

O'Halloran's Hell

by

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CHAPTER ONE

July 14th; 1847: Declan O'Halloran was a confidence trickster. A resident of Belfast, Ireland, he had 'sold' such items as Nelson's Column¹, the Tower Bridge, and even the Old Cathedral in Bourke Street, headquarters, in those days, of the Roman Catholic Church in Londonderry, Northern Ireland. Not only had he 'sold' these well-known monuments dedicated to state, church, and history to unsuspecting dupes with more cash than common sense, but he had 'sold' each – and several other buildings, monuments, and palaces – many times over.

In his twenty-two year career in Ireland and London, the overworked and much-maligned police forces of two countries tried desperately to catch him, without ever once coming close. But in the year of 1847, his luck ran out.

During a 'sale' to a particularly-wealthy American, in what, today, is known as a 'sting' operation joining the police forces of both England and Ireland for only the second time in their individual histories, the officers of the law had plotted, planned, and worked the near-impossible task of laying hands on the collar of the most wanted man on two continents.

Now, as he stood, manacled, in the dock of London's Old Bailey (which, at one time in his long career, he had *also* 'sold'), he listened with impassivity and a face that resembled that of a cow that has just discovered her milk is not, in fact, being given to her precious calf, but being sold to the highest bidder on the open market, as the sentence was read out: "Declan O'Halloran, in a career of over twenty years, you have duped and cheated many people out of their life savings and hard-won fortunes in order to fund your own ambitions to live the high life...and never, during the course of this trial have you shown any sign of remorse. So, it is with a light heart and no sympathy whatsoever that this court sentences you to transportation to the colonies for the term of your natural life. And may a beneficent God have mercy on your soul – if He can find it."

Just before the gavel banged, and the judge fixed Declan with a glare and a smile of retribution, Declan said, loudly, clearly, and distinctly: "An' tha same ta yerself, me Lord."

As the court erupted into laughter and thunderous applause, and the judge sought to restore order to his realm by hammering the gavel upon his bench until the handle snapped and the head of the gavel dropped to the floor, the miscreant was led away to await his fate aboard a rotting, vermin-infested hulk moored in the backwaters of the mighty Thames River.

Declan O'Halloran was given no special treatment; in fact, he found his treatment aboard what had once been a proud ship-of-the-line was far worse than any of the other one hundred and seventeen prisoners – men and women – who awaited transport to the southern oceans, and a place regarded as little better than France's notorious Devil's Island. This was principally due to his having bilked a close and aristocratic relative of the Supervisor of Prisoners of some two thousand pounds through the sale of Kensington Palace, which Declan did not own and had never seen other than in woodcarvings reproduced in newspapers.

Unfortunately for Declan, the lord of the manor, who had lost a fortune to the wily Irishman read of his sentencing in the London Times and made contact with his lowborn

relative aboard the remains of Her Majesty's Barquentine *Turncoat*, and certain 'arrangements' were made.

When the other prisoners were brought up twenty at a time to take their daily exercise on the rotting decks of the ship, the Irish rogue found himself being lowered over the side on a frayed and worn rope and dunked in the filthy waters of the Thames – to wash the filth from his soul; then he was forced, under armed guard, to run along the gunnels of the ship until dry, and then permitted to dress once again in his prison garb, and taken below.

Whilst the other prisoners ate their daily ration of watery mashed potato and cold salted beef, he made do with a bowl of the thinnest soup imaginable, on the surface of which often floated the corpse of a cockroach or maggot. And whilst the other prisoners stretched out as much as they could in the below-decks confinement of a hold to sleep, he was dragged up on deck again to receive five to ten lashes for some fancied misdemeanour committed during the day, then shackled, in a standing position, with his back to the mainmast, and permitted to sleep as best he could.

Life, for Declan O'Halloran, accustomed to the best that England and Ireland could offer him, had reversed itself.

January 7th; 1848: Before the sun had risen, two hundred and fifty-one prisoners were offloaded from the Thames' rotting hulks and taken in groups of six, by whaler, to the fleet waiting in Portsmouth. They were divided between two transport ships whose holds had been especially altered to accommodate human cargo, chained and manacled to huge bolts driven into the bulkheads, and the huge wooden hatches overhead were slammed shut and bolted into place.

Because the prisoners had originally been spread between four ships, and that number of ships had now been halved, there was even less room than there had been aboard the woodworm-eaten hulks moored among the mud and reeds, and most of the prisoners found it almost impossible to find room enough to sleep. Comfort, or what passed for it, became a waiting game: wait until one of the prisoners on either side of one moved slightly, then grab as much of the space they had occupied as possible before they attempted to settle again, and one *might* have room enough to drop off for an hour.

But Declan, being a small man and one who lived by his wits rather than by any degree of size or propensity for brutality, found himself being pushed, pulled, kicked, belted, and crammed into impossibly-small spaces by those who were much bigger and tougher than he was. Even the younger prisoners in their early teens outweighed him by as much as twenty pounds, and his ability to fight back and maintain for his own use a modicum of space was beyond his capabilities.

Prisoners aboard Her Majesty's transport fleets were regarded as little better than cattle, and were fed accordingly: breakfast was cold gruel, with perhaps a mug of watery tea, whilst supper was a constant diet of watery mashed potato and salted beef – but the potatoes were

often rotting at the time of use, and the beef was so old, one could have replaced the sole of an army boot with it. And the quantities served were so small that by the time the two-month trip from England to Australia had been completed, even the brawniest of prisoners were less than half their weight at the time of their arrest, when they arrived in the southern climes.

Declan O'Halloran, once again, found himself at a severe disadvantage. His meal, served on a tin plate or in a bowl, was often taken from him by force by a larger or tougher prisoner, so that when the ships finally docked in Botany Bay, he had lost so much weight he could barely stand beneath the weight of his manacles and chains, and his rough and worn prison garb hung on his skeletal frame like rags on a scarecrow.

For the first time in his long and at one time, successful life, Declan O'Halloran knew what it meant to be starved and weakened almost to the point of death.

1: Nelson's Column in London was constructed between 1842 and 1843 to a design by Willsom Railston at a cost of forty-seven thousand pounds as a monument to Admiral Lord Nelson, who died at the Battle of Trafalger in 1805. Downloaded from:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson%27s_Column September 2011.

CHAPTER ONE

March 10th; 1848: Archbishop John Bede Polding, Vicar of the new land of Australia², folded his copy of the *Sydney Herald*, finished his cup of black tea sweetened with sugar and enlivened by the addition of a slice of lemon, and leaned back in his armchair.

He had served his God well in the fourteen years since his appointment as Bishop, and then Archbishop, over the new continent in 1834, and felt mildly satisfied with his work. But there yet remained one fly in his otherwise pristine serve of Apostolic cream, and that fly had grown more worrying with the morning's news that another fleet of ne'er-do-wells, or 'lost souls ready for redemption,' as he chose to refer to them, had arrived. Two hundred and fifty-one of them, to be precise: one hundred and seventy-three males and seventy-eight females, three of that last number pregnant and two with small children.

"Lord! That children should be brought up in this den of iniquitous souls!" he cried aloud, and sighed.

The clergyman's housekeeper, Mrs O'Dougherty, a born-and-bred Londonderry woman whom he had personally rescued from the alleys of Sydney Town, where she had been hiring herself out to sailors, businessmen, drunkards, and all manner of male lechers, eyed him for a moment then continued clearing the table. She had learned to recognize the light of battle when it entered the eye of her employer and saviour, and knew nothing she could say would deter him from the course he had no doubt already determined in his ever-active mind and saintly soul.

"Mrs O'Dougherty...t'is a shame these poor benighted children cannot see the after-life to which they are condemning themselves," he remarked, and the woman stopped, considered the statement for a moment, and knew the archbishop referred to all those awaiting his saving words and tender ministrations, and not just the far younger ones.

"Aaaah, t'is a pity ye cannot purchase Hell itself, Yer Eminence..." she said, a sad expression on her thin face; "...for ye'd no doubt turn it inta one o' tha Lord's finest establishments, an' do away wi' tha need fer Purgatory altogether."

"That I would, Mrs O;" the archbishop responded; "that I would. In my world, there would be no need for Satan and all his scheming ilk. No need at all, for all benighted souls would recognize the Light of Heavenly Love the instant it shone upon their tear-stained cheeks."

Out of sight of her employer in the kitchen, Mrs O'Dougherty crossed herself, then took the little flask of rum from the pocket of her apron, uncorked it carefully, took a long swig, and replaced it in the pocket. There were some evil habits that fought hard against death, and this was her personal cross: the ever-present need for a 'little tippie' every now and then.

The good archbishop linked his hands behind his head and closed his eyes for a moment, dreaming of a world where Hell itself had been transformed: little children clad in raiments of the purest white ran hither and yon, and flowers grew in abundance. Where the Hellfires had

burned, the grass now stood clean and green, and in the background stood a magnificent, gleaming gold palace topped with a towering crucifix, a building fit to house all the saints, and the entire angelic host of heaven. The sound of harps played softly over and above the gentle whisper of the summer breeze, and people walked hand-in-hand, smiling beatifically at one another, whilst at their feet a clear river trickled over smooth, shiny stones.

And through the happy throng walked John Bede Polding, clad in the rich, flowing robes of an Archbishop.

John Bede Polding, Hero of Heaven; the man who, single-handedly and armed only with his dedication and his religion, had brought about the transformation of the Land of Purgatory, adding it to the real estate holdings of his Lord and Master on High.

“Aaaah! What a sight!” he sighed as his housekeeper lifted the crockery from a pail in which she had been washing it, and began to stack it beside her on the bench, then reached for the flask once more.

“Oi beg yer pardon, Yer Grace?” Mrs O called and burped, and Archbishop Polding smiled to himself. She was forever getting mixed up between referring to him as ‘Yer Eminence,’ ‘Yer Grace,’ and ‘Yer Lordship’...not to mention the odd resorting to the bottle every now and then.

“Nothing, Mrs O; nothing,” the clergyman called, then slid back his chair and rose. He waddled through to the hall-stand, where his broad-brimmed hat hung, placed it squarely on his bald pate, and took the walking-cane with the elephant-tusk handle carved in the shape of a monk with arms outspread, out of its rack. He opened the door and stepped outside into the blazing heat of the early morning, opened the gate and stepped through, and set off on his way to the Quay, where the fleet of transport ships soon would be docking.

He stood beneath the shade of an overhang outside the offices of the ‘Black Ball’ Shipping Line and gazed out to the Heads, some three miles away. As he watched, the prow and then the foresails of the first ship came into view around North Head, the low, squat hull foreshortened, and it made the turn and straightened for the long run down the harbour to the Dawes Point wharf, around the corner to the left of where Archbishop Polding stood. Moments later, a second ship poked its long prow around the rocky foreshore, and within fifteen minutes, the entire fleet of six ships was in view, coming line-astern down the deep blue waters towards him.

“Checkin’ on yer cargo o’ souls, sor?” the Harbour Master said at his side, and the archbishop turned. The chubby face smiled up into his, the ever-present pipe clenched between yellowed teeth, a pencil stuck behind one ear.

“Yes, my son,” the archbishop replied, turning his gaze once again back to the fleet; “more to add to my little flock. I do hope I have more success with this lot than with the previous issue...one of them stole a silver candelabra from my office whilst my back was turned!”

“Ooh, now, Father, that won’ get ye t’rough that Pearly Gates,” the Harbour Master said, frowning; “more’n likely, they’ll finish up in Purgat’ry.”

‘Father’...’Grace’...’Eminence’...why can’t people get my proper term of address correct?’ Polding wondered, his mind again turning to his earlier daydream regarding the purchase of Hades at mention of ‘Purgat’ry’. Again, the image of his corpulent figure draped in scarlet flashed before his eyes, then the dark scarlet became, suddenly, the white of the Holy Fa...no! No! That could not be...or...could it?

He shook his greying head and turned his attention again to the line of white sails and brown, dirty hulls proceeding straight towards the docks.

Sighing, he moved forward, to wait at the dockside and watch as the human cargo in its manacles and chains was unloaded.

2: John Bede Polding, consecrated in 1834, was first Roman Catholic bishop and archbishop of Australia from 1834 until his death in 1877.

Downloaded from http://www.sydney.catholic.org.au/about/key_dates_in_our_history.shtml 15 September 2011.

CHAPTER THREE

The two prison-ships tied up alongside, gangplanks were lowered, a squad of armed Royal Marines with bayonets fixed lined themselves out along the wharf and stood to attention facing the ships, their muskets at the ready, and watched as the hatch-covers were lifted and the prisoners began to file up out of their dingy, cramped, and by now putrid lodgings, and were encouraged to move in single-file down onto the wharf by lustily-wielded rifle-butts and boots.

During the long journey out from England, all had lost weight, some far more so than others. But none looked nearly so starved and malnourished as the short figure in the front rank, Declan O'Halloran, who appeared no more than a shadow hung with rags and chains. His cheeks were sunken, his eyes stuck out alarmingly, and his limbs were no more than skeletal sticks of bone hiding beneath a thin covering of jaundiced flesh.

As he stood there, his eyes happened to meet those of Archbishop Polding, and for just a moment, a faint flicker of hope appeared in those sunken, haunted eyes. Then it was extinguished, and the deep blue orbs became dead, lifeless, and empty again.

At that instant, the archbishop's heart went out to the prisoner who stood, leaning heavily to one side, as if the muscles that yet remained on that thin frame were unable to carry the weight of the carcass. He saw, in that pitiful image, a soul that had lost even the will to live, so badly had it been mistreated, and on an impulse, he moved forward and stood immediately before that pathetic figure.

"What is your name, my son?" the archbishop asked as softly and as kindly as he could, and slowly the gaunt face lifted until those hollow eye-sockets were in line with his own.

"O'Halloran, yer Grace," Declan replied in a voice that laboured to find its way up past the vocal-chords and out from between the wrinkled and bruised lips; "me name is...Declan O'Halloran."

"O'Halloran...Declan O'Halloran. And what brings you to this Devil's workshop for the lost?"

