, should you take the path of demanding that price, the Church will meet it. We would hope, as a man of principle and goodwill, you would settle for its value in the market place for scrolls of its date and origin."

Monty's hands were stiff, his arms covered in goosebumps. The bishop's figure seemed to float in the air, to become darker, and then lighter, the edges to blur. This was ridiculous! He blinked and shook his head, then looked again, and everything was normal. An elderly bishop, perfectly solid and human, was standing near the door, still smiling at him, still watching him.

Monty gulped. "The price doesn't lie within my control, Your Grace, but I imagine Mr. Williams will be fair. I have never known him not to be otherwise."

"Do not put it up for auction, Mr. Danforth," the bishop said gravely, the pleasantness disappeared from his expression as completely as a cloud passing across the sun robbed the land beneath of light. "It would be a very dangerous



mistake, the extent of which I think might well be beyond your imagination, fertile as that is.”

“I shall pass on your message to Mr. Williams,” Monty promised, but his voice lacked the firmness he wished.

“Something suggests to me, Mr. Danforth, that I am not the only person to approach you on this subject,” the bishop observed. “I urge you, with all the power at my disposal, not to sell this scroll elsewhere, no matter what inducement might be offered you to do so.”

Now Monty was annoyed. “You say *inducement*, Your Grace, as if I had been offered bribes. That is not so, and I do not care for your implication. That might be the case with people you usually deal with, but it is not so with this bookshop. Bribery does not work, and neither do threats.” The moment the words were out of his mouth fear seized him so tightly he found himself shaking.

“Not threats, Mr. Danforth,” the bishop said in barely more than a whisper. “A warning. You are dealing with powers so ancient you cannot conceive their beginning, and in your most hideous nightmare you cannot think of their end. You are not a fool. Do not, in your ignorance and hubris, behave like one.” Then without adding any more, or explaining himself, he turned and went out of the door. His feet made no sound whatever on the floorboards beyond, nor did the street door click shut behind him.

Monty did not move; in fact, he could not. His imagination soared over one thing after another and he seemed at once hot and cold. Clearly in the bishop’s mind the scroll had an even more immense power than Monty had already seen in his own inability to copy it by any mechanical means. Who had written it and when? Was it ancient, or a more modern hoax? Obviously it held some terrible secret, almost certainly to do with the Church. To do with greed? The Catholic Church at least had treasures beyond imagining. Or was it personal sin, or mass abuse of the type only too well known already, but involving someone of extraordinary importance? Bribery, violence, even murder? Or some challenge to a doctrine people dared not argue or question?

The possibilities raged through his mind and every one of them was frightening.

At last he stood up, a little wobbly at first, his limbs too long cramped, went over to the telephone, and tried to get Roger Williams again. He let it ring twenty times. There was no answer. He hung up, and called instead the young man who looked after opening the shop in Roger’s absence and told him that he would not be in the next day.

Monty drove to the village where Williams had his house. The countryside was silent in the morning sun, untroubled by rush hour traffic. He passed through gentle fields, mostly flat land. Much of it was agricultural; here and there sheep grazed, heads down.

He was turning over in his mind exactly how to explain to Roger the sense of evil he had felt from both the old man, and then perhaps even more from the bishop who had seemed at once benign and dangerous. Or was it Monty’s own imagination that was at the heart of it, coupled with his technical incompetence in not being able to copy the scroll?

But Hank couldn’t copy it either. Hank was absent-minded at times, and he had a dry and odd sense of humour, but he was never incompetent.

He glanced up at a field of crops, and saw beyond it a sight that made his heart lurch. The rich, dark earth was littered with human skulls—thousands of them, as if a great army had been slaughtered and their corpses left in the open to rot as a perpetual reminder of death.

His hands slipped on the steering wheel and the car careered over the road, slewed to one side and finished up on the verge, only a foot from the drainage ditch. Another fourteen inches and he would have broken the axle. He drew in gasps of breath. His whole body was shaking and he was drenched with sweat.

Then he steeled himself to look at the field again. He saw white sheep turnips in the mud and weeds, their skull-like surfaces mounded above the soil.

What on earth had he seen for that awful moment? A vision of Armageddon?

He put the car back into gear and backed out very slowly, then sat, still shaking, until he could compose himself and drive the last mile or so to Roger's house. He pulled in the drive and stopped. Stiffly he climbed out of the car, still a little shaky, and went to the front door. He rang the bell and there was no answer. Normally he might have waited, perhaps gone to the pub for a coffee or a beer, and returned later. But today it was too urgent. He tried the door and found it unlocked.

