

## Princess Diana's Revenge: the Blogcast, Episode 5

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The Cuddesdon path came out in the middle of the village, passing through a scattering of council houses on the Wheatley road. Joe was standing opposite the seminary, a Victorian gothic edifice constructed in a yellow brick made ethereal by the sunlight. It was adorned with turrets and pretend mullioned windows, a smaller version of St Pancras station. Joe crossed the road, passed through a gateway and came into a gravelled courtyard. It was a confusing building, there were doors everywhere, like the quadrangle of an Oxford college, and there were passageways leading to smaller courtyards. A few students were standing outside one of the doorways; a few more sat on benches; they wore dark clothes, black skirts on the women.

Joe crossed the yard. 'I'm looking for the Bishop,' he said. These youngsters made him feel old. He felt awkward with them; he presumed they all believed in God.

'Bishop,' said one of the young men. 'We have quite a lot of Bishops, we do Bishops. Haven't got a collective noun for them though...a hosanna of Bishops, perhaps.'

Now Joe felt stupid. The Bishop had told him his diocese. 'Aylesbury,' he said.

'Ah yes,' said the young man and there were smiles all round, as if the ex-Bishop of Aylesbury was particularly bizarre. He pointed to one of the gothic archways. 'Aylesbury. Up that staircase and on the first floor you'll find his rooms, there's a card on the door.'

Joe mounted the stone staircase and knocked. The Bishop's voice came immediately. 'Come in,' it said.

The Bishop beamed from behind his desk. 'I thought I might see you,' he said. 'Sit down, Mr Rapps, sit down. I've got some coffee on the go. Did you walk up? Lovely isn't it, the walk, and such a lovely day again.'

Joe felt a sensation of ease flood through him. It was like meeting an old friend after a long separation. They had spent little more than an hour in each other's company the previous evening, but it seemed as if

they had known each other for years.

'I'm so pleased to see you, Bishop. It's like old times.'

The Bishop laughed out loud at that, got to his feet and made for the glass coffee jug which was kept on a hot plate in the corner of the room. The sun streamed through the lead lights of the window and on to the Bishop's black suit, the sheen of it green with age, shiny with use. Joe hadn't paid much attention to the Bishop's appearance the night before, in the back of the stretch. He'd been too bewildered. Now as the clergyman stood he could see the whole of him.

He was not tall, his torso was short, fat and wide. The stomach, covered in purple, was well fed and well wined, firm, hard as concrete. The shoulders were muscular, the face square, the expression one of contentment, and the skin was red where the veins were not indigo. The Bishop's eyes were pale blue, but none the less impertinent for that. His silver hair curled extravagantly over his ears, and over his collar. He was like a painting of a romantic poet; he was Keats had he survived into late middle age.

The Bishop returned to his swivel chair. 'And how have you settled in? Lovely little house, isn't it? You'll love Milton, you know. Everyone does, you'll never want to leave.'

Joe took his cup. It smelt delicious; the Bishop knew his coffee.

'Well,' said Joe, 'I like what I've seen, it's special, certainly, but that's not the point. It's more important to me to know what's going on, and you're the only person who knows why I'm here. I mean, someone sent you to get me, bring me here...what's that about? Why you?'

'Oh no particular reason, mainly because I look reassuring, clergyman and all that, and I'm bribable.'

'Look, Bishop...I've been given a house, the deeds to it, and wardrobes and cupboards full of expensive clothes...even a housekeeper. Things like this don't happen.'

'Ah,' said the Bishop, 'I should not question your good luck too closely

as yet. We are all trying to find the back door to paradise, each and every one of us, and you have found yours, so it would seem. A housekeeper too...Mrs Cornish, ah, the lovely Mrs Cornish, and the clothes, a good fit, I trust.' He put his fingertips together and beamed like an uncle at Christmas. 'Good quality, I know they are.'

'You see, you know. I've never had such stuff. That house must be worth a fortune...and there's even a car.'

'Ah, of course. Have you driven it yet? Nought to sixty in the blink of an eye. What a world we live in.'

Joe shook his head in puzzlement. He knew the Bishop was playing with him. 'Oh come on, Bishop. What's happening? Who's doing all this, more importantly, why? I know I'm not a beneficiary of the Church for leading a blameless life.'

This remark truly amused the Bishop and he laughed again, loudly. When the laugh was finished his expression became serious. He sipped his coffee. 'I would like to discuss all these matters, Mr Rapps, but I am precluded by a promise; you wouldn't expect a Bishop of the church to go back on his word now, would you?. I will tell you one thing, you must attend a meeting at the Methodist Chapel this evening at eight o'clock, it's near the old school. You can't miss it, big solid walls, brick corners, tiny slits for windows, impregnable really. Odd little place, nowhere near as attractive as the church, which is in Pevsner, you know. Eight o'clock, on the dot and you will learn all you need to know. All will become clear, and then tomorrow we may talk to our hearts' content...'