"Oi...sold t'ings that didna belong ta me, Yer Grace," Declan replied, putting as pretty a description on his long and nefarious career as possible; "Oi...hadda feed me woife an' six kids..." the head slowly lowered, the voice trailed away, as if the speaker found the subject too painful to bring to mind, and Archbishop Polding's very soul wept for this rag-draped remnant of humanity.

"Driven to crime by the all-consuming need to survive and support one's beloveds," the clergyman whispered, a catch in his voice. He reached out a fat, be-ringed hand, and laid it gently on Declan's shoulder, and just for a moment the figure before him seemed to straighten up slightly, as if drawing strength from the archbishop. Then the figure folded and seemed to droop like a melting candle, and the archbishop's two hands caught the skeletal

remains in his own two large hands and held them until they could once again find the strength to bear their own weight.

In truth, the little Irish conman had never been married; as far as he knew, he had no offspring, although he had 'dallied' in many a young woman's bedroom. But his story had the desired effect: lifting one eyebrow, he caught the glistening movement of a tear, trickling down the churchman's cheek.

Impulsively, the archbishop reached out and enfolded the thin body in his arms, nearly crushing all Declan's ribs.

"Ye shall suffer no more, my son," he said softly; "I shall save you from this den of brutality! I shall rescue ye from this iniquitous Hell on earth!" Then he released Declan, and held his arm while the Irishman's lungs dragged air into themselves again, and stepped back.

"You shall see me again, my poor soul," he said, touched Declan lightly on one cheek, and turned away before his emotions overcame him. As he moved away, he heard the sergeant call the prisoners to 'Ten-shun!' heard the shuffling of their feet and the rattling of chains, and walked away, his mind already engaged in planning the elevation of a lost soul from within those vermin-ridden ranks.

March 11th, 1848: For the first time since his arrest, that night Declan O'Halloran ate the food provided him. Admittedly, the potatoes were undercooked and rotting, and the salted beef was as hard as old leather, while the mug of tea was more like dirty water in which someone had wrung out an old pair of socks; but it filled his stomach, empty for so long.

He stretched out on the thin horsehair mattress in one corner of his dank, filthy cell, and closed his eyes. Within minutes, he was asleep, and he did not awaken until the guard walked past at five in the morning, banging his truncheon on the bars of each cell-door as he moved down the long, narrow passageway.

Half an hour later, a tin bowl of thin gruel was slipped through the hatch beneath his door, and again Declan ate all there was. By the time the call to fall in on the parade-ground was given and the cell-doors were unlocked one by one, he was feeling somewhat closer to human for the first time in months. But an hour later, the illusion was swiftly destroyed.

He was marched, along with some eighty other prisoners, out to a road that was being constructed to carry the ever-increasing traffic out to Parramatta, eleven miles away, and Declan found himself swinging a heavy pick, digging into the granite subsoil.

Declan had never done a day's honest labour in his entire adult life, so he was unused to the aching muscles and blistering hands that soon accompanied each swing of the pick. Added to that, he was totally unfit for physical labour, and as the pick grew heavier with each blow, so his flagging energy lessened markedly, until he could barely lift the head of the tool from the ground.

Finally, after no more than fifteen long, pain-filled minutes, his body gave out.

He dropped to the roadway, gasping for breath and unable to hold his weakened body upright any longer, as guards began to yell and shout, and run towards him.

They tried to encourage him to rise by bringing their whips down on his aching back time and again, but even that had no effect on him although he cried out anew with each stroke of the lash on his bare flesh. In the end, two of them seized him by the armpits and dragged him to a place where two tall eucalypts stood some ten feet apart.

While they held him there, his arms outstretched, ropes were tied about his wrists and the further ends lashed to the trees on either side of him. A huge, heftily-built guard stepped forward, the long, trailing lash of the cat-o'-nine-tails unfurling along the earth behind him.

“Twenny strokes...” the head guard said disinterestedly; “...fer...refusin’ ter work,” and the punishment began.

CHAPTER FOUR

Long before the last cut had landed, tearing flesh from his bare back and laying the bone open, Declan O'Halloran had passed out. His head hung down between his shoulders; blood ran from his bared spine and pooled on the earth at his sagging feet, where hungry red ants feasted on the unexpected fare, and climbed his legs and back in search of more. But he did not feel their stings and their mandibles, chewing and ripping into his flesh. His tortured mind had sunk into a deep pit of blackness, and his breath came in hoarse, gasping sighs.

They cut him down and dragged his inert body to a great granite stone, where it was dumped, draped over the rock in the heat of the morning sun. Beneath the influence of the burning rays, the blood began to dry and the torn flesh tautened, so that when he awoke, he found himself in a world of pain he had never experienced before.

One of the guards took a pail filled with muddy water, dumped a spadeful of rock salt into it, and stirred it until part of the salt had dissolved, then walked to the groaning man and tossed the pail's contents over his body.

As the salt penetrated the ripped flesh where the cat had torn chunks of living tissue from it, Declan uttered a long, drawn-out scream of pure agony. Then, his head slumped forward again, and he hung, head down, over the great stone.

"Orroight!" the head guard growled, jabbing the tip of his bayonet into the ripped and torn flesh of the man's spine; "back ta work, O'Hall'ran...yer got ta pay fer yer keep 'ere...gotta earn yer supper! On yer feet!"

Slowly, Declan placed both hands beneath his chest, and tried to heave his body up off the rock. But his strength failed him, and he slumped forward again, striking his chin on the rock and tumbling off, to land on his back in the gravel and dirt strewn about the worksite.

Again, he tried to rise, but his strength flagged again, and he fell back heavily, the gravel biting deeply into the raw, open wounds along his spine and back-muscles.

This time, his cry of pain echoed through the canyons and hills and brought the heads of the other prisoners around, to stare at the little man lying there, his blood soaking into the dry earth.

Two of the guards laid aside their muskets, reached down, and seized the little Irishman's forearms. They heaved him to his feet, and as he stood there, weaving drunkenly, his dazed mind fighting to grasp the situation he was now in, one lifted his right hand and closed the numbed fingers about the handle of the pick with which he had been working.

"Dig!" one of the guards grated, pointing the muzzle of his musket at the little man's belly; "or s'help me Gawd, oi'll shoot yer where ye stand!"

Declan hefted the pick with great difficulty, got it almost to shoulder-height, and let it fall towards the hard-packed earth. But the falling weight of the pick-head was too much for him,

and his body, unable to support itself, followed, bringing him crashing face-down to the ground where he lay, completely oblivious to all that was happening around him.

His tortured mind sank once again into that yawning black pit that opened before him, and this time, nothing they could do would bring him back to the world of the living.

Declan O'Halloran had slumped into unconsciousness.

High on a hill above the worksite, Archbishop Polding sat in his buggy and gazed in horror at the tableau that had just played out before his disbelieving eyes.

He had seen the cat, wielded with such force and ferocity, seen the guards' dump the inert body over the great stone, and watched in growing disgust as they attempted to get the beaten man back to his labours. When Declan toppled for the last time to the earth and moved no more, he shook the reins and his pony began picking its way along a narrow, winding track down off the escarpment and into the worksite, where he drew his buggy to a halt and climbed down.

"Who is in charge here?" he demanded, his fat body quivering with rage; "who is responsible for the...the foul and murderous attack upon this unfortunate?" As he moved forward to drop to his knees beside the still body, and laid a soft hand upon the back of the head, the senior guard stepped forward, his chin jutting aggressively, and grated: "Oi am...yer Worship! What of it?"

The archbishop fixed the guard with a baleful glare, and his lips drew back from tobacco-stained teeth. He rose to his full height, his well-fed belly jutting out before him, and took from the pocket of his robe a sheet of rumpled paper. Handing it to the head guard, he said angrily: "You, sir, are no Christian! You are a foul, evil caricature of humanity! I take it this...pathetic figure at my feet is Declan O'Halloran, the man whom you have just beaten to within an inch of his life?"

The guard unfolded the paper, glanced at it momentarily, then passed it to one of his underlings. "Yer takes it roight, priest!" he snarled, the whip over his shoulder now in his hand and uncurling on the earth beside his right foot; "an' don't think yer safe from me aut'ority, neither!" Then he took a step closer to the corpulent figure in the scarlet robe and skullcap, and from an inch away, spat into his face: "Take yerself, an' get outa here, afore Oi takes a shine ter beatin' *yerself*...an inch of yer loife!"

The archbishop had not been threatened so directly in many a year, so he was taken aback at the fury and venom of the guard's words and the hungry expression that came across the man's unshaven face. He stepped back hastily, then regained his courage and, raising a pudgy hand, and pointing at the sheet of paper, said in a quavering voice: "That form...is...is signed by the Superintendent of Prisoners himself. It gives me authority to take one Declan O'Halloran, take him and nurture him until he is fit once more, and can assume his new duties in my parish church. You...will kindly...*gently*...load his brutalised body aboard my

buggy before I use my position of friendship with the Superintendent to bring the hosts of Heaven down upon your head!"

Without taking his eyes off the churchman's fat, sweating face, the head guard asked of his comrade: "Is that what tha paper says?"

"It do, Sar'nt..." the younger guard acknowledged; "...it gives tha Archbishop tha roight ta claim tha prisoner an' employ him in... 'gainful pursoots' ...in tha church. An' it's signed by...tha Superintendent hisself."

The senior guard's cold eyes held those of the priest for long, long seconds. Then he stepped back, spat upon the ground, and said: "Orroight...toss tha pris'ner aboard tha buggy. An' you..." his finger came up, pointing directly at the archbishop; "...get 'im outa here, an' yerself too. 'E ain't no use ta me... 'e won't work!" and he turned on his heel and busied himself cursing and shouting at the other prisoners as they bent their backs to their tasks with a newfound will and a fear of the ever-present lash.

The young guard handed the order from the Superintendent back to the archbishop. He stooped, and with the aid of one of his colleagues, lifted the unconscious Declan and carried his body to the waiting buggy, where it was tossed unceremoniously onto the seat.

Archbishop Polding stalked back to his buggy, climbed aboard, lifted Declan's body that it slumped, half-upright, against his own, and set off, back up the trail and over the ridge towards faraway Sydney Town.

His overweight body did not stop trembling with rage and fear until he had almost reached the gates of St Mary's Cathedral.

CHAPTER FIVE

Archbishop Polding and the Superintendent of Prisoners had exchanged many favours in the past. They had dined together at the Governor's yearly Christmas Banquet and numerous other official celebrations and affairs. So the Superintendent did not find it unusual when his overweight acquaintance made a request to have a certain prisoner allotted into his care as a servant – a prisoner who had recently arrived from England, and whose name the archbishop had learned from the guards on board Her Majesty's Barquentine '*Turncoat*'.

He had signed the order with a flourish, smiled, and handed the sheet of paper to the priest, and thought no more of it. O'Halloran was not regarded as a violent prisoner; he had not been charged with crimes of greater significance than embezzlement and fraud, and as such, could be appointed to whatever tasks or to serve whichever masters the Superintendent felt appropriate.

Now, as Mrs O'Dougherty knelt by the tub-full of hot water in which the battered body of Declan O'Halloran lay and scrubbed at months of encrusted dirt, grime, sweat, blood, and filth and tried, at the same time, to protect her offended olfactory nerves from the smells emanating from her patient, she cursed the big-hearted man who had brought this remnant of humanity into her well-kept place of employment and appointed her to the task of cleaning it.

She had scraped at the weeks of stubble on the chin with the archbishop's own razor; she had washed the long, unkempt hair several times in lye soap and kerosene to try to rid it of the hordes of lice inhabiting it; and she had scrubbed and scrubbed at the flesh until her arms ached and her fingers began to cramp, and still she could not rid the little man of the foul smells of the prison-ship and the cells.

Finally, when she had pared the grit and dirt from beneath each fingernail, and scrubbed out each ear until it shone pink and clean, she and the archbishop between them had lifted the inert form from the water, dried it on the archbishop's best towels, draped it in one of the archbishop's own nightgowns, and tucked it neatly between clean sheets in the bunk in the spare room at the rear of the rectory.

Only then did she sit down in the kitchen, check the roast in the oven to ensure it had not been overcooked during her protracted absence, took a long and well-deserved swig from the flask in her apron pocket, lit her clay pipe, and sighed with relief. Then she took a second, longer swig, and felt almost human again.

It was at that moment that she remembered she had not rubbed soothing ointments into the savaged and torn flesh on her patient's back. She began to rise, thought better of it, and uncorked the flask again; that could wait until the skin-and-bone caricature of a human being in the archbishop's spare room was awake and in need of relief from his agony.

She swigged again, realized the flask was almost empty, and headed for the archbishop's hidden bar in the parlour where he kept a ten-year old bottle of whiskey – the last hour's labours had entitled her to an elevation above the more common rum, she thought – and

refilled the little flask. She took a long pull directly from the bottle, made her way a little unsteadily back to the kitchen, and turned her attention to the roast.

As she was lifting the heavy baking-tray loaded with crispy brown-skinned potatoes and a huge leg of lamb from the oven, she heard a long, thin, drawn-out wail of pain from the direction of the spare room. She placed the tray on the bench-top, added the pumpkin and parsnips, basted the contents, then returned the tray to the oven and closed the door.

“Aaaaaghooooogaheeeerrrr!”

The cry was more drawn-out and agony-filled than before. Mrs O’Dougherty rose to her feet, waddled into the bathroom, took the little tub of soothing ointment from the cupboard above the sink, and headed for the spare room.

Archbishop Polding’s ‘guest’ had managed to turn onto his belly and pull the nightshirt up to just beneath his shoulder-blades, and the hideous wounds on his back had opened, spreading a pool of red blood and suppurating fluids over the flesh. And she could see crimson stains in the folds of the nightshirt.

“Oh, me poor man!” Mrs O’Dougherty said, and dropped to her backside on the edge of the bed. She unscrewed the lid of the ointment jar, and using her fingers, spread it gently and liberally over the open wounds, then began rubbing slowly and tenderly, watching as the eyes of the convict slowly closed and his breathing softened.