Inside the hall there was a harsh smell of smoke, as if Roger had burned a pan, or even a whole meal.

"Roger!" he called at the foot of the stairs.

There was no answer, and he went up, beginning to fear that perhaps Roger was more seriously ill than he had supposed. He knocked on the bedroom door and when there was still no answer, he pushed it open.

He stepped back, gasping, hand over his mouth. Now the silence was hideously plain. What was left of Roger's body lay stiff and black on the remains of the bed, charred mattress, blackened carpet beneath it. The whole room was stained with smuts and soot as if some brief but terrible fire had raged here, consuming all in its path, and then gone out.

Monty fumbled his way back down the stairs to the telephone and called the police.

They came from the nearest small town, taking only twenty minutes to get there. They asked Monty to wait.

It was nearly two hours before a grim-faced sergeant from the county town told him that they believed it had been arson, quick and lethal. They asked him a great many more questions, including some about the bookshop, Roger's personal life, and also to account very precisely for his own whereabouts all the previous day. To his great relief he was able to do so.

Then with their permission he drove back to Cambridge and went to see Roger's solicitor, both to inform him of Roger's death, and to ask for instructions regarding the bookshop, for the time being. He was stunned, grieved and too generally disconcerted even to think about his own future.

"I'm afraid it falls on you, Mr. Danforth," Mr. Ingles told him gravely. "The only family Mr. Williams had is a niece in Australia. I can try to get in touch with her, but I already know from Mr. Williams that the young woman is something of an explorer, and it could be a period of time before we can obtain any instructions from her. In the meantime you are named as Mr. Williams' successor in the

running of the business. Did he not inform you of that?" He shook his head. "I'm sorry—by the look on your face, clearly he did not. I do apologize. However there is nothing I can do about it now."

Monty was appalled. The scroll! He couldn't possibly make the decision on the sale of that!

"When can you find this woman?" he said desperately. "How long? Can't the Australian police or somebody get in touch with her? Doesn't she have responsibilities? A telephone? An email address? Something!"

"I dare say we will find her within a few weeks, Mr. Danforth," the solicitor said soothingly. "Until then, I advise that you just run the business as usual."

Monty felt as if one by one the walls were falling down and leaving him exposed to the elements of violence and darkness and there was no protection left.

"You don't understand!" He could hear the hysteria rising in his voice but he could not control it. "I have an ancient scroll in the last shipment, and two people are wanting it. I have no idea what it's worth, or which one to sell it to!"

"Can't you get an expert to value it?" Inglis said, his silver eyebrows raised rather high.

"No, I can't, not if it's worth what the two bidders so far are implying. I don't know what it is... it's..."

"You're upset, Mr. Danforth," Ingles said soothingly. "Roger's death has distressed you, very naturally. I'm sure when you've had a day or two to think about it, or a good night's sleep at least, you'll know what to do. Roger had a very high opinion of you, you know."

At any other time Monty would have been delighted to hear that; right now it was only making things worse. He could see in Ingles' face that already he was thinking of Monty as incompetent and possibly wondering why on earth Roger had thought well of him.

"The Church wants it," he said aloud.

"Then sell it to them, at whatever price an impartial assessor considers to be fair," Inglis replied, rising to his feet.

How could Monty explain the power the old man had exerted, the extraordinary emotions in his face that Monty could not ignore. Put into words it sounded absurd.

"I'll get an assessment," was all he could think of to say.

Ingles smiled. "Good. I'll wait to hear from you."

Monty did not get home until late, and the following day was taken up with matters of business at the shop. There was a great deal of paperwork to be attended to, access to bank accounts, dry but very necessary details.

In the evening Monty went to his favourite pub to have supper in familiar and happy surroundings. He had called Hank to join him, but Hank had not yet returned home and was not answering his mobile, so Monty was obliged to eat alone.

He had a supper that should have been delicious: freshly cooked cold pork pie with sharp, sweet little tomatoes, then homemade pickle with Caerphilly cheese on oatcakes, and a glass of cider. He barely tasted it.

The setting sun was laying a patina of gold over the river bank and the trees were barely moving in the faint breath of wind beyond the wide glass windows.

