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Text: The Voice

A message came from the rescue party, who straightened up and leaned on their spades in the rubble. The policeman said to the crowd: "Everyone keep quiet for five minutes. No talking, please. They're trying to hear where he is."

The silent crowd raised their faces and looked across to the church which, now it was destroyed, broke the life of the street like a decayed tooth. The boom had brought down the front wall and the roof, the balcony and capsized. Freakishly untouched, the hymn-board still announced the previous Sunday's hymns.

A small wind blew a smell of smouldering cloth across people's noses from another street where there was another scene like this. A bus roared by and heads turned in passive until the sound of the engine had gone. People blinked as a pigeon flew from a roof and crossed the building like an omen of release. There was dead quietness again. Presently a murmuring sound was heard by the rescue party. The man buried under the debris was singing again.

At first difficult to hear, soon a tune became definite. Two of the rescuers took up their shovels and shouted down to encourage the buried man, and the voice became stronger and louder. Words became clear. The leader of the rescue party held back the others, and those who were near strained to hear. Then the words were unmistakable:

"Oh Thou whose Voice the waters heard. And hushed their raging at thy Word."

The buried man was singing a hymn.

A clergyman was standing with the warden in the middle

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of the ruined church.

"That's Mr. Morgan all right," the warden said. "He could sing. He got silver medals for it"

The Reverend Frank Lewis frowned.

"God, I shouldn't wonder," said Mr. Lewis dryly. Now he knew Morgan was alive, he said: "What the devil's he doing in there? How did he get in? I locked up at eight o'clock myself."

Lewis was a wiry, middle-aged man, but the white dust on his hair and his eyelashes; and the way he kept licking the dust off his dry lips, moving his jaws all the time, gave him the monkeyish, testy, and suspicious air of an old man. He had been up all night on rescue work in the raid and he was tired out. The last straw was to find the church had gone and that Morgan, the so-called Reverend Morgan, was buried under it.

The rescue workers were digging again. There was a wide hole now and a man was down in it filling a basket with his hands. The dust rose like smoke from the hole as he worked.

The voice had not stopped singing. It went on, rich, virile, masculine, from verse to verse of the hymn. Shooting up like a stem through the rubbish, the voice seemed to rise and branch out powerfully, luxuriantly, and even theatrically, like a tree, until everything was in its shade. It was a shade that came towards one like dark arms.

"All the Welsh can sing," the warden said. Then he remembered the Lewis was Welsh also. "Not that I've got anything against the Welsh," the Warden said.

The scandal of it, Lewis was thinking. Must he sing so loud, must he advertise himself? I locked up myself last night. How the devil did he get in? And he really meant: How did the devil get in?

To Lewis, Morgan was the nearest human thing to the devil. He could never pass that purple-gowned figure sauntering like a cardinal in his skull cap on the sunny side of the street, without a shudder of distaste and derision. An unfrocked priest, his predecessor in the church. Morgan ought in strict justice to have been in prison, and would have been but

for the indulgence of the bishop. But this did not prevent the old man with the saintly white head and the eyes closed by the worldly juices of food and wine from walking about dressed in vestments, like an actor walking in the sun of his own vanity, a hook-nosed satyr a he-goat significant to servant girls, the crony of the public house, the chaser of bookmakers, the smoker of cigars. It was terrible, but it was just that the bomb had buried him; only the malice of the Evil One would have thought of bringing the punishment of the sinner upon the church as well. And now, from the ruin, the voice of the wicked man rose up in all the elaborate pride of art and evil.

Suddenly there was a moan from the sloping timber, slates began to skate down.

"Get out. It's going," shouted the warden.

The man who was digging struggled out of the hole as it bulged under the landslide. There was a dull crumble, the tearing down below the water. Thick dust clouded over and choked them all. The rubble rocked like a cakewalk. Everyone rushed back and looked behind at the wreckage as if it were still alive. It remained still. They all stood there, frightened and suspicious. Presently one of the men with the shovel said, "The bloke's shut up."

Everyone stared stupidly. It was true. The man had stopped singing. The clergyman was the first to move. Gingerly he went to what was left of the hole and got down on his knees.

"Morgan!" he said in a low voice.

Then he called out more loudly: "Morgan!"

Getting no reply, Lewis began to scramble the rubble with his hands.

"Morgan!" he shouted. "Can you hear?" He snatched a shovel from one of the men and began digging and shoveling the stuff away. He had stopped chewing and muttering. His expression had entirely changed. "Morgan!" he called. He dug for two feet and no one stopped him. They looked with bewilderment at the sudden frenzy of the small man grubbling like a monkey, spitting out the dust, flung down his nails. They saw the spade at last shoot through the old hole. He down the

hole widening it at once, letting himself down as he worked. He disappeared under a ledge made by the fallen timber.

The party above could do nothing." Morgan, they heard him call. "It's Lewis. We are coming. Can you hear? He shouted for an axe and presently they heard him smashing with it. He was scratching like a dog or a rabbit.