“Oh, thank ye, Ma’am...” Declan sighed hoarsely; “ye don’t know how good that feels.”

“Are ye hungry?” Mrs O’Dougherty asked as she gently worked away; “Oi’ve a nice leg o’ lamb an’ a plum puddin’ in tha oven fer lunch.”

Had Declan heard right? *Roast lamb?* And...*plum pudding?* For a moment, he could not believe his ears. Had he passed away and gone to Heaven? The last he recalled, he was lifting that heavy pick up, up, to his shoulder, the flesh on his back was burning, burning like fire, and he was...falling...down, down, into...

“Are ye...an angel?” he whispered hoarsely, and held his breath.

Mrs O’Dougherty laughed: “Sure, an’ Oi’ve been called many t’ings in me long loife...but *angel* ain’t one o’ them.”

She finished her ministrations, and Declan released his breath in a long, satisfied sigh. The burning agony in his back and spine had eased, and the angel was sitting back, screwing the lid on a jar of salve and smiling at him.

“Ma’am...where am I?”

“Why, ye’re in tha house o’ his Holiness, Archbishop Polding, tha sainted man that he is! T’was him what rescued ye from that place ye was in, an’ brought ye here. Now, ye rest...try

not ta move too much, an' in a few days, yer back'll be feelin' much better." She rose, and pulled the sheet up until it was just below Declan's waistline, and turned to leave the room.

Declan managed to turn his head, and saw the short, dumpy figure of the housekeeper, about to close the door to this room where all was cleanliness and softness and light.

"Thank ye again, Ma'am. Ye may not have been called an angel...but ye are one," he said, and managed to twist his lips in the parody of a smile.

CHAPTER SIX

March 14th; 1848: Three days of rest and relaxation had worked miracles in the mind and body of Declan O'Halloran: he was able, clad in one of the archbishop's voluminous dressing-gowns, to hobble about the house with the aid of a walking-cane, and though the skin on his back was tight and still raw and open in places, to sit and while away the time in discussions with his saviour. He had even shown a talent for the game of chess, the archbishop's favourite pastime when he could find players of his own high standard, and his houseguest turned out to be well-versed in the strategies and manoeuvres of the miniature battlefield, to the point that Declan often found difficulty in ensuring he lost each game to the priest by the narrowest margin, and only after a long and protracted battle.

Mrs O'Dougherty's frequent applications of the soothing ointment was also working its wonders on the damaged and torn flesh of Declan's back, and he soon found he could reach down and pull on his trousers with a minimum of pain. He now found pleasure in wandering out to the front verandah of the archbishop's little cottage and sitting in the morning sun, watching prisoners, clad in their grey rags and hand-me-down sandals hauling heavy barrows of refuse or working on the roads, forever in need of repair due to wear and tear caused, principally, by the passage of heavy drays and the hard hooves of the teams of oxen that pulled them. As he sat there, one of the archbishop's fine cigars clenched between his teeth, and a glass of the archbishop's twelve-year old port in his hand, he felt that at last the world had turned full circle, and life, once again, was all that he could wish.

It was true that life and freedom, at present, came with a price: always present on his lap was a copy of the Good Book, which he was supposed to study in order to bring him closer to his God, especially the Book of Job, which told the tale of one of God's servants who, no matter the travails and losses that a vengeful Satan could throw at him, held true to his faith, and in the end regained all that he had lost. And whenever the archbishop was close, he made sure the book was open at an appropriate page where a lesson to be used as a guiding light by the student could be found...which meant that, since a lesson could be found on almost every page of the book, any page was appropriate.

He also committed to memory certain passages to be used in conversation with his mentor, who had determined that here was one lost sheep who should not escape the fold and be lost to the jaws of the wolf, or Sin, whichever one chose to call it. And his strategy was working: daily, his relationship with the archbishop grew closer, the trust the churchman placed in him stronger, and praise came more frequently.

But in the mind of Declan O'Halloran, complete freedom still called from afar, in odd moments when he gazed at the long, straight road that passed the front gate and eventually disappeared into distant green hills and rolling valleys. For him to achieve that freedom, however, there was still one important item missing; and that item was money.

Money, to purchase where and what one chose, regardless of cost; money to go where one would, and stay as long as one wished, clad in the finest that gold could buy.

And regardless of his growing indebtedness to the archbishop, Declan found that old habits, learned in England and Ireland in a previous life, died hard. So it was that in quiet moments, when the archbishop was not near to watch over his student, Declan's fertile mind engaged itself with plotting and scheming to get his hands on the wealth of whoever had so much that the odd thousand or two would never be missed, or could be purloined in such a way as to ensure the thief was long-gone into the darkness before the Hand of the Law could reach out and claim him.

During the succeeding days, the wily Irishman watched and waited, and read every broadsheet he could find, seeking a source of the gold he needed to fulfil his dreams. He watched, and listened when he could, to every conversation that took place in the archbishop's study or parlour, and little by little, he began to realize that here, right under his nose, was the source of that wealth he so desired.

Archbishop Polding had an unending stream of visitors, mostly priests, nuns, monseigneurs, and other dignitaries of the Holy Mother Church, and most of those visitors came with requests for funding for one purpose or another. It seemed that while the Church had access to almost unlimited funds, the man appointed to play watchdog over that mountain of funds was none other than the good Archbishop himself. He it was who signed off on every account presented to him, or gave the yay or nay to every request for money to be put to use in alleviating the needs of the poorer classes, or requests for money to be spent in the rebuilding or renovations to some part of the Church's vast holdings.

Archbishop Polding was, in fact, the Roman Catholic Church's *banker* in this backwater of humanity. And, as such, he held the keys to the strongbox wherein lay Declan O'Halloran's future.

March 18th; 1848: Seven days after he arrived under the archbishop's roof, Declan was fit enough to be put to work. He started weeding the flower-beds beneath the windows of the archbishop's library at the rear of the house, where the shadow cast by the building protected his still-open back from the burning rays of the sun.

Down on his hands and knees, he pulled out the ever-encroaching weeds and tufts of grass that sought to invade the petunias and rose-beds, with the window to the study immediately above his head. And he soon found out that he was in an ideal position to overhear every word of the conversations taking place in the library.

On this particular morning, a Bible Study group was taking place, and some ten of the archbishop's congregation were present. They discussed the Book of Samuel, and its implications for present-day man, its relevance to the world, and the lessons to be learned from it, and although Declan could not have cared less what the Good Book had to say about sin, and doubt, and evil, he listened, hoping to glean enough information to give him an opening into the archbishop's world that might lead him to his goal.

The conversation ebbed and flowed above his head, and Declan worked his way steadily along the rows of blossoms, and out of the words of one parishioner came the germ of an idea that he had been seeking ever since he had realized that the wealth he so desperately sought lay close at hand.

Archbishop Polding had just finished the lesson for the day, and Mrs O'Dougherty had served scones and tea to the assembly, when one of the gathered multitude commented: "What a pity it is, Archbishop, that we cannot gain permanent dominance over the Evil One. If that were achievable, our task as Christians would be so much easier."

Almost immediately, Mrs O'Dougherty's voice came to his ears: "T'is funny ye should say such a thing, Mr Connelly, for I was jus' sayin' to tha archbishop some days ago that if I could gain tha ownership papers ta Hades, tha good archbishop could purchase it, an' we need never worry about tha Evil One again. If 'is home were bought out from under 'im, then 'e would have ta leave tha world alone an' go seek another abode, per'aps far away from us 'ere on God's earth."

"Aaah, it's a fine dream ye have, Mrs O'Dougherty," Declan heard the archbishop's deep voice respond; "but that's all it is...just a dream. Who, on this earth, would have access to the title to the Devil's abode?"

"Who indeed?" another male voice replied; "but what a dream! To rid the world of Satan and all his minions by taking away their home...what a dream, Mrs O'Dougherty. What a dream!"

And on the conversation went, with voices putting the pros and cons of the idea and adaptations to it, until the tea had been drunk and the scones consumed. Then, one by one, the members of the Bible Class departed, leaving the archbishop alone with his thoughts.

Declan heard heavy footsteps over his head, and bent his back, giving the impression that he was absorbed in the tasks of the flower-beds. Not five feet from him, the portly figure of the archbishop leaned on the open windowsill, breathed in the fresh morning air, and muttered to himself; "Purchase Hell...what a dream! What a glorious, magnificent dream!"

Down below, his fingers working busily among the petunias, Declan O'Halloran knew that the keys to the mythical strongbox wherein lay his future had just been placed within his reach. And his cunning and intelligent mind promptly went to work.

CHAPTER SEVEN

That night at supper, Declan appeared to choke on a sliver of chicken-bone. He coughed, spluttered, and gasped for air, then suddenly brought his hand to his lips, and a small chunk of soap passed from his palm to his lips.

He took a gulp of water as if trying to clear his throat, and foam began to dribble from his lips, down over his chin, and onto the table-cloth. Then he doubled over, as if suffering the most terrible pain in the stomach, and his head began to tremble and shake, his hands began to twitch uncontrollably, and his eyes took on a glassy stare.

Suddenly he cried out: "*No! I will not do it!*" and appeared to collapse into a dead faint, his forehead resting on the edge of his dinner-plate. The remains of the soap-flake dropped unseen to his lap, and he quickly closed a fist around it and allowed it to slip unnoticed to the floor.

The archbishop rose and quickly moved around to where Declan sat, apparently unconscious, and took the man by his shoulders. Gently, he eased the head back so that the man could breathe more easily, and stared in mild disgust at the foam still dribbling from Declan's lips.

"Quickly, Mrs O'Dougherty! Quickly!" the archbishop cried out, and the housekeeper came waddling into the parlour, saw the archbishop bent over the inert figure of the little Irishman, and hurried to the rescue. She wiped away the foam from Declan's face, and between them, the archbishop and the housekeeper lifted the slumped form and carried him to the settee, where they stretched him out on his side, his head back so the airway was clear, and the archbishop sat, concerned, on the edge of the cushions.

A few minutes later, Declan groaned, waved a hand in the air, and began to awaken from his fit. He mumbled incoherently for a moment, then said, quite clearly: "*I told you I will not do it!*" and a moment later, his eyes opened.

"Are you alright, man?" the archbishop asked, taking Declan's hand between his and massaging it as if trying to bring life back into the body; "tell me...what happened? Do you suffer from fits? Was the work I set you today too much for you?"

Slowly, Declan's blue eyes focussed on the face of the archbishop, moved to the housekeeper, then returned to his saviour.

"It...was nothing, Your Eminence," Declan said slowly; "...just an old family malady. Please...do not concern yerself." And then he sat up.

"You should lie down for a while, my son," the archbishop said concernedly; "you've just suffered some kind of fit...I think I should fetch the physician."

Declan's eyes grew wide with fear. His lips began to tremble, and he muttered eventually: "No! Please! Do not do that! I...am alright, I...just..."

“Then tell me...what was it?” Archbishop Polding asked, his hand resting on the man’s brow, but Declan only shook his head and closed his eyes again.

Then, as if from far away, his voice came to them again: “It is too much responsibility...I can carry it no longer,” and his head slumped down as he appeared to pass into a dead faint.

Down in the dark depths of Hades, where the hell-fires raged and thick, black smoke rose into the sulphur-laden air from around the souls of the damned, Satan sat up, his ears cocked.

Something in the world of Man had stirred, awakening his wandering senses as they roamed over the earth, searching for more souls to drag down into His kingdom, something that was far from the usual Gluttony, or Vice, or Avariciousness, or any of the other Seven Deadly Sins that piqued his interest from time to time.

His name had been mentioned, yet not in words; it had been said in thought, flitted across the brain-cells of one who plotted and planned for his own benefit, plotted to use the Lord of the Underworld for his own gain. And this was enough to cause him to pay closer attention to the Universe above, where good men and women fought to hold Him at bay, fought against the darkness raised by the deadly spectres of those who sought to fulfil their own needs.

He rose from the gilded throne and stepped down off the dais, His feet crunching in the ash and soot underfoot, the debris of lost dreams and shattered intentions, and lifted His face up to the world above, seeking the source of that minute feather-touch upon His dark soul.

And then he found it, found the merest trace of a scheme, born in the heart of a mortal.

He listened closely, but heard no more; the tiny whispering voice was gone, vanished just as suddenly as it had come upon Him, and He was left to wonder and puzzle over the meaning of it, that fleeting image that had ventured into His consciousness.

Moving steadily but slowly forward on great, clawed feet, He came to the Pit of Damnation, where souls in torment spent their days, crying out for pity, for mercy, for the considerations they had never shown to others during lives of taking and keeping for their own. He crossed the Bridge of Wistful Sighs, where lovers pondered the mistakes of their days, the missed opportunities to show another the meaning of true love, one chance after another passing them by, until it was far too late to follow their aching hearts.

At last He came to the haunted Valley of Shadows, where the good had turned in that final period before passing over from Life to Death, and denied that to which they had clung all their lives, turning instead to the Dark Lord in their hour of need when they should have reached out to the only one who could save their mortal souls.

He watched as they wailed and moaned in their terror, a terror that would last for all eternity, until the world and time were no more, and all things ceased to be, watched the

tears running endlessly from their eyes, and listened to the sounds of their gasping breath in the hot, foetid air that burned the throats as it went down.

But that tiny voice was gone; it had faded away, far into the distance, beyond His reach.

No matter: it would come again. And when it did, He would know, and be ready to reach out and seize the soul that had uttered those faint sounds that rose on the burning breeze that swept through the land of Hell.

Turning, He walked back to the raised dais and slumped down into His gilded throne once more.

CHAPTER EIGHT

March 20th; 1848: For thirty-six hours, Declan lay, apparently in the grip of a stupor, breathing loudly and in shallow gasps, his hands fluttering on the bedclothes like doves unable to find their wings.

He roused once, when the archbishop instructed Mrs O'Dougherty to fetch the physician, said: "Don' trouble yerself, Yer Lordship...it is nothin' ...it will pass," then lapsed into apparent unconsciousness again.

