The Circus

A charismatic ring-master dead in his accidental town.

Paul Dolden

CHAPTER 1

Prologue

Excerpt from 'Ordinances on The Creation of All Things' — Manual of the Brotherhood of The Provident Father LLP — 14th Edition (Revised)

The Brotherhood of The Provident Father LLP having approved this list of ordinances, has authorised its publication.

Brother Provident.

Spire of The Brotherhood

Section 1: On Creation 1.1. Prior to creation there was only emptiness. This left The Provident Father dissatisfied.

(Amended, 3rd Edition) — Clause 1.1 is to be read subject to the following, passed by resolution at the Council of Fraternal Contemplation: the Brotherhood does not, in asserting clause 1.1, presume to state the complete intent of The Provident Father. The word "dissatisfied" represents the Council's authorised interpretation. Members are reminded that presuming to assert divine intent is contrary to clause 4.1.

1.2. The Provident Father willed the world into being with full knowledge and intent. 1.3. After creation came the world, and humanity. The Provident Father was (presumably) satisfied.

Section 2: On Mankind 2.1. Mankind is second only to The Provident Father. 2.2. Mankind, and by general extension Womankind, exist to honour The Provident Father and his creation. 2.3. Unsanctioned or experimental forms of honouring The Provident Father constitute False Worship (See Section 3).

Section 3: On False Worship 3.1. Worship belongs to The

Creator alone. 3.2. Devotion directed towards any mortal figures — hereinafter referred to as False Idols or False Prophets — is contrary to these ordinances, and is most strictly prohibited. 3.3. (Amended 4th Edition) — Worship of False Idols will be met with legal action, pursued without exception or appeal through the supreme court of the Crown Confederacy.

Section 4: On The Divine Plan 4.1. The Provident Father moves in ways mortal eyes cannot see, nor mortal minds comprehend.

[Sections 5–134 omitted from this excerpt.]

All subjects of The Provident Father are bound by these ordinances.

Queries should be directed to the General Secretary of the Brotherhood, in writing, and may be addressed at the bi-annual Council of Fraternal Contemplation. Responses are not guaranteed, and will not be considered for Contemplation by the Brethren unless accompanied by the (Green)[1] R6A/12 — 'Request for Communion' form.

[1] Historic (Brown) versions of the R6A/12 form have been superseded and will not be accepted.

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Monty stormed off and plonked himself onto a rock beside a thick patch of undergrowth. He fidgeted with a loose button on his coat and tapped his foot in time with the rain. Apparently his negative attitude wasn't helping, but he hadn't fucked the wagon.

Ambrose and that fucking hole. Come have a dangle, Monty.

Monty had told him it would all end in disaster and lo and behold, in goes the wagon and square go the wheels.

He'd not been in a great mood beforehand. The rain had been putting the boot in for days and a little way off in the distance the Hushwood loomed. He couldn't see it yet behind its veil of fog, but he knew that it was there. Mum used to tell them all the fairy tales.

Ambrose enjoyed them more than he did. Small mercies for being stranded.

Maybe he did have a negative attitude.

"Don't fucking move," whispered a voice from the undergrowth.

Monty didn't move.

"Good lad," whispered the voice. "How do you feel about being a hostage?"

They crept around the edge of the caravan. Monty led the way. Every couple of steps the blade jabbed into his back. He didn't know what the blade was, or how many of them there were. Three, maybe four? One would be enough. He thought he might have pissed himself, but he couldn't tell for the rain.

Ambrose was up ahead, his stupid long hair halfway down his back. Jim and the others were in front of him laughing at something. The wagon sat next to the group, ignored.

"Wotcher lads," said the man with the blade. "That's some lovely kit you got there. What do you say to a trade?"

Ambrose spun and the rest of the group scrambled back. His expression didn't falter.

"Easy, gentlemen," he said finally, raising his hands and taking a step forward. "This is my troupe, my family. I'm happy to trade, but let's first start with myself for my cousin, ey? Then we can get to business deciding what my life is worth."

Monty sobbed. He didn't even feel it coming. He wanted to call out. He really wanted to. All the air caught in his throat.

"All the same to me," said the man. "We're nothing if not reasonable."

"I don't doubt that," said Ambrose. "And I think, given the inclement weather, it would benefit everyone to get this dealt with as smoothly as possible. What is it you need from us?"

"Money mostly," said the man.