Monty was looking towards the west when he saw the man walking across the grass towards him, up from the riverside path. He seemed to have the light behind him as if he had a halo, a sort of glow to his very being.

To Monty's surprise the man came in through the door and across the room straight towards him, as if they knew each other. He stopped beside Monty's table.

"May I join you, Mr. Danforth?" he said quietly. "We have much to talk about." Without waiting for the reply, he pulled out the second chair and sat down. "I do not need anything to eat, thank you," he went on, as if Monty had offered him something.

"I have nothing to talk about with you, sir," Monty said a little irritably. "We are not acquainted. I have had a very long day. One of my close friends has just died tragically. I would prefer to finish my dinner alone, if you please." He was aware of sounding rude, but he really did not care.

"Ah, yes," the man said sadly. "The death of poor Mr. Williams. Yet another victim of the powers of darkness."

"He was burned to death," Monty said with sudden anger and a very real and biting pain at the thought. "Fire is hardly a weapon of darkness!"

The man was handsome, his face highbrowed, his eyes wide and blue, filled with intelligence. "I was speaking of the darkness of the mind, Mr. Danforth, not of the flesh. And fire has been one of its weapons since the beginning. We imagine it destroys evil, somehow cleanses. We have burned wise women and healers in the superstitious terror that they were witches. We have burned heretics because they dared to question our beliefs. We have burned books because the knowledge or the opinions in them frightened us and we did not wish them to spread. And pardon me for bringing it back to your mind, but you have seen the results of fire very recently. Did you find it cleansing?"

In spite of himself Monty's mind was filled with the stench of burning and the sight of Roger's charred and blackened body on what was left of the bed. It made him feel sick, as though the food he had just eaten were revolting.

"Who are you and what do you want?" he said harshly.

"I am a scholar," the man replied. "I am someone who could add to the world's knowledge, without judgment as to who should know what, and who should be permitted to conceal truth because they do not agree with it, or have decided that this person or that one could find it difficult or uncomfortable. I would force no one, but allow everyone."

"What do you think is in it?" Monty asked curiously.

"A unique testimony from the time of Christ," the scholar replied. "One that may verify our beliefs—or blow them all apart. It will be a new truth—or a very old one."

Monty already knew what he was going to say, but he asked anyhow.

"And why do you approach me at a time of grief and interrupt my supper?"

"Actually you have finished your supper," the man indicated Monty's empty plate with a smile on his finely sculpted face. "But I find it hard to believe that you do not already know why I have come. I wish to buy from you the scroll, at whatever price you believe to be fair. I would ask you to give it to the world, if I thought that would prevail upon you, but I know that you have some responsibility to the estate of which it is presently a part. And please do not tell me

that it is not within your power. With Mr. Williams' most unfortunate death, it is more than within it, it is your obligation."

Monty felt the sweat break out on his brow in spite of the closing in of the evening, now that the sun had definitely faded.

"You are not the only person seeking to buy it," he answered.

"Of course not," the scholar agreed with amusement. "If I were, I would begin to doubt its authenticity. The Church, at the very least, will bid high for it. But surely money is not your only consideration? That would disappoint me very much, Mr. Danforth. I had thought far more highly of you than that."

"I have not yet been able to get anyone in to verify what it is," Monty prevaricated. "It is impossible to put a price on it."

"When you have verified it, it will still be impossible," the scholar responded. "But you are being disingenuous. I think you have at least an educated guess as to what you have. And I assure you it is what you believe it to be."

"I have no beliefs as to what it is," Monty insisted angrily.

The scholar's face was filled with awe, his eyes almost luminous in the waning light. "It is the lost testament of Judas Iscariot," he said so quietly his voice was barely audible. "We have known of its existence for centuries. It has been hunted by all manner of people, each with his own reasons either to hide it or to make it known."

So it was true. Monty sat on the familiar river bank in the English twilight and thought of Jerusalem two thousand years ago, of betrayal and sacrifice, of blood, pain, ordinary human feet trudging in the dust on a journey into immortality. He thought of faith, and grief, and human love.

"Is it?" he asked.

"I think you know that, Monty," the scholar answered. "It must be given to the world. Mankind has a right to know what is in it—a different story, or the one we all expect. And in simple morality, does not the accused have a right to testify?"

The thought whirled in Monty's head, and he found no words on his tongue. The enormity of it was too great. Little wonder he could not photocopy it!