Just before supper that night, the archbishop declared he would fetch the physician himself. Again, Declan roused, whispered: "No...it 'as 'appened before...it will 'appen again. Jus' let it pass," and again faded into slumber.

As the archbishop sat down to breakfast in the parlour, he said that no matter what the little Irishman said, the physician would be called following the meal, and set to his bacon and eggs with a will. Hardly had he finished speaking when Declan walked into the parlour, sat down, and asked for a strong cup of coffee with no milk and plenty of sugar 'to restore his equilibrium'.

Archbishop Polding attempted to draw his houseguest out on the strange attack that had laid him low the previous day, but Declan would not be drawn. He kept his face bowed, sipped at his coffee, rejected the plateful of bacon and eggs and toast, and sat, silent and morose, while again and again the archbishop sought to draw some response from him, some explanation as to the cause of his malady.

But the only remark Declan would make was: "Me harchbishop, there is some t'ings it is better that ye not know about. Leave it be, and pray it never takes me again, for if it does, I may not be responsible fer me actions."

And so the archbishop left it. He retired to his library, seeking books on maladies of the mind and brain, and searching them for an answer to whatever had taken place at supper two nights ago. He came across maladies, afflictions, illnesses a-plenty; but none seemed to fit precisely what had happened.

Meanwhile, Declan returned to his flower-bed tending, working slowly, like a man in a trance, oblivious to all save the tiny plants beneath his fingers, the weeds and clusters of grass-stems that had to be removed.

He came in when called for lunch, and again made do with a black cup of coffee and sugar, eating nothing, saying even less, and keeping very much to himself.

Then, as Mrs O'Dougherty rose to clear the table, the convict slumped suddenly forward in his chair, his forehead banging onto the table, cried out: "*No! I told you! I will not do it to him!*" and slipped, senseless, to the floor.

He remained still, unmoving, his eyes closed, until the archbishop, kneeling at his side, was about to wave the smelling-salts beneath his nose. Then he awoke, a wild, hunted

expression on the pallid face, the eyes flying from point to point around the room, sat up, and looked about him.

“What happened?” he asked.

As he attempted to rise, the archbishop's hand beneath his arm, the churchman said: “You took another fit. Now...you must tell me what this is about...what is causing these...fits?”

Declan slumped on the edge of the sofa, his head in his hands. His shoulders trembled as he said in a hoarse voice: “I cannot, Yer Grace...it is too terrible for any man to hear. It is...an old family curse,” and he rose and, shaking his head and mumbling to himself, he walked slowly through to the back door, and returned to his work.

Satan's great head came up, His ears pricked. That strange feeling had come over Him again, a thought from the world of man had invaded His land. Then, as His questing senses reached out to claim and identify it, the image vanished again.

Angrily, He slammed His fist down on the arm of His throne, and a deep, angry growl arose from His throat. There was a soul above, playing His game, and twice now it had slipped through His fingers.

He rose, and kicked in fury at the cinders about His feet, then stepped down off the high dais that overlooked the land of Hades, and paced restlessly about, seeking for the faintest clue as to what had just taken place.

But it was gone...and in its place was a great emptiness that cried out to be filled by a soul that sought entry to the Underworld. For although that soul may not have known it yet, it was already pounding on the door to Damnation, shrieking to be let in...and Satan was only too willing to open the portal.

There was always room for one more cursed soul in Perdition...

Declan worked slowly and methodically at his flower-beds, a tiny smile on his lips. He had planted the first seed three days ago in the mind of Archbishop Polding, then fertilised it with his remark that there were some things ‘too terrible for any man to hear’; that had been followed by a liberal dose of ‘an old family curse’.

And now the seed had taken root and was beginning to force its way through the fertile soil of the archbishop's calling, and would soon be ready for harvest. A long life of studying human nature had taught the little conman that if there was one thing no churchman could resist, it was mention of a ‘curse’ preceded by what, to such a man, appeared to be a case of demonic possession...and if the archbishop followed the usual mould of his kind, that was the way his mind was leaning now, although he may not yet have realized it.

A little more judicious prompting on the part of Declan O'Halloran, and the archbishop would be ready for 'fleecing'.

To be fair to our 'hero,' we should admit that a tiny twinge of guilt had entered his soul when he first considered the archbishop, his access to the wealth of the Church in his keeping, and the kind and considerate treatment the same man had showered upon the little convict. But fate, to Declan, was something one did not ignore when it came knocking upon one's door. And it was Fate alone that had placed him in an ideal position to take advantage of the situation, so he was not about to turn his back upon it now, all because of a debt he may have owed to the man who had saved him from the work-gangs and the lash.

He listened to the rustling of pages coming from the open window of the archbishop's library, the sighs and whispered words as the churchman sought an answer to Declan's strange malady, and knew that his act had taken pride of place in his intended dupe's thoughts. A prod here, a little shove there, and all would be his.

Humming quietly to himself, he pulled another weed from the petunias, and considered his next move in the chess-game of life.

CHAPTER NINE

March 21st;1848: Being a Sunday, Mrs O'Dougherty had the day off to attend church with the archbishop, a cold lunch prepared for him and his assigned convict in the ice-chest, and sandwiches prepared for their supper.

Feigning illness and a raging headache, Declan remained in his bed. When the archbishop suggested he miss the morning service and request the lay preacher to take it in his stead, Declan steadfastly refused to consider the idea, encouraging the archbishop to attend church, minister to his flock, and conduct whatever house-calls he had to make before returning to watch over the ailing patient.

He waited until the sounds of the archbishop's buggy, bearing the archbishop and Mrs O'Dougherty away to church, had faded into the distance, then rose and made his way to the housekeeper's room. Making his way to a small sewing-box on a bedside table on the far side of the room, he took a reel of fine black cotton, shoved it in his pocket, then went out to the shed in the back yard.

A few minutes' searching uncovered what he needed: a small quantity of putty. Pocketing that, he made his way back to his bedroom, took a small figurine of one of the saints down off the bookshelf, and fixed a tiny lump of grey putty to the back, some two inches up from the base. He removed enough cotton from the reel to reach the bed twice-over, looped it around the figurine and pressed it into the tiny ball of putty, then dropped both ends on the floor beneath the shelf.

He glanced around the room then, satisfied the twin threads of cotton could not be seen, got back into bed and kicked the covers about until the bed was untidy and the sheets rumpled and tossed.

Smiling to himself, Declan O'Halloran settled down to wait.

As the grandfather's clock struck one pm; Declan heard the front door open, then the voices of the archbishop and Mrs O'Dougherty in conversation, discussing the morning's service. Waiting until both voices sounded in the parlour, he gave a mighty shout, then screamed and hurled himself from the bed, landing with his face on the floor, both arms outflung, and his feet tangled in the sheets.

As the archbishop came rushing through the doorway to Declan's room, the little Irishman began shivering and twitching uncontrollably, whilst unintelligible sounds tumbled from his lips.

Archbishop Polding looked at the man hanging on the floor, shouted for the housekeeper to come to his aid, and ran to Declan's side, where he dropped to his knees. Whilst Declan kept up his twitching and shivering, his voice rising and falling, reaching a full-throated

scream then dropping away to a low whisper, the archbishop got both arms about the chest of the little man, and heaved.

Mrs O'Dougherty appeared in the doorway, saw what was happening, and lent her weight to the task of getting Declan back on the bed, on his back, where he lay, kicking his legs and waving his hands about furiously, until the archbishop seized both his wrists and held the tightly.

"Quickly, Mrs O!" the archbishop cried, leaning all his weight on the twitching arms; "run and fetch the physician!"

Mrs O'Dougherty ran for the front door.

Half an hour later, the physician finished his examination, pulled the stethoscope from his ears, and stood, gazing at the apparently-sleeping figure of Declan O'Halloran. He had administered an injection to quieten the patient, and whilst Declan still writhed and mumbled from time to time, he seemed more relaxed, at rest.

"Damned if I know what is wrong with the man," the physician said; "his pulse is normal. His heart sounds healthy...well, as healthy as one can expect for someone of his age...and there is nothing wrong with his breathing...now. It's some form of malady, obviously. But further than that, I cannot help. At a guess, I should say it's related to the brain...possibly. I suggest you keep him at rest, Archbishop, and if he shows any signs of further disturbance, call me. We may have to admit him to hospital, for further examination."

He began packing his medical equipment back into the old Gladstone bag he carried, and the archbishop, standing on the side of the bed nearest the door, sighed: "You cannot be more precise, doctor?" he asked, sighing again and gazing with pity at Declan.

"I'm afraid not. I don't think it's epilepsy...there are...certain signs one looks for in such cases, and none of those signs are present. As I say, I think it's related to the brain, but..." it was the physician's turn to sigh. As he walked to the door, the archbishop tucked the sheets tightly around Declan, then followed the physician to the front door.

Mrs O'Dougherty stood staring at Declan for some moments. Then she turned and left the room.

As soon as all three figures had faded from sight, Declan leaped from the bed, grabbed the cotton ends, and pulled them gently across the floor, dropping them beneath the side of the bed. Then he climbed back between the covers again, and lay, his eyes closed, his breathing relaxed, his right arm hanging out of the bed, the fingers touching the cotton-ends.

He heard the front door close, and immediately began mumbling incoherently, allowing his voice to grow louder as he heard the archbishop's heavy tread drawing nearer.

“Good Lord! Not again!” he heard the archbishop say, and then the footsteps stopped: the archbishop was standing in the doorway to Declan’s bedroom.

Suddenly Declan shouted: “Ye evil bastard! Ye evil bastard! I won’t do it! No matter what ye do ta me, ye devil!” then he allowed a low, evil chuckle to escape his lips, and his arms began to wave about. As the archbishop rushed to his side and seized his left wrist whilst trying vainly to lay hold of the right, Declan suddenly heaved himself up off the pillow.

He heard Mrs O’Dougherty’s running footsteps, heard them stopped...and pulled on the two ends of cotton.

The little figurine flew off the shelf and sailed across the room as the putty pulled free of the statuette and dropped, out of sight, to the floor. Again he pulled, and the cotton with the ball of putty attached flew out of sight beneath the bed.

Declan opened his eyes as the figurine smashed into the wall nearest the door and shattered into fragments. The archbishop turned, staring at the little statuette, and Declan shouted: “You will do what I command you, mortal! Or I will have your soul!”

Mrs O’Dougherty stared at the fragments of plaster on the floor, all that remained of the statuette: “What happened tat ha statue o’ Saint Michael?” she asked in a shocked voice, and Declan watched as the archbishop’s pale face turned to the woman.

“It...flew off the shelf...sailed right across the room...and just missed my face...” he muttered in a shocked, stunned whisper; “Mrs O’Dougherty, I am very much afraid that I now know what is wrong with this poor, benighted man.”

“Poor...benighted...an’ what is wrong with ‘im, d’ye think?” the woman asked, and the archbishop’s eyes returned to Declan’s wildly flashing eyes and waving hands.

“I think that..he is possessed...by a demon,” the archbishop replied; “...and if that is the case...then there is only one solution. We must prepare...for an exorcism-”

Hardly had the words left Archbishop Polding’s lips when Declan O’Halloran heaved himself upright in the bed. His eyes opened and fixed on the archbishop’s pallid face. Then he shouted: “*Churchman! Ye shall not send me away!*”

Then he collapsed back upon the bed in a dead faint.

Darkness fell early that night, as if all the world were hurrying to blanket its face from the events that were taking place in the parsonage next door to the grand and imposing St Mary's Cathedral.

Archbishop Polding sat just inside the doorway to the room where Declan O'Halloran lay, quiet and still now, his hands motionless on the coverlet except for the occasional nervous fluttering of his fingers, his lips moving silently, a soft whisper of sound emanating from his lips.

Leaning back in the old armchair Mrs O'Dougherty had brought for the archbishop, the churchman clutched his rosary beads, his Bible open on his expansive lap, a small bottle of Holy water clutched between his fingers, his eyes never leaving the face in the bed not six feet from him.

He had not dined in the parlour, but taken sandwiches and a small glass of tea earlier when the housekeeper had brought them to him, afraid to leave Declan's side in case the affliction that held him required the most desperate of measures – measures only a man of Archbishop Polding's training, experience, and faith could provide. Occasionally, he picked up the little candle burning in a holder near his feet and held it so that he could read one or two passages from the Good Book; other than that, he was motionless, on watch, guarding the little man in the bed against attacks from the world of evil that, the archbishop was certain, lurked so very close to him that night.

Somewhere outside the bedroom window, an owl hooted, a soft, lonely cry that seemed to echo the trepidation in the archbishop's heart. The wind caused a branch to scrape against the windowpane, and in the hallway, the grandfather's clock struck one am.

The archbishop yawned, rubbed at both eyes with his fists, yawned again, and fought against the weariness that seeped into every bone in his large body. It had been a long day, with three services to conduct, and visits to make to parishioners unable to leave their homes, together with hours of research he had made into the subject of exorcisms and demonic possession, but his day would not end until the dawn rose, and Mrs O'Dougherty could relieve him for an hour or two, providing Declan remained quiet and at rest, and the big man could snatch a short nap to 'recharge his energies', as he put it.

The old armchair in which he sat was heavily-padded and normally comfortable, but tonight, it seemed as comfortable as a rack to which he was bound, taxing every nerve, every muscle to their limits. But he dared not leave his post; there was no telling when the demon might appear, and the archbishop had to be ready for it, ready to do battle on Declan's behalf, ready to defend his flock against the danger that he felt sure was so very close to them that night.

Down in the depths of Hades, the huge, hulking figure looked up towards the world of Man, and listened: He could hear the thoughts racing through the mind of the priest, feel the trepidation in the man's heart as it beat, and almost see the concern on the lined and ageing face as the eyes focussed on the still figure in the bed.

Hour by hour, the image was becoming clearer, more sharply defined. And as Satan sat and considered the implications of what was taking place above His domain, He smiled to Himself, an evil twisting of the wide lips. A deep, throaty chuckle crept from the column of the throat and insinuated itself on the foetid air, hung for a moment, echoing deep within the Realm of the Damned, then died away gradually, until only the crackling of the Hell-fires remained.