The Bishop rose, took Joe's cup, and his own, and refilled them from the pot on the hob. 'But I'll talk about anything else. I can talk for England. You look confused...Mr Rapps, don't be. I have discovered, after a long life, that the world doesn't become easier to understand as we go on, but more difficult, and indeed, crueller, and we have to accept it. We amble through life, we make wonderful friends, then they have the temerity to die off and, gradually, one by one, they leave us to live the rest of our lives alone. Most of those I went to college with are dead or have sailed off to the other side of the world. The world is full of sadness and

pain, all we can do is grasp little moments of happiness here and there, waiting our turn.'

Joe leant back in his chair. The Bishop had no intention of telling him why he had been brought here; he might just as well listen.

'God is cruel, the world he has made is cruel. Here we are, planted down amongst all the beauties of life; the use of words, poetry, history, walks by the river, love, the near physical joy of learning, travel...and above all, those friends I mentioned. Then along comes the Almighty and clears the table with one sweep of his arm, takes it all away and we die in pain and loneliness. It's all very well to call it a "mauvais quart d'heure", but what a quarter of an hour, and what comes after...nothing?'

'Quarter of an hour?' said Joe.

'A bad quarter of an hour to get through, Voltaire.'

'You know, you don't sound like a Bishop at all.'

'My dear boy, I'm a retired Bishop. I teach the history of Christianity, I don't ask my students to believe it, but they've got to earn a living, like the rest of us, and earning a living in the Church can be very agreeable.'

'You can't retire from religion, can you?'

'Of course you can, Mr Rapps. I have. I long ago discovered that people take religion far too seriously. They have forgotten all those old fashioned liberal values we used to admire and live by, those humanitarian attitudes that used to sit so lightly upon us. Nowadays there are fundamentalists coming out of the woodwork, making life unbearable...how I long to hear the tumbrels rolling over the cobbles, coming to take them to the guillotine...I tell you, I would be sitting in the front row with my knitting. But the tumbrels will not roll, liberalism has been scared back into its cave by this evil. Christian fundamentalism, emanating from America, has given rise to Muslim fundamentalism, or was it the reverse? And liberalism, the one true faith, will be squashed between them. If we want to get back to those values we will have to fight for them. What you see in the world around you, Mr Rapps, is belief taking the place of thought, and reason being replaced by revelation.'

'You're not really a Christian, are you?'

The Bishop sighed and smiled as he looked back down the years. 'That is true.' He leant forward in his chair. 'And what is more I feel it my duty to criticize all religion, but these days criticism of religion is seen as blasphemy, or Islamophobia or anti-Semitism, and that leads to violence and fatwas. That is truly sad, because religion makes us less human, not more. Nothing wrong with honest blasphemy.'

'But those who believe get so violent.'

'Indeed; they have forgotten their humanity. Theocracy must be resisted to the limit by anyone who cares for democracy, but it's not easy, things are getting out of control. Have you never thought how strange it is that America created a secular state in which self-evident rights would be fought for...and yet that part of the American dream is now being destroyed by bigotry.'

'No, I can't say that I have.'

'Well, you should. It's frightening. The devout are so certain of their salvation: Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Jews, there's not a shred of good honest doubt amongst them. They bring their children up in certainty, and what kind of education is that? And because they have no doubts we are not allowed to express ours...and doubt is what makes us human. Religion is a poison in politics.'

'Do you believe in God, Bishop?'

'Oh that's irrelevant, really. It's how we live that counts...love, common sense and uncertainty, and the greatest of these is uncertainty. The devout keep up their spirits with a fable of the permanent...that way they don't have to remind themselves that their little lives can be disposed of by death. Our task is more difficult, we are the lantern bearers, bringers of light, but the light is threatened by dogmatism, a disease that would kill us all.'

'But what about the people who run this college? They can't be happy with the way you think.'

'Oh, they don't care as long as I don't preach it at the crossroads. Half of my students think like me anyway, if they think at all.'

'Well, I have no idea what to believe. It's a mad world and I keep quiet

in it, stay out of trouble.'

The Bishop laughed, pushed against the arms of his chair and rose. 'Don't be dismayed, Mr Rapps, remember God works on us through the people we meet.' The Bishop laughed again. 'You will not be thinking religion this evening at the Methodist Chapel...Come, let me show you the garden, then you must leave, I have a lecture before lunch.'

Joe followed the Bishop out into the courtyard where the sun was still shining. He was dazzled after the darkness of the Bishop's study.