The scholar leaned across the table closer to him. "You would be a benefactor to justice, Monty," he said, unable to keep the urgency out of his voice. "An honest man, a true scholar who sought the truth above all emotional or financial interest, a man of unsoiled honesty."

For a moment Monty was overwhelmed by temptation. He drew in his breath, and then he remembered the old man with his granddaughter, and the promise he had made him. Why did he want it? He was the only one who had given no reason. He remembered again the knowledge of time and pain in his eyes.

"I will consider it," he said to the scholar in front of him. "If you leave me an address I will be in touch with you. Now please leave me to have another glass of cider and a piece of cake."

Actually he did not bother with more cider, or the cake. He paid his bill and left. As soon as he was in his car he tried Hank again on his cell phone. This time Hank answered.

"I must see you immediately," Monty said before even asking how Hank was or what he was doing. "Please come to the bookshop. I'll wait for you."

"Are you alright?" Hank said anxiously. "You sound terrible. What's happened?"

“Just come to the bookshop,” Monty repeated. “Ring the bell. I’ll let you in.”

Half an hour later Monty and Hank were sitting at the table in Monty’s workroom with the scroll open in front of them.

“Who was this scholar?” Hank said gravely. “He must have given you a name.”

“No, he didn’t,” Monty replied. “Like the old man with his granddaughter, and the bishop, or whatever he was, they all knew about this,” he glanced at the scroll. “And my name, and where to find me. But I’ve told no one, except you. I didn’t even have a chance to tell Roger.”

Hank looked at the scroll again, lifting up his glasses to peer beneath them and see it more intensely. He was silent for so long that Monty became restless. He was about to interrupt him when Hank sat back at last.

“I’ve been swatting up a bit on Aramaic,” he said, his voice quiet and strained, lines of anxiety deeper in his face than usual, perhaps exaggerated by the artificial light. “I can only make out a few words clearly. I’m not really very good. It’s a long way from mathematics, but I’ve always been interested in the teachings of Christ—just as a good man, perhaps morally the greatest.”

“And...?” Monty’s own voice quivered.

Hank’s face lit with a gentle smile. “And I have no special illumination, Monty. I can make out a few words, but they seem ambiguous, capable of far more than one interpretation. There are several proper names and I’m almost sure one of them is ‘Judas’. But there is so much I don’t know that I couldn’t even guess at the meaning. It isn’t a matter of missing a subtlety. I could omit a negative and come with a completely opposite interpretation.”

“But could he be correct... the scholar?” Monty insisted. “Could it be the lost testimony of Judas Iscariot?”

“It could be a testimony of anyone, or just a letter,” Hank replied. “Or it could be a fake.”

“No it couldn’t,” Monty said with absolute certainty. “Touch it. Try to photograph it. It’s real. Even you can’t deny that.”

Hank chewed his lip, the lines in his face deepening even more. “If it is what the scholar says, that would explain why the bishop is so anxious to have it, and perhaps destroy it. Or at the very least keep it hidden.”

“Why? Surely it would make religion, Christianity in particular, really hot news again.”

“If it confirms what they have taught for two thousand years,” Hank agreed. “But what if it doesn’t?”

“Like what?” Monty asked, then immediately knew the answer. It was as if someone were slowly dimming all the lights everywhere, as far as the eye could see, as far as the imagination could stretch.

Hank said nothing.

“You mean a fake crucifixion?” Monty demanded. “No resurrection?” Then he wished he had not even said the words. “That would be awful. It would rob millions of people of the only hope they have, of all idea of heaven, of a justice to put right the griefs we can’t touch here.” He swallowed painfully. “Of ever seeing again those we love... and those who didn’t have a chance here...”

"I know," Hank said softly. "That is a belief I would never force on others, even if I hold it myself. I would be inclined to give it to Prince of the Church, and let him burn it."

"Book burning? You, Hank?" Monty said incredulously.

"If I had to choose between truth, or what seems to be truth, and kindness... then I think I might choose kindness," Hank said gently. "There are too many *shorn lambs* I wouldn't hurt."

"Temper the wind to the shorn lamb," Monty said in a whisper. "And could you do it without even knowing what the scroll said?"

"That's the rub," Hank agreed. "We don't know what's in it. It might not be that at all. Do you remember what the Bible says Christ said to Judas? 'Go and do what thou must?'"

Monty stared at him.