A Voice like that to have stopped, to have gone! Lewis was thinking how un-bearable this silence was. A beautiful proud voice, the voice of a man, a voice like a tree, the soul of a man spreading in the air like the cedars of Lebanon. "only one man I have heard with a bass like that. Owen the Bank, at Newtown before the war. Morgan! ", he shouted, " Sing! God will forgive you everything, only sing!"

One of the rescue-party following behind the clergyman in the tunnel shouted back to his mates.

"I can't do nothing. This bleeder's blocking the gangway."

Half an hour Lewis worked in the tunnel. Then an extraordinary thing happened to him. The tunnel grew damp and its floor went as soft as clay to the touch. Suddenly his knees went through. There was a gap with a yard of cloth, the vestry curtain of the carpet at the communion rail was unwound and hanging through it. Lewis found himself looking the blackness of the crypt. He lay down and put his head and shoulders through the hole and fell about him until he found something solid again. The beams of the floor were tilted down into the crypt.

"Morgan! Are you there, man?" he called.

He listened to the echo of his voice. He was reminded of the time he had talked into a cistern when he was a boy. Then his heart jumped. A voice answered him out of the darkness from under the fallen floor. It was like the voice of a man lying comfortably and waking up from a snooze, a voice thick and sleepy.

"Who's that?" asked the voice.

"Morgan, man. It's Lewis. Are you hurt?" Tears pricked the dust in Lewis's eyes, and his throat ached with anxiety as he

spoke. Forgiveness and love were flowing out of him. From below, the deep thick voice of Morgan came back.

"You've been a hell of a long time," it said. "I've damn finished my whisky."

"Hell" was the word which changed Mr. Lewis's mind. Hell was a real thing, a real place for him. He believed in it. When he read out the word "Hell" in the Scriptures he could see the flames rising as they rise out of the furnaces at Swansea. "Hell" was a professional and poetic word for Mr. Lewis. A man had had been turned out of the church had no right to use it. Strong language and strong drink, Mr. Lewis hated both of them. The idea of whisky being in his church made his soul rise like an angered stomach. There was Morgan, insolent and comfortable, lying (so he said) under the old altar-table, which was propping up the fallen floor, drinking a bottle of whisky.

"How did you get in?" Lewis said sharply from the hole, "Were you in the church last night when I locked up?"

The old man sounded not as bold as he had been. He even sounded shifty when he replied, "I've got my key".

"Your key? I have the only key of the church. Where did you get a key?"

"My old key I always had a key."

The man in the tunnel behind the clergyman crawled back up the tunnel to the daylight.

"O. K.," the man said. "He's got him. They're having a ruddy now." "Reminds me of ferreting. I used to go ferreting with my old dad," said the policeman.

"You should have given that key up," said Mr. Lewis. "Have you been in here before?"

"Yes, but I shan't come here again", said the old man

There was the dribble of powdered rubble, pouring down like sand in an hour-glass, the ticking of the strained timber, like the loud ticking of a clock.

Mr. Lewis felt that at last after years he was face to face with the devil, and the devil was trapped and caught. The tick-

tock of the wood went on.

"Men have been risking their lives, working and digging for hours because of this," said Lewis. "I've ruined a suit of..."

The tick-tock had grown louder in the middle of the words. There was a sodden lurching and groaning of the floor, followed by a big heaving and splitting sound.

"It's going," said Morgan with detachment from below, "The table's leg." The floor crashed down. The hole in the tunnel was torn wide and Lewis grabbed at the darkness until he caught a board. It swung him out and in a second he found himself hanging by both hands over the pit.

"I'm falling. Help me", shouted Lewis in terror. "Help me". There was no answer.

"Oh, God," shouted Lewis, kicking for a foothold. "Morgan, are you there? Catch me. I'm going."

Then a groan like a snore came out of Lewis. He could hold no longer. He fell. He fell exactly two feet.

The sweat ran down his legs and caked on his face. He was as wet as a rat. He was on his hands and knees gasping. When he got his breath again, he was afraid to raise his voice.

"Morgan," he said quietly panting.

"Only one leg went," the old man said in a quiet grating voice. The other three are all right."

Lewis lay panting on the floor. There was a long silence. "Haven't you ever been afraid before, Lewis?", Morgan said, Lewis had no breath to reply, "Haven't you ever felt rotten with fear?" said the old man calmly, "like an old tree, infested and worm eaten with it, soft as a rotten orange? You were a fool to come down here after me. I wouldn't have done the same for you," Morgan said.

"You would," Lewis managed to say.

"I wouldn't," said the old man. "I'm afraid. I'm an old man, Lewis, and I can't stand in it. I've been down here every night since the raids got bad.

Lewis listened to the voice. It was low with shame; it had the roughness of the earth, the kicked and trodden choking dust of Adam. The earth of Mr. Lewis listened for the first time to the earth of Morgan. Coarsened and sordid and unlike the singing voice, the voice of Morgan was also gentle and fragmentary.

"When you stop feeling shaky, "Morgan said, "you'd better sing. I'll do a bar, but I can't do much. The whisky is gone. Sing Lewis, even if they don't hear, it does you good. Take the tenor, Lewis."

Above in the daylight the look of pain went from the rescue party, a grin came on the dusty lips of the warden.

"Hear it?" he said. A ruddy Welsh choir!