At last, the idea that had taken shape in the mind of the figure in the bed was taking on a more definite form, an outline that was appearing slowly through the fog of images and memories and schemes that ran, helter-skelter, through the glowing brain-cells.

Satan focussed His eyes upon the tiny pinpoints of light as they flashed their messages to one another, and smiled again. What He could now see was very much to His liking.

The man in the bed had committed – or was about to commit – one of the Seven Deadly Sins – that of avarice. His mind was consumed with a hunger to possess the wealth controlled by the other figure in the little tableau, and had concocted a plan that was assured of success, providing all went as planned. And for its success, the plan depended principally upon the faith of the churchman, the blind obedience to his God, a blindness that would lead him into parting with a goodly portion of that wealth of his own volition, in an attempt at limiting the powers of the Dark Lord Himself.

Satan brought his huge right fist beneath the long, pointed chin, rested the elbow upon the knee, and stared at the world above, his concentration total and absolute, for here was a soul worthy of working for. Here was a soul that was condemning itself to an eternity of Purgatory, and all for a handful of gold.

The huge figure on the gilded throne smiled widely; the smile widened still more; the great mouth opened, showing row upon row of long, sharp teeth, a long, pointed tongue; then the laughter burst forth in a gust of sound that shook Hades to its very foundations and caused the lost souls in the Pit of Despair to tremble and quake.

The last pieces of the puzzle were almost in place. Soon, very soon, the image would become clear as the water in a limpid pool, and then the Dark Lord could begin to play His part in this scheme of mortal man to cheat another of that which he desired.

And when that happened, the game could begin.

March 22nd; 1848: Two-thirty five am. All was silent in the house. Even the owl, outside the window, calling to its mate, had fallen quiet, the breeze that ruffled the tops of the trees had stilled, and nothing moved.

In the tiny back room of the manse, the archbishop's balding head had fallen forward onto his chest as he slumbered, overcome by tiredness at last. His hand dropped down to his side, and the rosary beads slipped from his fingers to lie, forgotten, at his feet. The little bottle of Holy water slipped to the carpeted floor, bounced once, and rolled to a stop beside the leg of the armchair.

Declan's eyes, squinted shut so that only a tiny sliver remained open, saw the signs, and he gently and quietly slid back the covers and rose. Slipping his feet over the side of the bed, he picked up the reel of cotton and moved on soundless feet to the window, closed against the chill of the night.

He slid it open, then took up a pencil from the desk near it, and placed the pencil so that it was balanced on its point right on the edge of the lower sill and held the window open a few inches, then tied the end of the cotton around the centre of the pencil, paid out the thread behind him, and crawled carefully back beneath the covers. Beside the bed, his right arm hung down, the reel of cotton between the fingers. Tentatively, he pulled the cotton taut; a tiny tug more, and it would come free, allowing the window to slam shut.

Settling his head back on the pillow, he placed his left hand on his chest, and allowed his breathing to steady down to a soft rumble of sound.

He glanced across at the slumbering figure of the archbishop once more. Then he sat up, opened his mouth wide...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Aaaaaaaaagreeeehhhhhaaaaghr!”

The cry that was torn from Declan O'Halloran's lips brought the archbishop awake with such a start that he almost toppled from his chair. He came to his feet in an instant, his bleary eyes trying to focus on the man sitting bolt-upright in the bed, his left hand upraised, the fingers splayed out before him as if warding off some terrifying threat.

“Dear God in Heaven above!” the archbishop shouted, rushing to the bed and dropping to his knees beside it. As he did so, Declan opened his mouth again, and screamed: *“No! Get out, you demon from Hell! Be gone! Be gone from here!”* Then the voice dropped to a hoarse bass tone, and the shocked archbishop noticed that, although Declan's lips did not appear to move, he uttered the words: *“I shall be gone then! But I warn thee...I shall return for thy soul!”* And suddenly, on the far side of the room, the window slammed shut with a crash that shook the house.

As the short, dumpy figure of Mrs O'Dougherty appeared in the doorway, draped in an old dressing-gown and with rollers in her hair, Declan raised both hands to his face, and his shoulders began to tremble. A soft sob broke from his lips, then another, and he slumped back in the bed, turned his face away from the archbishop, and curled up into a tight little ball.

Hearing a sound behind him, the archbishop turned and stared at the housekeeper.

“Lord in Heaven, Mrs O'Dougherty!” he whispered; “that was the voice of the Devil himself!”

“Oi never knew ‘e spoke wit’ an Irish accent,” Mrs O'Dougherty muttered sarcastically, and fixed her gaze on the apparently-shattered man in the bed.

“Oh, Mrs O; the Devil can take on many guises, many accents,” the archbishop told her, his eyes wide with fear; “he is the prince of liars, and will lead you to believe he is one of your kind, no matter what kind you are! I tell you, that was the voice of Satan himself!”

“Well, devil or no...’e nearly broke me window. Tell ‘im ta be careful next time!” Mrs O'Dougherty returned, and left the room, muttering to herself.

Rising, the archbishop returned to the chair in which he had been sitting, and fetched the bottle of Holy water and his rosary beads. Then he came back to the bed, seated himself on the edge of the mattress, and took Declan gently by the shoulder.

“My dear, poor boy,” he began; “you must tell me what just took place. For your own good...and for all our sakes...we must know what just took place betwixt you and the Master of Evil. Here...” and he leaned forward, uncorked the bottle of Holy water, dribbled some onto his forefinger, and gently drew the sign of the Cross on Declan's forehead.

Immediately the archbishop's finger touched the little man's forehead, Declan straightened himself in the bed so that his body was stiffened, like a steel rod. His hands flew out, clutching at the air, the fingers flexing and unflexing, and he shrieked in that strange bass voice: "*Do not do that! it burns! It burns!*"

"Hold still, my boy! Hold still!" the archbishop cried, seizing Declan's shoulder and turning him onto his back. Seizing his wrist, the churchman forced the fingers open and pressed the rosary beads into them, then closed the hand again.

"Hang onto those...they will protect you and keep you safe," he said, and sat back, waiting to see what the reaction would be.

It was not long in coming: almost immediately, Declan's body began to relax, and his hands dropped to his chest, the fingers wrapped tightly about the rosary beads, the water where the archbishop had drawn the Cross still shining dully on his forehead. As his face relaxed and his eyes opened, he focussed on the concerned face of the archbishop and said in a whisper: "Thank tha Lord fer yer presence, Me Eminence. Wit'out you, he mighta won!"

"Tell me...what is it that Satan wants of you?" As he spoke, the archbishop rose, fetched the Bible, lying beside his chair, and returned to Declan's side.

The little Irishman's hands came up, shielding the face, hiding the eyes from view, and his shoulders began to tremble again.

"I cannot...it is too terrible to tell any man..." Declan muttered, and tried to turn away, but the archbishop held his shoulder in a firm grip and prevented him.

"You *must*, my boy, for only then...only when we know what Satan wants of you can we prepare our defences, and ward off his attacks upon your poor body and suffering soul. Come now...tell me...what does he want?" and he gently reached out and pulled Declan's hands away from his tear-streaked face.

Declan sat for a time, apparently gathering his thoughts. Then, in a soft and broken voice, he whispered: "He wants...me ta...destroy yerself, Yer Worship, an' bring down tha Cathedral. Ye've done too much good, too many good works, in this loife, an' Satan sees ye as a threat ta his dominion over tha earth. 'E wants ye...*Oh!* how can I say tha words? It is too terrible..."

The archbishop crushed Declan's head to his breast, one hand stroking the hair. They sat like that for several moments, then the archbishop gently pushed Declan away from him, held him at arm's length, turned his face so that he could meet the eyes of Declan O'Halloran, and replied in a strong but low voice: "You've already told me all I need to know, my poor boy. Lord! What a terrible load you've been carrying! You should have come to me as soon as...as soon as the devilish monster made his approaches to you. Tell me, Declan...how does he plan for you to...take my life?"

The time had come for Declan to play his trump card. The 'dupe' was ready to receive the bait, and swallow the hook that, if it held, would unlock the fortunes over which the archbishop held sway.

Leaning his head against the archbishop's ample bosom and flinging his arms about the churchman, Declan said: "He...doesn't want ye dead...he wants yer reputation destroyed, so that yer soul becomes his fer all time. An'...he wants me ta...lead ye inta a trap...he wants me ta...trick ye inta thinkin' yer *purchasin'*...tha land o' *Hades!*"

Immediately, Mrs O'Dougherty's words came back to the archbishop, just as Declan had intended. He saw himself once again in the white robes of the Holy Father, standing on a balcony, waving to a multitude far larger than any flock to which he had ministered in his life. His chest swelled, and his human pride, a failing held by many of us, forced itself to the forefront of his mind. With a voice that held determination and strength, a strength he had not known he possessed, he said: "Then we will *purchase* the land of Hades. As soon as it can be arranged. But you and I, Declan...we will perform a service to the world that will stand for all time as testimony to the power of faith, and belief, and Christianity. By the Lord, we will beat Satan at his own game, you and I! *We will purchase Hades!*"

CHAPTER TWELVE

A broad, evil grin spread across the face of Satan as he digested the information He had just learned.

It seemed the little confidence trickster wanted to use the powers of Hades for his own ends, in a scheme to bilk the churchman of some of the vast wealth over which he had control, and intended using a sale of Hades itself as the method.

Many thoughts and ideas raced through His evil mind as he sat there, one arm braced on the arm of the throne in which He sat, His chin resting on His fist, His eyes holding a glitter few had seen before. The soul of the little trickster was something that He would inherit when the time came; but to capture the soul of one such as Archbishop Polding...that would be a victory indeed!

A sale of the land of Hades...that was a plot of which even Satan Himself would have been proud! But...how did the little man intend springing his trap on the trusting and unsuspecting archbishop? How would he prove that he did, indeed, hold the deed to such a place as this?

Rising from His throne, he stepped carefully down the ash-strewn pathway towards his House of Records, avoiding the reaching, beseeching hands of those seeking mercy from the Master of Hell, those who had learned that what one did on earth held a direct bearing on how one spent one's time in eternity, and approached the great, steel door behind which lay the records and plans for the entire realm that lay beneath His control, used a huge gold key to unlock the door, and pushed it open on hinges that squealed, sounding like the wailing and crying of many souls in torment, and stepped inside.

He walked to the centre of the vast room, the walls lined with filing cabinets and chests stacked one atop the other, and allowed His eyes to roam from one to the next, whilst His evil thoughts at the same time played with and teased the matter of the little man and the fat archbishop. He moved further into the room, His great clawed feet tossing up clouds of ash and cinders with every step, and at last saw what he sought, buried beneath a pile of chests and strongboxes down at the far end of the room – a cabinet that had not been opened in aeons. Therein, He was sure, lay the document He sought.

Brushing aside the detritus of ages past, huge cobwebs, and dust that lay inches thick, He pulled aside the boxes one by one, eventually reaching an old, battered metal chest, its sides showing where rust and woodworm had eaten into its body. Reaching down with His huge clawed hands, He pulled the chest out and lifted it onto a table that rested just behind Him, and took from His pocket a large brass key, similar to the one that had opened the door of the Ancient Records Room. Inserting the key into the lock, He applied pressure, gently at first then with increasing pressure, and at last heard a loud 'chink!' as the wards of the lock turned protestingly, and the lid flew back.

Within were documents piled upon files, thousands of them, filling every corner of the chest.

Somewhere in that accumulation of records and deeds lay the one document that could give the little Irishman the power to carry out his devious plan. Somewhere amidst all the sheets and files added over time to the contents of that chest lay the one document that could bring Him the souls of the little Irishman and the powerful and respected Archbishop Polding...

The afternoon sun slanted through the window of the archbishop's library, casting bright blades of light across the surface of the great mahogany desk and limning the items ranged upon its scarred surface in a shining halo that seemed to beckon the eyes of Archbishop Polding onward, onward to the achievement of something that had begun as a chance remark by Mrs O'Dougherty and now lay just beyond the churchman's reaching fingertips, a tempting prize that was not to be ignored.

It was strange, indeed, how Fate worked at times. Never in all his long life of service to his church had the archbishop dared dream of the chance that now fully-occupied his mind and led him on towards the final, ultimate victory of Good over Evil, Life over Death, Heaven over Hell. And now, there it lay, like a shining trophy, waiting to be seized and lifted from the reaching hands of its owner and placed among the relics and religious artifacts of centuries past, with the name of Archbishop Polding inscribed on a brass plate beneath it.

The Deed to Hell itself.

Never once in the archbishop's mind did it occur to him that the prize he sought could never be his, could never belong to any man. Never once did it enter his imaginative mind that he could be the unsuspecting dupe in a scheme designed to rob him of a goodly part of the wealth over which he held sway.

Hovering before him like a heaven-sent vision of what could be hung the image of an old and faded parchment, the writing almost indecipherable now, supplanted by another vision – that of himself bedecked in white, and wearing a white-and-gold bishop's mitre and holding the gold cross, symbol of Papal power in his left hand.

It was not that the archbishop was avaricious, or greedy, no more so than any man. But just like any man, the enormity of the plan developing in his mind conjured up images of the rewards that could be his upon the culmination of his scheme to rid the world of all its evil in one stroke, and like any man, he could not divorce the images from his consciousness and think on a more staid and sensible plane when what was needed was a degree of common sense that would have told him the thing he dreamed of could never be.

And so he sat, leaning back in his oversized armchair, his elbows resting on the arms of the contrivance, his chin resting on his folded fingers, his eyes closed, allowing the pictures and wild imaginings of what his future could be to filter, one by one, in an unending succession, through his racing mind.

How was he to work this plan to end all plans? How was he to defeat the might and power of Hell itself, and carry off the prize that would see Satan homeless and defeated for all time? 37

At that moment he did not know. He only knew that in a small room at the back of the rectory lay a little man who had been given the task of bringing down the archbishop by offering the prize of the deed to Hell, then withdrawing it when the archbishop's soul was firmly in the grasp of the Evil One, and lost to Heaven for all time.