"Haven't got any," said Ambrose, "not on me at least. It's all tied up in the gear, the horses or in the Greywater First Trust Bank."

"We'll take the gear and the horses then, shall we?"

The other bandits nodded and grunted in agreement.

"You could," said Ambrose, with frustrating honesty. "Our 'gear' is valuable, but the thing is it's not really worth anything. Unless you can sell it of course. Which I guarantee you can't because very few people are stupid enough to buy it. Lugging it across the wilderness, in this weather. It's not worth the effort. Believe me!"

Ambrose laughed. Monty whimpered.

"Why the fuck should we believe you? Seems convenient to me. I'll say we take our chances, and worst case use it for firewood."

"Of course you could. By all means. Take it."

Ambrose gestured towards the wagon with its square wheels.

The bandits conferred briefly.

"You got others aint ya?"

"We do," said Ambrose. "A handful, but there aren't enough of you to take them all, are there?"

"Fine," said the man. "One of them then. And the horses."

"Agreed," said Ambrose. "Though, I'd take it as great kindness if you left us with Gertie over there."

He pointed at the fat old horse who was scratching its back against one of the wheels.

"She's awfully dear to me."

Two days later they'd covered two kilometres. They'd made it into the Hushwood, but not much further. Which was the worst of both worlds. Gertie had tried, bless her, but it was no good.

Monty had been dreading today. He'd been running away from it for a year. Of all the days to get stuck. The wind moaned and rattled the little window, and rain clomp, clomp, clomped on the roof, pitching it deeper into the mud.

Monty didn't believe in ghosts but it was impossible to think about anything else in a place like this.

A half-empty bottle of brandy stood, bracing itself, on the table.

"He'll be turning in his grave, you know?" said Monty, his head cradled in his hands.

"Who, Old Byron?" said Ambrose, sipping his drink. "No, I don't think so. I'd have fancied his chances against the bandits, but I think he's probably content with being wrapped up warm, whilst we're sat here covered in god knows what. He'd be pleased that we kept Gertie though."

Monty thought about the thugs. He thought about the blade against his back, colder than the rain. It was a stupid thing. It was stupid, and he was glad Ambrose had done it. He told himself that it was because Ambrose could talk anyone into—or out of—anything, and he hoped that was the only reason.

"I um," whispered Monty, his mouth suddenly dry. "I don't think he'd be as pleased with us drinking his brandy though."

Ambrose laughed. Monty sighed.

They raised a glass to the old man.

"Still," said Ambrose, "a slightly awkward thing to happen on our first trip in charge."

Monty paused for a moment.

"There's no our about it. Old Byron left the circus to you. Like I said, I just run the road."

"And a mighty fine job you're doing too," said Ambrose.

Monty let out a weak laugh, which turned into a groan.

"I honestly don't know what we are going to do," he said, dropping his head back into his hands. "We might as well just stay here, and the ghosts can save the prince the bother."

Ambrose didn't say anything.

Monty couldn't remember exactly when a second bottle had

appeared on the table.

Ambrose continued to not say anything. Until he didn't.

"We could you know," he said slowly, staring out of the window. "As it stands we don't actually have any other options. We are no closer to Greywater than we are to The Capital. Might as well keep busy while we wait for the Prince to send someone to help us."

Murder us.

"Are we looking at the same place?" said Monty.

"We run a circus Monty. The strange and the wonderful and the mysterious. This is exactly the place."

The rain was easing. Lantern light from the other wagons cast a dull glow across the fog, pushing it back towards the tree line. The clearing itself, save the patch they found themselves sinking in, actually looked like fairly solid ground. There was something about it; he just wasn't sure what it was.

His dad's voice popped into his head. Suddenly; unexpectedly. Just needs a bit of work, that's all, Monty.

"It's been a year today, you know," said Monty.

"I know," said Ambrose. "And we haven't stopped moving for a second since. Until now."

They raised a glass to mum and dad.

He was right about that. The moving. It felt strange, not bad really, just unfamiliar in a way that he wasn't expecting. Like finding something he hadn't realised he'd lost.

Ambrose reached out and gently squeezed his shoulder.

"I owe them everything, you know," said Ambrose. "Your mum and dad. Old Byron."

"OK. Say we stay here," said Monty, after the tears had stopped. "We are in the middle of nowhere. Who's going to come? How are we going to feed everyone, not to mention convincing them that life in the middle of a haunted swamp was everything they never knew

they wanted?"

The rain had stopped its clomping. The wind had relented.