Hank looked at the scroll. "If there were no betrayal then there would have been no trial, therefore no crucifixion, and no resurrection. Is it possible that Judas did only what he had to, or there would have been no fulfilment of the great plan?"

Monty was speechless, his mind whirling, his thoughts out of control.

"But that would spoil the simplicity of the damnation that Christendom has always placed on Judas," Hank went on. "It would all suddenly become terribly real, and fearfully complex, much too much to be shared with the whole world, most of whom like their religion very simple. Good and evil. Black and white. No difficult decisions to be made. We don't like difficult decisions. For two thousand years we have been told what to think, and we've grown used to it. And make no mistakes, Monty, if this goes to anyone except the Prince of the Church, it will be on the Internet the day after, and everyone will know."

"The Churchman is obvious," Monty agreed. "Anyone can see why he wants it, and I can't entirely disagree. And I can see why the scholar wants it, regardless of what it destroys or who it hurts. But who is the old man? Why does he want it, and how did any of them know it exists, and that I have it?"

"What did you say his name was?" Hank asked. "He was the only one who gave you a name, wasn't he?"

"Yes. Judson Garrett."

Hank stood motionless. "Judson Garrett? Say it again, Monty, aloud. Could it possibly be...?" He stared at the scroll. "Lock it up, Monty. I don't know if it will do any good, but at least try to keep it safe."

Quite early the next morning Monty received a phone call from the police to tell him that it was now beyond question that Roger Williams had been murdered. They asked him if he would come down to the local station at his earliest convenience, preferably this morning. There were several issues with which he could help them.

"Of course," he replied. "I'll be there in a couple of hours."

He was met by a very pleasant policewoman, no more than in her mid-thirties. She introduced herself as Sergeant Tobias.

"Sorry about this, Mr. Danforth," she apologized straight away. "Coffee?"

"Er... yes, please." It seemed discourteous to refuse, and he would welcome something to do with his hands. It might make him appear less nervous. Had she seen how tense he was, how undecided as to what to tell her?

"You said Roger was murdered," he began as soon as they were sitting down in her small office. If that were so, why was a mere sergeant dealing with it, and a young woman? It did not sound as if they regarded it as important.

"Yes," she said gravely. "There is no question that the fire was deliberately set. And Mr. Williams was struck on the head before the fire started. I thought you'd like to know that because it means he almost certainly didn't suffer."

For a moment Monty found it difficult to speak. He had refused even to think of what Roger might have felt.

"Thank you," he said awkwardly. "Why? I mean... do you know why anyone would kill him?"

"We were hoping that you could help us with that. We have found no indication of any personal reason at all. And the fact that the house was pretty carefully searched, but many very attractive ornaments left, some of considerable value, not to mention all the cutlery, which incidentally is silver and quite old, suggests it was not robbery. All the electronic things were left too, even a couple of very expensive mobile phones and ipods, very easily portable."

Monty shook his head, as if trying to get rid of the idea. "Nobody could have hated Roger like that. Maybe it was people high on something?"

"Maybe," she agreed. "But it was very methodical and well done. The search was meticulous, and nothing was broken or tossed around."

"Then how do you know?"

She smiled a little bleakly. "Marks in the dust," she answered. "Not just here and there, as he might have pulled books out himself since anyone last dusted. They were on every shelf, all recent. What does your bookshop deal in, Mr. Danforth? What would your most expensive item be?"

Now the cold ate through him and the taste of the coffee was bitter in his mouth. There was only one possible answer to that, unless he were to lie to her. That thought was born in his mind, and died.

"Usually just a rare book, sometimes a manuscript or original folio, quite a lot of first editions, of course. They can fetch thousands, even tens of thousands. Just occasionally we get an old manuscript, possibly illuminated."

She looked at him steadily. "And at the moment?" she prompted.

He took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. "At the moment we have an old manuscript which came in the bottom of a crate of pretty ordinary books, from an estate sale."

"Old?" she asked. "What do you call 'old'?"

What would she know about books? Probably nothing at all. World War II would be ancient history to her.

"Mr. Danforth?" she prompted.

"Possibly the time of Christ," he answered, feeling a little melodramatic.

Her interest was instant and intense. "Really? In what language? Latin? Hebrew? Aramaic?"

"I think it's Aramaic," he replied. "It seems to be important, because I have had three people asking for it already, and I haven't even had it authenticated yet."