But forewarned of the plan, the archbishop intended turning the scheme back on its perpetrator in such a way that his name would live on through history as a shining example of what one man of faith could achieve with an agile mind and guidance from above.

And so Archbishop Polding dreamed on through the heat of the long afternoon, travelling in his mind from a cathedral in early Sydney Town to a balcony in the ancient city of Rome, and glory far beyond his greatest expectations...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

March 23rd; 1848: “How long do we have to complete the...transaction?” the archbishop whispered whilst Mrs O’Dougherty was in the kitchen, fetching the dessert.

Declan stopped, his fork halfway to his mouth, and said softly: “Days yet, Yer Eminence. Days. Never fear...there is no rush.” And he was quite correct: he had not even begun work on the ‘deed’ yet, not even put pen to parchment; in fact, he had not even found the parchment he needed to make the document look authentic, which it would need to do if it was to fool someone as intelligent as Archbishop Polding.

“Excellent!” the archbishop sighed, leaning back in his chair, as Mrs O’Dougherty reappeared, a large baking dish in her hands; “for I have an...Ecumenical Council in the city of Bathurst, some two hundred miles away, and must leave on the morrow.”

“When will ye be back, Yer Worship?” Declan asked, and the archbishop’s eyebrows drew down at the misuse, once again, of his title. Why could not people ever get it right?

“In a week...I must leave tomorrow evening on the coach, and shall return at the end of the week, in time for Sunday’s services.”

Declan smiled to himself: a week! that gave him plenty of time to prepare the bait, and have it ready for the archbishop’s perusal. He knew that his scheme would not work unless the old man honestly believed he held, in his hands, the title deed to Hades...and that meant Declan had numerous purchases to make, and hours of work ahead of him.

“Errr...does Yer Holiness mind if i...go inter town awhile tomorrow mornin’, ter make some...purchases? Oi need some t’ings fer me...pers’nal use, an’ cannot get them at tha corner store.”

“Of course. Of course,” the archbishop said expansively, spreading his hands wide and sniffing in the aroma of the pudding Mrs O’Dougherty had baked; “take as much time as you need, my son. In fact, there are some items I need for my trip, and you may as well purchase these as well whilst you are in the city. Take my brougham...I will not be using it.”

The meal over, and the weeding completed in the gardens, Declan managed to secure the afternoon for himself, and locked the bedroom door before commencing. He took out pencils, ruler, quill, ink, and eraser, and sat down at his desk, drew a small sketch-pad towards himself, and began laying out the document. But the weeks and months he had spent in the keeping of Her Majesty’s prisons had robbed him of his steady hand and keen eye, and he found that his fingers trembled slightly whilst holding the quill.

Whilst the archbishop was in his library, laying out his plans for the upcoming Council, and Mrs O’Dougherty was busy in the kitchen, Declan stole into the parlour, opened the cabinet where the archbishop kept his supply of twelve-year old brandy, and helped himself to a bottle and glass. Then he returned to his room, locked the door once again, uncorked the

bottle, and took a glass of the fiery liquid. Then he held his hand out before him, fingers splayed, and noticed the tremor was still present, and one thing demanded of the task he must complete in the archbishop's absence was a steady, even rock-steady, hand. He refilled the glass, downed the contents, then filled it a third time, and by the end of that glass, found his customary steady fingers had returned to him, although his eyes were slightly blurred and his gait a little unsteady.

He returned to his chair, pulled back the curtains so the afternoon sun shone directly on his desk, pulled the sketchpad towards himself again, and settled down to work once more.

As he worked, the sun continued its voyage from east to west, and shadows lengthened, casting odd patterns across his work, and eventually, after two hours of solid work, he sat back and carefully inspected the document he had produced in pencil. He found that, at long last, his keen eye had returned, and quickly realized this would never do: the letters were odd sizes, the curlicues amateurish, the flourish in the signature at the bottom varying in size from the first letter to the last. In addition, there were odd ink-spills on the white sheet where his early attempts with the quill had come to nought.

But the biggest problem was the sheet on which he worked, for it was obviously torn from a new block of sketching sheets, and not as aged and time-worn as he knew it must appear.

For some time, he sat in thought, considering the problem of ageing the document so as to give it an authentic appearance. And then, just as the last shadows had stretched all the way from the window to his body, resting against the edge of the desk, he knew what he had to do.

He gathered up his pencils, quill, ink, eraser, ruler, and sketching-pad, and locked them away in the desk-drawer until such time as he could destroy those first, early, amateurish attempts forever, rose, and left the room to join the archbishop and Mrs O'Dougherty at the table for supper.

March 24th; 1848: Declan O'Halloran was out and about early that morning, taking, as the archbishop had suggested, the official brougham, and touring the backstreets and alleyways of the Haymarket for second-hand bookstores and artists' equipment stores from one end of the city to the other in the end, before he found all the materials he sought.

He attended to the archbishop's small shopping-list, stowed the articles in a small cardboard box beneath the seat, and continued on by foot, seeking out whatever stores he had missed on his first search, and at last came upon a small, dingy, and ill-lit bookstore at the back of the city markets. The volumes that lined the rickety shelves looked old, time-worn, and covered in dust, and eventually, after an hour of hunting and perusing almost every item within the tiny shop, he found an old volume entitled 'The First Voyage of HM Barque Endeavour,' printed on parchment and not on paper, which was the more modern way of producing printed material, and purchased it for the sum of two shillings.

Then, his purchases stowed away in a small holdall, and the book carefully bound in brown paper and stored flat at the bottom of the bag, he set out once again for the parsonage just as the sun had passed its zenith.

In one old store, he had come across a quill, its tip discoloured and browned by the powdered ink of a bygone age; in another, a collection of pencil-stubs, their tips blunted; in a third, he had found a pair of spectacles that fitted more or less securely on his nose, with lenses that would aid his eyesight. But his master purchase of the day had been the book.

Its pages were yellowed and discoloured by time and the effects of leaving it open in the sun over the course of its life. In fact, some of the ink was so badly faded, it was almost illegible. But it was not the printed pages that were of value to him.

Like all books produced for commercial consumption, it carried blank end-papers, made of the same parchment as the printed sheets, with no figures or notations marring their faces on either side. Using a sharpened and extremely keen razor, he would carefully cut out the end-papers, and reproduce his 'deed' on these, with all the skill and attention to detail he could muster.

Then he would leave the documents in the sun in his room, before a closed window so that the morning sun, moving across his window, would work its magic on the documents, discolouring them further and giving a slightly wrinkled appearance to them. Over a period of four days, while the archbishop was in faraway Bathurst, Declan O'Halloran's skill, aided by Nature, would reproduce two aged and genuine-looking documents, good enough to fool all but the most skilful of students, certainly good enough to fool the archbishop. With a little further work to make the two documents appear even more aged than they already seemed, he would then select the best of the two, and this would become the centrepiece of his scheme to lessen the archbishop's coffers and fill his own pockets with the wealth and power he so dearly craved.

All now depended on Declan's own skill. If his hand trembled in the slightest, or if the tiniest accident should occur to mar the work he had set before himself, the plan would fall into ruin. But Declan O'Halloran had no intention of allowing this to happen. He would carry his plan through, and at the end, the archbishop would hold, in his fat hand, the deed to Hades itself, and Declan would disappear with enough wealth to carry him through the rest of his life in comfort and security from the law.

As the brougham turned in at the gates of the rectory and drew to a halt before the door, Declan allowed himself one more small smile of victory, then gathered up his purchases and the box containing the goods the archbishop had requested, and stepped down onto the drive, just as Mrs O'Dougherty opened the front door.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

March 25th; 1848: Declan had loaded the archbishop's baggage aboard the brougham the evening before. He had accompanied the old man in to the Cobb & Co coach terminal in the city, where he had once again loaded the heavy bags onto the coach. Then, like the dutiful servant he was, he had stood and waved farewell as the driver whistled and cracked his whip, and the coach had started on its way along George Street, and out of the city.

When the coach had passed from sight, he had boarded the brougham again and travelled back to the rectory where, after a nightcap of the archbishop's best whiskey, he had retired to bed, weary but eagerly looking forward to the coming day.

During breakfast, he had listened with half an ear to Mrs O'Dougherty's endless prattling and given a non-committal grunt where it seemed appropriate as she voiced her opinions on the dangerous trip the ageing archbishop had undertaken, the dangers of bushrangers holding up the coach, the accidents that could befall a coach on the steep descent over Mount Victoria, fifty miles to the west. When he finally laid down his knife and fork and rose to leave the table, he heaved a sigh of relief: the woman could be so tiring at times, and at that point, he reminded himself not to hire such servants when the time came for Mr Declan O'Halloran to set up his household in whatever distant land or city he chose to settle. A closed mouth and attention to duty was all that was required of servants who worked for him, and Mrs O'Dougherty certainly did not fill the first of these two roles.

He retired to his room, locked the door, and carefully removed his purchases from the little holdall, setting them out on the desk in the bright sunlight coming through the window, drew up his chair, rolled up his sleeves, donned a pair of silk gloves he had purchased the day before to keep the grease and grime of his fingers from leaving marks on the parchment, and at last took out the book.

He opened the stiff cover, and there before him, just as he expected, was the first of the pristine end-papers, already showing the signs of age in the wrinkling and the fine brown stains that often discoloured old parchment when left lying in the sunlight for too long a time.

Taking out a razor, he carefully slit the end-paper from the binding, then turned to the back of the book and removed that end-paper also, laying them to one side beneath a clean square of lint-free cloth.

Then he pulled the little sketch-pad towards him, and set to work.

As the grandfathers clock in the hallway struck eleven am; Mrs O'Dougherty poured a cup of coffee from the archbishop's percolator, placed it on a saucer, added milk and sugar and stirred it, then placed two biscuits on the saucer and carried the cup through to Declan's room.

She knocked on the door, and turned the handle, but the door remained firmly closed.

“Mr O’Halloran!” she called; “why is yer door locked? What are ye doin’?”

There was silence for a moment. Then Declan’s muffled voice came back: “Important work for the archbishop.”

“Oi’ ve yer mornin’ tea here, an’ some biscuits. Will ye open tha door?”

Muttering beneath his breath, Declan raised his voice, and called back: “Oi cannot. Leave tha mornin’ tea out there...Oi’ll get it in a minute, thank ye.”

Mystified, Mrs O’Dougherty stared at the door. Then, shrugging her shoulders, she bent and placed the cup and saucer on the floor, and walked away. ‘What on earth could that little convict be doin’ that would not allow tha door ta be opened?’ she wondered. She had worked for the archbishop for many years, and there were no secrets between them of which she was aware; so why all the secrecy so suddenly?

Then she realized her own birthday was but two weeks away, and smiled to herself: that dear man had set his convict servant to working on a gift for his housekeeper. What a dear man he was! Again, she smiled, and returned to her duties in the kitchen, humming happily to herself.

Declan heaved a sigh, and sat back in his chair. His back and shoulder-muscles were aching, his fingers had grown stiff from holding the pencil and quill so tightly, and his eyes felt as if they were filled with sand, but at last he had produced a document that, with a little more refinement, would pass the most intense scrutiny, if reproduced on a sheet of the parchment. It was a pity that the book from which he had cut the end-papers was a standard-size volume, and not an A4 size, or perhaps even a little larger. But if he paid attention to detail, and aged the sheet appropriately, it should be good enough to serve his purposes.

Just as he peeled the silk gloves from his aching fingers, the grandfather’s clock outside struck the half-hour after three: Lord! he had been working solidly for six hours!

On the desk near his right hand lay a small stack of sheets from the sketching-pad. Each time he had taken a new sheet and started work only to make a small mistake, he had taken a fresh sheet and begun again. But the difficult, repetitive task had been worth it in the finish.

The afternoon shadows were lengthening over his desk, creating pools of dark shade and areas of white light on the pad, which tended to throw out his accuracy, so he gathered up his pencils and other equipment, and the little sketch-pad, and locked them in the desk-drawer, then pushed the key into his trouser’s pocket.

Picking up the stack of partly-completed practice drawings, he tore them separately into small pieces, shoved the pieces into a brown-paper bag, and stuffed the bag into the holdall, where Mrs O’Dougherty would not look if she came in to clean the room. It would not do for her to discover what he had been working on at such a late stage in his plans. One inquisitive housekeeper, at this point, could ruin everything.

Then, one hand pressed to his complaining back-muscles, he rose from his chair, checked that all was securely locked away, and left the room. He walked, stiff-legged - for he had been sitting for so long - down the corridor and out the front door to the rubbish-bin, and shoved the brown-paper bag deep inside it, then replaced the lid.

He stood on the sidewalk in the late afternoon sunlight, feeling the cool evening breeze blowing across his face and bare arms, and flexed his fingers to get the blood pumping once again, gazed along the street and watched a large dray, executing a wide turn at the bottom of the main road that intersected with the street in which the rectory stood, and turned to make his way back inside the house.

Tomorrow, he would begin work on the parchment. If he managed to complete the document in one long sitting, that would leave him three days to properly age it before the archbishop returned from Bathurst.

“An’ that...” he muttered to himself, smiling; “...should be that.” All that then remained was to decide on a price...not so high that the archbishop would shy away from the sale, yet high enough to allow Mr Declan O’Halloran to live in comfort the rest of his days.

This would be the last ‘job’ he would ever conduct in a long and somewhat checkered career of deception, lies, cheating, and outright lying to all and sundry. So the prize at the end of the ‘job’ had to be enough to last him until his dying day.

Whistling softly, he walked back inside the house and closed the door.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

March 26th; 1848: Declan was up and at his desk even before Mrs O'Dougherty had stumbled into the kitchen for her first cup of coffee at dawn.

He unlocked the drawer, took out his equipment, and laid it on the polished mahogany surface of the desk, then carefully pulled on the silk gloves before unwrapping the two sheets of parchment and laying one of them aside.