"You really do worry too much about the trivialities, Monty. Everything will come to us! I'd also ask that, going forward, as Deputy Mayor, you'd demonstrate a little bit more civic pride."

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Ambrose was excited. He was stood on top of a wagon, peering through his homemade spyglass, awaiting their arrival. Monty had told him that being excited to get brutally maimed or murdered was stupid, but he'd also said his spyglass was only a rolled up piece of paper, so what the hell did he know.

He'd heard the Prince was a temperamental bugger, but they all came around in the end. In the distance, the wagon approached, inching its way through the fog. It looked incredible.

"Hold fast, First Mate Monty. Here they be, on the horizon."

"You're an idiot," said Monty.

They sent a small man and what appeared to be a walking wardrobe. Ambrose didn't catch his name. He asked plenty of times, but the man's resolve was strong. The other man was called Julian, and he gave it up straight away, which was a bit boring.

"My cousin—The Prince—is not happy," said Julian. "You're over a month late, with no word as to why."

What a strange thing to say. He's a Prince, for crying out loud. Imagine not being happy with your lot.

"We're not particularly happy either. We've run out of brandy, horses and my cousin—the one hiding behind that crate—thinks he's being haunted," said Ambrose.

Ambrose waved at Monty. He didn't wave back.

"He's not being haunted by the way, it's only me doing voices, but the brandy thing is for real."

The wardrobe cracked what appeared to be the smallest grin. Good lad.

"Mr. Ash," said the man. "You're going to need to come with us and make your apologies to The Prince directly."

He really was massive. Tall. Wide. He also sort of loomed. Back in Byron's day, when lifting heavy things was the pinnacle, he would have done well.

"Mr. Ash," repeated the man.

"Oh I'm sorry. I wasn't listening."

The wardrobe's grin widened.

The man sneered and spat on the ground, which seemed unnecessary.

"That seemed a tad dramatic," said Ambrose.

"Listen to me, you jumped up clown," spat Julian. "My cousin—"

"The Prince was it?" interjected Ambrose.

"My family owns this land, and I'll do what I damn well please. And I've had enough of being disrespected."

Ambrose wrinkled his nose and stared at the man.

"This your whole retinue, is it?" said Ambrose. "My apologies for not showing you the respect you are so clearly entitled to. I'd have just thought someone with such close familial ties to the Prince—your cousin—would have a bigger, um, 'entourage'."

The little man had turned white, and his lips were quivering like he couldn't find the words. How odd.

"Like I'd need an army to deal with a bloody band of fools."

"No, you're right. Just your keen wits and your friend here—I'm sorry I didn't catch your name."

Nothing. Impressive.

He did seem a little more relaxed though.

"I've had enough," said Julian. "Take him and his coward of a cousin to the wagon. We're leaving."

"His name is Monty—and yours?" said Ambrose directly to the big man.

The man paused, just for a moment before taking a step forward.

"Are you interested in a job?" said Ambrose to the big man. "It pays better and it's so much less serious than all this 'disrespect', 'make your apologies' stuff."

The man stopped again. His expression completely unreadable.

"Sure," he said finally.

"Excellent!" said Ambrose, turning back to the little man.

He was shaking now, looking back from Ambrose to the big man, completely bewildered.

"So," Ambrose continued, "your family owns this land, you say? How about a deal?"

The small man flicked his eyes to the wagon then back again.

He nodded.

Ambrose trundled back over to the wagon with the big brute of a man who apparently now worked for him. Monty was waiting with his most skeptical expression.

"That's The Prince problem solved," he said.

"For now," said the brute.

"Yes, yes. One crisis at a time," said Ambrose. "But the land is ours, The Prince is—temporarily at bay. I say we get a wriggle on and get building before anyone changes their mind."

"You'll have to change the name at least," said Monty.

Here we go. He can never just be happy with good news.

"Why so?" said Ambrose.

"Well, firstly," said Monty, "you can't call a circus that doesn't move 'travelling', that needs to go."

"Fair enough—"

"And secondly," said Monty, cutting across his cousin, "Old Byron was a traditionalist. He'd want his name nowhere near this."

Ambrose sat with that for a moment. It was true enough. Nothing made Byron happier than screaming at Ambrose, but this was probably a bit much.

"So," said Ambrose slowly, "that leaves us with 'the' and 'circus'.

"It might need workshopping. 'The Circus' is not likely to inspire the masses."