"But you advertised it?" she said with a quick note of criticism in her voice.



“No,” he answered. “No, I didn’t. I don’t know how anybody knew of it. And I don’t know whether it is Aramaic or not. I have a friend who knows a little, just words here and there, and that’s what he thinks it is. I still need an expert.”

“Have you any idea at all what it is about?” she pressed. “What is it written on? Parchment, vellum? How long is it?”

He withdrew a little bit. “Why do you want to know?”

She smiled, and her expression was gentle and full of pride. “My father is Eli Tobias. He is an expert in ancient Aramaic scripts. We think Mr. Williams was killed for a rare book of some sort. That is why they put me onto the case.”

He sighed. “You’re right. Three different men have come to me and offered anything I want if I will sell it to them. I can’t even photocopy the thing. It’s as if it were ... possessed.”

“Then you need an expert to look at it,” she replied. “Perhaps more than one. Did any of these men suggest what it is, or why they want it so much?”

He repeated to her what each of the men had said and she listened to him without interrupting.

“Keep it safe, Mr. Danforth,” she said after he had finished and stared at her over the cold coffee. “We shall send two experts tomorrow, or the day after. I think we have found the reason poor Mr. Williams was burned to death. Please... please be very careful.”

Monty promised to do so, and went out into the street a little shakily. He drove back to Cambridge and worked in the shop until late afternoon. He finished cataloguing the last books of the Greville estate and decided to go home for supper, and then perhaps telephone Hank and tell him the latest news. It would be comforting to speak to him. His sanity was like a breath of clean air, blowing away the stale nonsense that had collected in his mind.

He was surprised to find when he went outside that it had been raining quite heavily, and he had not noticed. The gutters were full and in places slurping over. Thank goodness it had stopped now or he would have been soaked. The sky was darkening in the east, and the red sky to the west promised a good day tomorrow, if you believe the old tales of forecasting.

He turned the corner and the sunlight struck him in the face. He shut his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. The shock took him like a physical blow. The whole tarmac surface was covered with blood. It lay in pools, shining and scarlet. It ran gurgling in the gutters.

He was paralyzed by the sheer horror of it.

A cyclist came racing around the corner, skidded, slewed across the road and hit him, knocking him over. He was bruised and his skin torn, his chest for a moment unable to move, to draw in breath. With difficulty he gasped in air at last and straightened very slowly to his knees, dizzy and aching.

An old lady was hurrying towards him, her face creased with concern.

“Are you alright?” she asked anxiously. “Stupid boys. They’re going much too fast. Didn’t even stop. Are you injured?” She offered her hand to help him up, but she looked too frail to take any of his weight.

He stood upright, surprised to find that apart from being thoroughly wet from the gutter, he was actually not damaged. His jacket sleeves and his shirt cuffs

were sodden with rainwater, dirty grey, his trousers the same. There was a tiny red smear of blood on his palm where he had scratched it.

“Yes, I think I’m all right, thank you,” he replied. “I was standing in the way, I think. Just... staring...” There was nothing left of the images of blood, just an ordinary asphalt road with puddles of rain gleaming in the last of the sunset. He wouldn’t tell Hank about this. As he had always said, most supernatural phenomena were just over-excited imaginations painting very human fears onto perfectly normal situations.

Nevertheless when he saw Hank later on, having washed, changed his clothes and had a very good supper, he found him also unusually concerned.

“Can you work out why we can’t photograph this scroll yet?” Monty asked as they sat with late coffee and an indulgence of After Eight mints.

“No,” Hank said candidly. He gave a slightly rueful smile. “For once, logic eludes me. I can’t think of any reasonable answer. I imagine there’s an explanation as to how those three men knew of the scroll at all, when you didn’t advertise it. I suppose since they knew you had it, it wasn’t a great leap to track down poor Roger. Monty...”

“What?”

“We have to settle this issue straight away. I don’t think I’m being alarmist, but if they’d kill Roger for it, they aren’t going to accept a polite delay from you.”

The increasing darkness that had been growing in Monty’s mind now suddenly took a very specific shape. Heat raced through him as if he felt flames already.

“I’ve no idea what price to put on it,” he said desperately. “I wish I’d never found the thing. Sergeant Tobias said she’d have her father come and look at it some time this week. What if they won’t wait? Or won’t pay what he says it’s worth? I suppose I should tell the Greville Estate solicitors, shouldn’t I?”