The second one, he placed before his chair, slid a clean sheet of art-paper over it to protect it from the sweat of his forearms, then sat down. Stretching his arms out before him, he interlocked the fingers of his hands and applied pressure, listening appreciatively as the knuckles 'cracked' one by one, then set to work.

He was just about to apply the first fine stroke of ink to the parchment when he realized he had not locked his bedroom door. Rising from his chair, he moved to the door, then hesitated: he would be working in this tiny room, with the direct sunlight beaming down on him, probably for most of the day...he would need the occasional drink.

Moving silently out to the parlour, he opened the wine cupboard and took out a bottle of the archbishop's finest whiskey, aged eighteen years in the bottle. Then he thought about it for a moment, reached inside again, and removed a second bottle and a glass.

Holding the two bottles and the glass, he walked back into the bedroom, locked the door behind him, and settled down. He removed the seal from the first bottle, filled the glass, and took an appreciative sip: the normally-fiery liquid slid down his throat like silk moving over a smooth surface, and he downed the glass. Then he refilled it, sipped again, and took up his quill.

Unseen, the gaunt figure of Satan hovered just behind Declan's chair and peered over his shoulder, watching as the first deft stroke took shape on the blank surface of the sheet of parchment.

As the work proceeded, Satan Himself could not help but marvel at the skill of the little Irishman: He had seen many such men at their work in the past, but this particular one was in a class of his own. Each stroke was sure and firm, with nary a smudge to sully the pristine shades of the old parchment beneath Declan's hand. In fact, the document that was appearing, line by line, was almost as good as the original, which lay hidden safely within the Dark Lord's voluminous robes.

Declan worked on through the heat of the morning, unaware that he was being observed, his hand moving over the sheet in practiced strokes that, little by little, formed each letter, each punctuation-mark, perfectly.

And behind his left shoulder, His eyes wide, His mouth agape, Satan could only watch and admire the skill and talent displayed by the owner of the soul He planned to claim, when the work was done and the plan carried through to fruition.

Oh yes! This was a soul for which He had much work in the deep, dark depths of Hell! Work that would take an eternity to complete. But then...the little Irishman would have all of eternity to accomplish the tasks his Master would set him.

And Satan would see to it that His master craftsman was not disturbed in his labours...

Declan worked on through the hot afternoon whilst his fingers cramped and his shoulder-muscles began to ache abominably. He had been concentrating on his task so hard, he had a headache, and his eyes swam in and out of focus every now and then, but he stuck to his task until it was completed, then sighed, laid aside his quill, and sat back to admire his work.

Waiting until the late afternoon sunlight had completely dried the ink on the sheet of parchment, he picked it up by a corner, picked up a magnifying glass from near his right hand, and held it over the first line of work. He scrutinised each detail minutely, mark by mark, then turned his attention to the second line, and so on, until he had reached halfway down the page.

Then he stopped. His mouth drew down into a firm, hard line, and his anger began to rise: he had made a tiny mistake in the word 'Owner'; there, between the 'w' and the 'n' was a tiny dot of ink, appearing for all the world like a period-mark slightly out of place.

He could have left it, knowing it was highly unlikely that the archbishop would detect it. But his pride in his work would not allow him to ignore the tiny error.

Groaning heavily, he laid aside the magnifying glass and put down the sheet of parchment. There was now no way he could remove the offending spot of ink, for it had dried completely, and could not be erased without leaving a tell-tale mark on the face of the parchment.

There was nothing else for it: he would have to do the whole job over again. and he had only one sheet of parchment left, so would have to take far greater care than he had with the first sheet.

Moving aside the completed sheet, he drew the second end-leaf towards himself, picked up the quill, and dipped it in the jar of ink. But as he raised his hand, preparatory to making that first, important mark on the pristine sheet, his fingers cramped once again, and his hand began to tremble. He brought his left hand over, removed the quill from his right hand, and laid it carefully down to one side of the desk, then lowered his right hand onto his lap.

He took out his fob-watch and gazed at its face: six-thirty-one pm. He had been hard at work for over twelve hours. No wonder his hands were cramping, his muscles aching!

Just at that moment, there was a knock at the door to his room, and the doorknob turned. But he had locked the door from the inside, and it would not open.

“Mr O’Halloran! What are ye doin’ in there? Ye’ve missed yer lunch, an’ yer supper is getting’ cold!” Mrs O’Dougherty’s voice called through the door.

Shoving the art equipment into the open drawer and laying a clean sheet of paper over the remaining end-sheet of parchment, he rose, stepped to the door, and unlocked it.

Mrs O’Dougherty stood there, her hands braced on her hips, her eyes staring at him at first, then trying to see past him, see what he had been doing that had taken the whole day. But he blocked her view, and smiled: “Oi’m so sorry, Mrs O’Dougherty...Oi fergot tha time,” he apologised; “Oi’ll come an’ get me supper now.” And he closed the door again, leaving the housekeeper standing there.

Declan returned to the desk, carefully removed the silk gloves, and placed them in the desk-drawer, then closed and locked it and left the room, firmly locking the door behind himself. He walked out to the parlour, poured half a glass of whiskey, and sat down in the old armchair while Mrs O’Dougherty fetched his supper from atop a pot of boiling water on the stove, and brought it to him.

“Roast lamb...yer fav’rite,” she grinned, tempted to ask him what the surprise was that he had spent all day on, the surprise she was sure was for her birthday. But then...that would spoil the surprise, would it not? Best to hold on to her burning curiosity, and allow the archbishop and his servant their little secret for now. All would be revealed in time, and then she could show real surprise when presented with whatever this miraculous gift happened to be.

Hungry, his right hand barely able to hold his knife, Declan set to his supper.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

March 27th; 1848: As the first pale streaks of colour showed on the distant horizon, Declan rose, dressed, and went out to the parlour. He could hear Mrs O'Dougherty singing softly to herself as she worked in the kitchen, so dropped to his knees in front of the archbishop's wine cupboard, quietly slid out another bottle of vintage whiskey, and went back into his room.

Once again, he took out his equipment, set it out upon the desk, then removed the sheet of parchment from its protective sheets of art paper, and pulled on the silk gloves. Then, after setting his spectacles firmly on the bridge of his nose, he set to work once again.

On this particular day, he knew he could not afford to make a mistake again, for he had no more parchment with which to work, so he took even more care, even more time, than he had the previous day. In fact, he was so meticulous and careful that, by the time he heard the clock in the hallway striking eleven am; he had only just completed the words 'Bill of Sale' across the head of the document.

Laying aside his quill, and moving the ink-well so that there was no danger of accidentally bumping it and spilling ink over his work, he pulled off the gloves and gently massaged the fingers of his right hand. Even now, they were beginning to stiffen up, and there was still much work to be done.

He emptied the remains of yesterday's second bottle of whiskey into his glass and drank deeply, savouring the gentle flow of liquid down over his throat, and noting the slight rushing feeling that penetrated his brain as the alcohol did its work. Then he picked up the little magnifying glass and carefully inspected the work he had completed so far: it was perfect, not a letter out of place; not the tiniest slip or error anywhere.

Rising from his chair, he placed one hand against his lower back, pushed inwards, and walked a few paces to ease the cramping from his back-muscles, then shook his shoulders, massaged the muscles with his fingertips, and sat down again.

Eleven o'clock. He could waste no further time. He picked up the quill, wiped its tip on a clean piece of rag, then started again.

Declan did not appear for his lunch, nor did he come out for his supper, so Mrs O'Dougherty placed his plate of corned beef and vegetables on a plate over a pot of boiling water to keep it warm, and retired to bed. The little convict would find his supper when he came out of his room.

Two hours later, as the clock struck the quarter-hour after two am; Declan was finished.

With trembling fingers, he picked up the quill, capped the ink-well, and placed both in the drawer. He took up the magnifying glass and carefully inspected the document, each word, each tiny mark, for any imperfections, and found none.

He had done it! He had completed the 'Deed to Hades,' the document he would use to gain as much of the archbishop's wealth as he possibly could. And before the churchman had fully realized the trick his servant had played upon him, Declan O'Halloran would be long gone, to some faraway place where the long reach of the law would never think to search for him.

He turned the document over, inspected the back, and found no marks to mar its surface, then turned it face-up again and laid it down on the desk. All that remained now was the ageing process.

But he had estimated it would take fully three days of the document's lying face-up in the bright sun to fade to a shade that would deceive the archbishop. And now, because of that tiny mistake he had made in the first document, he had only two days remaining until the archbishop returned from his Ecumenical Council in Bathurst.

Pouring the last of the whiskey into his glass, he sipped, then considered the problem: to make the document curl and develop the signs of ageing so necessary to the scheme, heat was needed. Heat would make the document look old, curled, wrinkled, just as one would expect it to look after being locked away in Hades ever since eternity had begun. Yet with only two days...

Then he had it: tomorrow morning, he would rise early, before Mrs O'Dougherty. He would open the oven, kept warm overnight with a small fire burning in its belly, and lay the document inside for perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes. That should be enough to achieve the desired effect.

Smiling happily to himself, he completed stowing away his equipment in the drawer, and went out into the parlour, where he opened another bottle of the archbishop's special whiskey, and walked into the kitchen to retrieve his supper.

March 28th; 1848: Just as Declan had planned, the house was silent and still when he arose that morning. He dressed quickly, moved out into the kitchen, the parchment in his gloved hand, and knelt before the oven. Opening the door and holding his breath as the ancient door squealed its protest, he laid a single sheet of newspaper on the rack, then slid the document in on top of it and closed the door again.

He moved back into the bedroom, collected all the equipment he had used in creating his work of art, bundled it up in two large sheets of newspaper, then carried the bundle out through the front door and dumped it deep inside the waste-bin on the footpath. Then, whistling quietly to himself, he went back into the parlour and opened yet another bottle of Archbishop Polding's personal supply of whiskey.

Fifteen minutes passed on leaden feet, and Declan kept pulling out his fob-watch and checking it until the time had passed, then crept quietly into the kitchen and opened the oven

door...and there lay the parchment, curled at one corner, tiny wrinkles appearing on its once-smooth surface.

He pulled on the gloves again, and removed the document and the sheet of newspaper from the oven, closed the door, and straightened up. Then he retrieved the bottle of whiskey he had opened, and went back into his bedroom.

Picking up the little magnifying glass for the last time, he carefully scrutinised every inch of the document, noting with pleasure the signs of ageing that the heat inside the oven had created. The document now truly did appear as if it was as old as Time itself!

Laying it face-up on the desk so the sun coming through the window could complete the task the oven had started, he exited the bedroom, locked the door once more, and wandered back out to the parlour, where he set about celebrating the completion of his work.

By the time Mrs O'Dougherty rose half an hour later, Declan was already well on the way to becoming inebriated.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mrs O'Dougherty waited until Declan staggered off to bed that night then, unable to keep her curiosity and excitement in check any longer, walked quietly to the door of his bedroom. Leaning down, she pressed her ear to the wooden panel and heard, clear from inside, the sound of heavy snoring.

Returning to the parlour, she took a lantern from the occasional table, lit it, and moved once more, out through the back door and into the little alcove where the entrance to Declan's bedroom lay. Using her ring of keys the archbishop had given her the day he appointed her as housekeeper, the woman carefully unlocked the door to Declan's bedroom, and stepped inside.

The little Irishman lay, spreadeagled, across the bed, his head thrown back, his eyes closed, mouth wide open. He was deeply asleep.

As quietly as she could, Mrs O'Dougherty began searching the room, starting with the lowboy in the corner. She opened all the drawers, and the hanging space, searched between his few pairs of trousers, one or two ragged shirts, and one good suit, then went through the three drawers one after the other, but found nothing...other than a few pairs of socks badly in need of darning, and one or two pairs of undershorts, the elastic in the waistbands loose and frayed.

She dropped to her hands and knees and peered between the edge of the mattress and the spring, but found nothing once more. Then she turned her attention to the only item of furniture remaining in the room besides the straight-backed chair, the desk. She turned over every piece of paper on the scarred surface, peering closely at each one, and then realized the sheets of paper she had been examining were art-paper sheets...yet every one was blank.

Puzzled, she stepped back, lifted the lantern onto the desk, and went through the sheets once more. Then she took hold of the handle on the face of the drawer, and pulled. It was locked.

Mrs O'Dougherty cleaned this room every day, except for the past three days, because Declan had kept the door firmly locked to prevent her entry...whilst he worked on her gift for her birthday. And the drawer was *never* locked. Yet...

This had to be it! Her gift was hidden away, in the drawer, and she did not have a key to open it. Her curiosity now running wild, she stared about the tiny room, at the shelf above the bed, where two dog-eared books stared back at her; at the bedside table, where sat nothing more than a cup and carafe of water. But nowhere could she see a key.

Suddenly, Declan groaned and rolled over onto his side, and as he did so, a small silver chain appeared from around his neck – and on the chain was a small brass key.

She moved closer to the bed. Carefully, so very carefully, she reached out with one hand and took hold of the key, then used her free hand to slide the chain up and over Declan's

neck. As she pulled, it became caught on his ear, and she almost fainted with fright as his eyes flickered, and he muttered softly, then his head rolled in the opposite direction, and the chain pulled free!

She inserted the key into the keyhole in the front of the desk and turned gently, hearing the wards click as the locking mechanism operated. Hardly daring to breathe, she pulled gently on the desk, and it slid out.

Mrs O'Dougherty was about to insert her hand into the drawer *when the temperature in the room suddenly plummeted. She breathed out, and her breath turned to icicles before her face. Then a deep, deep voice whispered in her ear: "Get ouuuuut! woman! Get out!"*

The woman turned. There was nobody behind her. Quickly, she faced about again, her eyes falling on Declan, still sound asleep and snoring loudly.

"Leave this room! I warn thee a last time! Leave this room! Now!" Then a hand came out of nowhere, and slapped resoundingly against her cheek.