“No,” Hank replied after a moment’s thought. “From what you told me, Roger bought the books as a job lot at auction. They belong to his estate, not the Grevilles. But you’re right, I don’t think you can wait until a valuation is put on the scroll. That could take quite a while, especially if it really is what the scholar claims it is. That would actually make it almost beyond price.”

“Then what the hell can I do?” Monty demanded. “Give it to the British Museum?”

Hank bit his lip. “Do you think the bishop, or Mr. Garrett will allow you to do that? Who do you think killed Roger?”

Monty shut his eyes and ran his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “One of them, I suppose. Hank, what can I do?”

Hank sat for a long time without answering.

Monty waited.

Finally Hank spoke, slowly and very quietly. “I don’t believe we can wait, Monty. I don’t know what this scroll is, but I do know it has great power. Whatever is in the scroll itself, or in what various men believe of it, that power is real, and it is very dangerous. Roger is dead already. I believe that we need to end the matter long before any experts can run their tests and verify it. For a start, I don’t think the bishop, or whoever he is, is going to allow that to happen. His whole purpose in buying the scroll is to destroy it, to make sure that mankind never gets to know

what is written in it—expert, scholar or ordinary man in the street, or more importantly to him, perhaps, man-in-the-pew.”

“What about Mr. Garrett? What does he think it is, and what does he want it for?” Monty asked.

“I don’t know who he is, but I have an absurd guess, for which I doubt my own sanity. The reason he wants it, I believe, is to reverse the verdict of history.”

“What can we do?” Monty asked, searching Hank’s clear blue eyes.

“Tell the men we know of who want it to meet us at Roger’s house, and we will hold an auction there, privately for the three of them.”

“I don’t know how to contact them,” Monty pointed out.

“*Times* personal column,” Hank said simply. “Although they may have some way of knowing anyway. Funny they should be so wrong about where the scroll was, though.”

“What? Oh... you mean... in Roger’s house? Why did they think that? Why did they kill him? He didn’t even know about it?”

“Was the crate with the scroll in it addressed to him?”

Monty had a sudden vivid picture of the address label in his mind’s eye.

“Yes. Yes it was...”

“Then that may be the answer. At that time they did not realize Roger was sick and not coming in to the bookshop. They assumed he would take it home.”

“How did they know about it at all?” Monty pursued.

“That is something I can’t answer,” Hank admitted. “I don’t believe in your ghosts, all of whom have a logical explanation in either fact or hysteria. But I will admit that there are things I can’t explain, and I am prepared to allow that they could have to do with a more than ordinary evil... albeit a highly powerful human one, with manifestations we don’t yet understand.”

“Generous of you,” Monty said with a touch of sarcasm, the sharper because he was afraid.

Hank ignored him. “Put an advertisement in the personal column of the *Times*: *Gentleman wishes to auction ancient scroll. Regret photocopies impossible. Auction to be held at 7:00 p.m. at home of now deceased owner of shop. Replies unnecessary.* That should reach those with an interest.”

Monty’s throat was dry, his tongue practically sticking to the roof of his mouth.

“Then what?” he croaked.

“Then we lock up the scroll here and go to Roger’s house to wait,” Hank answered, but he too was pale and there was knowledge of fear in his eyes.

At seven in the evening Hank and Monty were in Roger’s sitting room, too restless to occupy the armchairs. Hank was by the window looking over the back garden and Monty paced from the center of the room to the front windows and back again. The acrid smell of smoke was still sharp in the air. The electric lights were not working since the fire, and as the room grew darker with the fading sun Hank struck a match and lit the hurricane lamp they had brought.

“They’re not going to come,” Monty said at quarter past seven. “We didn’t give them enough time. Or else they’ve gone to the shop, and they’ll break into the safe and steal it while we’re here. We shouldn’t have come.”

“If they were going to steal it they’d have done so anyway,” Hank pointed out. “It was there every night, wasn’t it?”

“Then why didn’t they?” Monty demanded.

“I don’t know. Perhaps they need some legitimacy—or maybe they just aren’t good at safe cracking. It’s a pretty good safe, isn’t it?”

“Yes ...”

The hurricane lamp burned up, sending its glow into the corners of the room and showing the dark outline of an old man with a child beside him, a fair-haired girl of about eight, whose brilliant, ice-cool eyes gleamed almost luminously.

Monty felt the sweat break out on his skin and run down his body, cold within seconds. He turned to Hank, and instead saw in the doorway the robed and implacable figure of the bishop, his face filled with a scalding contempt.

The smell of old smoke seemed heavier, catching in the throat.

The bishop moved into the room and his place in the doorway was taken by the scholar, a smile on his handsome face, a fire of intense curiosity blazing in his eyes.

Hank looked at Monty. “Perhaps we had better begin the bidding?” he suggested.

Monty cleared his throat again. “I do not know what the scroll is, or whether it is authentic or not. Each of you has offered to purchase it, as it is. Please make a bid according to what it is worth to you.”

“Where is it?” the bishop demanded.

“Hush man, it is of no importance,” the scholar cut across him. “Mr. Danforth will provide it, when the time is right. We don’t want to risk having it destroyed in another fire, or do we?”

The old man smiled. “How wise of you. I fear destruction is what the bishop’s purpose is. He will pay any price to that end.”

“May the fires of hell consume you!” the bishop shouted hoarsely.

“The fires of hell burn without consuming,” the old man said wearily. “You know so little. The truth is deeper, subtler and far better than your edifice of the imagination ...”

The bishop lunged forward and picked up the hurricane lamp. He smashed it on the floor at Monty’s feet. “Betrayer!” he cried as the flames spread across the spilled oil and licked upwards, hungry and hot.

The scholar, who had been watching Hank, charged him and knocked him over, seizing the small attaché case he had been carrying. He picked it up and made for the window, leaving Hank stunned on the floor.

It was the old man who took off his coat and threw it over Monty, smothering the flames at his feet, catching his trousers already burning his legs.

But the oil had spread wider and the sofa was alight. The billows of black smoke grew more intense, choking, suffocating. The bishop was lost to sight. Hank was still on the floor and Judson Garrett was bending over him, talking to him, pulling him to his feet.

Dimly through the black swirls Monty could see the child hopping up and down, her face brilliant with glee, her eyes shining with age-old evil as she watched the fire grow and swell, now reaching the old man’s clothes as he lifted Hank up. He was strong, his hair dark again, his face young. He carried Hank over to the window, smashed it and pushed him through as the fire burned behind him, swallowing him up.

Monty fought his way to the door and out into the hall, gasping for breath, the heat all but engulfing him. He flung the front door open and fell out into the cool, clean night. Behind him the flames were roaring up. There was going to be nothing left of the house. He must find Hank, get him out of the way of exploding debris.

He was as far as the corner of the house when he saw Hank staggering towards him, dizzy but definitely upright.

“Monty! Monty!” he called out. “What happened to Garrett?”

Monty caught Hank by the arm. “I don’t know. We’ve got to get away from here. It’s all going up any minute. Those dry timbers are like a bomb. Come on!”

Reluctantly Hank allowed himself to be pulled away until they were both seventy yards along the road and finally saw the plume of flame burst through the roof and soar upwards into the sky.

A cloud of crows flung high in the air like jagged pieces of shadow, thousands of them, tens of thousands, all shouting their hoarse cries into the night.

“Did anybody else get out?” Hank asked, his voice shaking.

“No,” Monty answered with certainty.

“He thought the scroll was in my case,” Hank said. “The bishop. I’ve had that case for years.”

“What was in it?” Monty asked.

“Nothing,” Hank replied. “He would have destroyed the scroll.”

“And the scholar would have published it, no matter whose faith it broke,” Monty replied. “People need their dreams, right or wrong. You have to give them a new one before you break the old.”

“What about Garrett?” Hank asked, pain in his voice as if he dreaded the answer.

“He’s all right,” Monty said, absolutely sure that it was the truth.

Hank stared at him, then at the burning house. “He’s in there!”

“No, he isn’t, not now. He’s all right, Hank.”

“And the child?”

“Gone. I think he’s free of her... it.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re talking about?” Hank asked, not with doubt but with hope.

“Oh, yes, yes, I think so. I’m talking about sacrifice and redemption, about faith, about hope being stronger than even the demons who dog you with memory and tales of hatred, and who tempt you to justify yourself, at all costs.”

“And the scroll? What are you going to do with it now?”

“I think when we go and look, we’ll find it’s gone,” Monty replied. “We aren’t ready for it yet.”

Hank smiled and together they turned to walk away towards the darkness ahead, no more than the soft folds of the night, with sunrise beyond.