The key falling from her fingers, Mrs O'Dougherty whirled about again, and saw, *through the icy mist of her own breath, two glowing red eyes staring back at her...eyes that were filled with a savage, angry glow.*

Mrs O'Dougherty waited no longer. Her heart pounding in her breast, she rushed from the room and down the short corridor, back into the house, and slammed the kitchen door behind her. With trembling fingers she reached for a tumbler, filled it with whiskey, and downed the contents of the tumbler in one draught. Then she slumped into the old armchair, one hand pressed to her pounding heart.

Back in Declan's room, Satan raised a huge, clawed hand, and held it out over the restlessly-shifting Irishman. Slowly, his movements stilled, and he slipped into a deep slumber once more.

Stepping to the desk, the gaunt-faced figure took the Deed to Hades from within His robes, lifted two sheets of paper from within the desk-drawer, and removed the document Declan had worked on all that long day. He folded it and slipped it away inside a sleeve, then replaced it with the actual deed, and waved a hand over the drawer. As he did so, words in very small print began to appear on the bottom of the deed. When the added paragraph was complete, Satan smiled to Himself, slid the drawer closed again, locked it, and slipped the chain around Declan's neck once more.

"Sleep well, my friend," He smiled at Declan; "for you will not find much rest for the remainder of eternity!" Then, laughing softly to Himself, the ghastly image slowly faded from sight.

March 29th; 1848: Declan awoke with a hangover such as he had never experienced in his life. To make matters even worse, he had not slept well, for in a dream, a towering gargantuan figure dressed in a floor-length red robe with eyes that glowed like coals had pursued him through a land ablaze with the fires of Hell.

He stumbled to the parlour, took down the last remaining half-bottle of whiskey, and tipped it to his lips. The first sip made him gag, and he bowed his head, and held his breath until the moment passed, then took a longer drink, and felt better. He waited for a few moments, then drank again, and his world began to return to normal.

The bottle still clutched in his hand, he moved back into his room, took the little brass key from around his neck, and unlocked the desk-drawer. Moving aside two sheets of paper, he carefully took out the aged and wrinkled document, laid it on the desk, and stood, admiring it in the early morning sunlight.

Truly, it was a work of art! It was a masterpiece! Something of which any artist would be proud.

He stood there, running his eyes over the sheet line by line, checking every letter, every tiny mark upon its face, seeking the slightest imperfection, and finding none.

But then he noticed, right at the bottom of the document, just before the blood-red signature with its fancy curlicues, two lines of letters, so tiny he could not read them. He picked up the magnifying glass, focussed its lens on the paragraph, and studied it. But even with the aid of the lens, he still could not read it.

How on earth had he written that last paragraph yesterday, when his eyes were tired and strained, in letters so small that this morning, with his eyes fresh from a night's sleep and a magnifying glass, he could not decode them?

And then he noticed the heading: 'Deed to Hades'.

He was sure that yesterday, he had written 'Bill of Sale to Hades'. Yet the writing could not have changed itself. Or...could it?

Declan stared at the document a long moment more then, still mystified and still filled with wonder at his own skill, he slid it back into the drawer and locked it.

If he did not know better himself, he would swear that the document was genuine! Oh, what a wonderful craftsman he was! Even better than he had believed! Far more talented than he had given himself credit for!

Still smiling and filled with awe at his own skill, he left the room.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

March 30th; 1848: Archbishop Polding leaned forward in his seat and peered through the window: there was Declan, standing, waiting beside the archbishop's brougham, a rolled document in his hand.

As the coach drew to a halt, the archbishop threw open the door and bounded down the steps, walked quickly to the brougham, and shook Declan's hand.

"You have the deed?" he asked breathlessly, and Declan held up the rolled parchment in his hand.

"Yes, Yer Lordship. I have it. It cost me a pretty penny, but it was wort' it."

"Good! Good! Oh, what a boon you have done mankind!" the archbishop said, heaving his bags into the back of the brougham and opening the door. As he stepped aboard and seated himself, Declan followed, closed the door, and sat opposite the archbishop. The brougham wheeled about in the wide street and started back the way it had come, and Declan passed the document into the archbishop's trembling hand.

He hesitated a moment, his eyes closed in prayer. Then, holding his breath in anticipation, he unrolled the parchment and gazed at its face.

It was old, obviously very old, and wrinkled in places. There was a curl in the upper right-hand corner, and a small tear down low on the edge, but it was quite legible. And there was the date, in the upper left-hand corner: March 26th; 1848. But most important of all, down in the lower right hand corner, was the signature, a red curlicued letter 'S' followed by a scrawl that could have been anything, but which, the archbishop knew, spelled the word 'Satan'.

"The deed to the land of Hades!" the archbishop breathed at last, his eyes shining in the dim street-lighting, his fingers trembling.

For a long moment his eyes ran over the document, checking each letter, each sentence, each paragraph, and finding no errors, no indecipherable passages, other than a two-line sentence down at the bottom of the document in letter so small his eyes could not read it. Probably a codicil of some form, an addition to the legalese of the document, something of low importance. He would study it at home, with the aid of a magnifying glass, and then...then he would pay Declan for the document, and his long-held dreams would finally come to fruition!

The brougham drew up before the gates of the rectory, and Declan jumped out, held the door for the archbishop, then hefted his heavy bags and carried them in through the open front door, kicking it closed behind him.

He carried the bags to the archbishop's room, placed them carefully just inside the door, and waited, as a dutiful servant should.

“How much...did the deed cost?” the archbishop asked, expecting to hear a figure he had no hope of reaching.

Declan stared at the old man for some time, before replying softly: “Foive t’ousand guineas, Yer Holiness. Foive t’ousand guineas.”

“Five thousand guineas? That’s all?” the archbishop said, hardly daring to believe his luck. Somehow, Declan had managed to secure the title deed to Hades itself, for the sum of five thousand guineas.”

“Yes, Yer Worship. That’s all. Tha...previous owner...wanted ta be rid of it fer all toime. ‘E no longer wants it.”

His voice trembling with emotion, the archbishop replied in a whisper: “Come to me tomorrow afternoon, Declan. I shall have the money for you then. In cash.”

Tomorrow! Five thousand guineas! More than enough to support Declan for the rest of his days! He smiled, nodded, bowed his head and kissed the ring on the archbishop’s extended hand, then left the room.

March 31st; 1848: During that day, Declan quietly packed his few belongings into a small holdall, and tried to attend to his duties, but his mind kept returning to the five hundred guineas he would receive for the forged document that afternoon.

Repeatedly, he found himself slipping into daydreams, dreams of the world lying open before him, of all the wonderful places he would see, the things he would do, with his newfound wealth.

Too excited to eat at lunch-time, he picked at his food, raising Mrs O’Dougherty’s eyebrows in surprise, wondering what was wrong with the little Irishman. He sipped his coffee, and walked out onto the front verandah halfway through lunch to smoke his pipe, and stared at the passing traffic, whilst images of gold coins floated within his imagination, teasing and taunting him, causing his heart to beat faster and faster.

Then, at two o’clock, he received a call to attend the archbishop in his private library, and hurried through the huge house, knocked at the door, opened it, and entered.

There, on the archbishop’s desk, was a brown-paper-wrapped package, rectangular in shape, a package Declan knew could only contain the banknotes he was to be given in payment for the title deed over which, he believed, he had worked so hard.

The archbishop rose from behind his desk, held out the package, and said softly, a tear in his eye: “Declan, ye have done mankind a tremendous service this day. Here is your payment, and may you enjoy it.” And the package passed into Declan’s trembling fingers.

Unable to speak, Declan could only smile, shake the archbishop's hand, kiss the ring on his finger, and hurry from the room. He rushed out the back door and around to the door to his own little room, buried the package deep in the holdall, after first tearing a corner of the brown paper to ensure the package did, indeed, contain banknotes, and sat upon his bed, waiting nervously for darkness to fall so that he could make his escape from the rectory, and be on his way.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

April 1st; 1848: As the last chimes of midnight died away into silence from the grandfather's clock in the hallway, Declan picked up his holdall and, clutching the bag in one hand, quietly opened the door to his room and stepped out onto the back porch.

He moved through the house on timid feet, afraid of making the slightest noise and awakening the archbishop or Mrs O'Dougherty, stopped to listen at every door, and heard only soft snoring coming from the room of the elderly archbishop, and even louder, almost raucous, snoring coming from Mrs O'Dougherty's room. He had half-expected the housekeeper to be sitting up, keeping watch, for she had gotten wind of the business deal between the archbishop and the little Irishman, and although she did not know the exact details, had been watching Declan closely all night as he nervously sat in the parlour with the archbishop and tried to concentrate on the words in that day's broadsheet. But her snoring told him otherwise.

Moving silently down the corridor, he reached the front door and opened it wide, allowing a gust of warm air to blow through the narrow hallway, stepped onto the front verandah, and moved out, onto the path leading to the front gate.

Above his head, an owl hooted from a eucalypt, almost startling him into dropping the holdall. But he clamped his fingers about the handles and moved on, through the gate, which seemed to squeal even louder this night than ordinarily, and turned right, heading for the hansom-cab stand at the end of the street. He had already determined that he would take a cab to Parramatta, then a coach to the Blue Mountains, and decide where he wanted to settle from there.

On this night, he felt as if all the world lay open to him: Paris, New York, Rome...his options were many and varied with five hundred guineas in his possession and nobody knowing which way he had gone or where he intended to begin his new life. In fact, it would be well into the morning before either the archbishop or the housekeeper even knew he was gone, giving him several hours head-start over them.

As luck would have it, there was not one hansom cab at the rank, and he stopped and stared up and down George Street, annoyed that the first part of his plan was not going according to his wishes. But, undismayed, he turned and walked left, up through Broadway and out onto the road leading to Parramatta. Surely, in a few minutes, he would see the lights of a hansom or even the bulky dark shape of a dray coming up the road behind him, and could gain transport, rather than walk the entire fifteen miles on foot.

"Declan O'Halloran!" a voice suddenly whispered in his ear, and he almost dropped the holdall in astonishment. He stopped, gazed all about him, but could see no sign of man or woman. Except for his own long shadow moving ahead of him in the moonlight, the length of George Street was deserted.

'Me imagination!' he muttered to himself, and moved on. But he had not gone twenty paces before that same voice whispered, slightly louder this time: "*Declan! Declan O'Halloran!*"

Again, he stopped and looked both ways, then peered down a cross-street and, seeing no sign of any other person, stood bemused for a few seconds, then pulled the collar of his worn overcoat up about his ears and started off again.

Several seconds passed during which Declan kept casting glances over both shoulders, expecting to see a uniformed figure reaching out for him, and then, quite suddenly, that same voice shouted: "*Aaah! T'is an evil thing you have done, Declan!*"

This time, the holdall slipped from his grasp, and he stumbled forward, reaching for it but failing to catch it before it struck the footpath, and the aged bottom of the small port ripped open. The contents spilled out onto the cement surface, and the brown paper parcel containing his future split open, sending banknotes whisking away in all directions, borne on a hot breeze that seemed to spring up out of nowhere.

Frantically, Declan reached for as many of the banknotes as he could grab, stuffed them into his overcoat pockets, then set out to pursue the remainder of his precious bundle as they skittered and spun, first one way, and then the other.

Before he had retrieved half his money, Declan was out of breath, panting, sweating, and almost exhausted. But he would not allow his wealth to slip away from his reaching fingers so easily, and followed a large bundle as they slid across the top of a low stone wall and flew on the hot breeze out over the silent emptiness of a small graveyard.

He climbed over the wall and followed, stumbling and sliding on the damp turf, stubbing his toes on rocks and stones in his way, and cursing mightily. One after another, his grasping fingers caught the fleeing notes, and slowly but surely, he began to think he was not far short of having his entire wealth back in his possession.

Then he noticed a wide layer of clean, unwrinkled banknotes spread over the fresh-turned earth near an open hole, and scrambled across mud and clumps of dirt, reaching desperately for the last of his money. As he stretched out a hand to seize some of the notes, he tripped over a half-buried tree root, and came face-down into the soft earth beside a freshly-dug grave.

Sputtering and cursing and spitting mud, he lifted his head - and there, right before his disbelieving eyes, was a new headstone.

Standing pale and unsullied in the moonlight, the white stone had already been placed in position at the head of the long, deep hole, and his eyes slowly read the inscription:

'Here lies the body of Declan O'Halloran, who sold his soul to the Devil.

April first, 1848'.

Declan stared. His lips followed each word, then again. And then he sat up.

“That is right, Declan O’Halloran. I own your soul for the princely sum of five hundred guineas!” the strange voice said, so close he felt he could reach out and touch the speaker. He turned, and saw, standing behind him, a tall, gaunt figure dressed in scarlet and holding in one hand, his holdall.

Declan rose to his feet, thoroughly terrified now, and took one pace. His foot found empty air, and he tumbled head first into the freshly-dug grave, just as his heart gave one final beat, and was silenced forever.

Yawning, Archbishop Polding stepped from his bed, slid his feet into his slippers, and walked into his library...and there, in the centre of the desk, was the brown paper parcel containing the five hundred guineas he had paid Declan O’Halloran for the deed to Hades.

Beside it, in a neat little heap, was a pile of ash, a faint whisp of smoke still trickling from the burned ashes, but one corner of the parchment yet remained. He picked it up, and from the feel, knew at once it was all that remained of the deed.

“Oh, Lord! Lord! Lord!” he whispered; “Declan, ye have cheated me! And yet...and yet, your own conscience would not allow ye to carry the trick to its final conclusion.”

For the rest of his days, the archbishop was to believe that the little Irish trickster, Declan O’Halloran, weighed down by his own guilt had, at the last moment, burned the falsified document and returned the archbishop’s five hundred guineas. Then, unable to face his master, he had fled.

Sighing, Archbishop Polding slid the money into his desk-drawer, and informed the authorities that a servant assigned to him had fled and was now a wanted man...*whilst down in the depths of Hades, at a pile of coal so large he could not see over the top, Declan O’Halloran swung a shovel, loading coals into the Devil’s furnaces.*

His task would not end until eternity was no more.

THE END

