

Scrolls, peacock feathers and rivalry

Monday, 5th January 1885

London

Overnight the temperature had dipped below freezing, ensuring the thick fog hadn't dissipated. It hung in the air like sludge, creating a halo effect around streetlamps and left an oily smear wherever it settled. Nathaniel Willis wondered if this was what it had been like in the 'Year Without a Summer'.

His hometown had its share of tall chimney stacks and domestic chimneys choking the air with smoke but, as it was only small-scale industry, the effects were nothing compared to those suffered by Londoners.

Breathing in the London fog was akin to taking in a lungful of moisture-laden air in the Palm House at Kew Gardens, whilst surrounded by pipe smokers, puffing their way through bowls of tarry shag. He felt as wretched as them without having had any of the enjoyment.

It had been pitch-black when he had caught the first train from Cambridge. By rights, morning had broken but it would be at least another hour before the streetlamps were snuffed out.

Willis arrived at Park View House with his case and a tube tucked under his arm, which contained pre-prepared templates, only to find the builders were still working on the interior. As he stepped cautiously on the rumpled dustsheets strewn over the floor, he could smell the sweet odour of fresh plaster.

"Ah, my blank canvases await!" he said, for his own benefit.

His employer, Mr Reid, had made the same remark on their first commission together and Willis repeated them as a talisman whenever he entered a patron's property to embark on a new scheme.

Negotiations went smoothly. The head builder agreed he could commence painting the dining room and he would get his men to move any tools, buckets, trestle tables and ladders to give him more space to work.

Willis enquired whether his ladder and a tea chest had been delivered. They had and the builders would move them for him.

"If Mr Harding, or comrade Harding as he likes to be addressed, calls at the house be sure to have an excuse ready," said the head builder.

"Why?" asked Willis.

"Because us poor fellows got invited to his house in Hammersmith last week for a 'simple supper', as he calls it. We were taken into his stable where we were given a tasty but meagre fare, followed by him sermonising about socialism and how we could become part of a revolution to bring down the class system. I don't know about you, but I like to take my coat off before I eats my supper. His stable was

colder than a rich man's pantry. By the time I got my helping of broth, it was barely warm. At least he's not a member of the Temperance Movement so there was beer.

"There he is living in a house fit for a country squire. He should see what our money buys us. He may present himself as a generous employer but only those that are part of his company gets a share of the profits and them's are men of high-standing. Whereas the likes of you and me work piecemeal, therefore we're not eligible. I asks you, does that sound like socialism to you?"

"Mr Willis won't have a job if you carry on like that!" said one of his work mates. "If comrade Harding calls and sees you gossiping like a fishwife, he'll dock everyone's pay."

The head builder turned to Willis and, adopting a comedy hoity-toity voice of a formidable lady, said, "I beg your forgiveness, sir. I appear to have forgotten my manners." Then, in his usual speaking voice, he continued, "You must be parched. I could do with a fresh brew myself. I'll get one of my lads to bring up a cuppa."

Willis went back to the entrance hall and ascended the grand staircase. He first located the West-facing drawing room, which he would commence after Easter. The walls were still bare brick and there was builders' detritus strewn on the floor, but it sufficed to give him a sense of the scale of the room and how long his work was likely to take him.

By contrast, the walls in the East-facing room had been plastered smooth and given a base coat of white paint. He was to paint an intricate frieze above the dado rail, following a design supplied by Joshua Harding. An emerald green silk damask would be affixed below.

He hung up his coat and jacket, found his overalls in the tea chest and put them on. Then, he extracted Harding's design from the artist's tube he had brought, pinned it up and stood back so he might study it. One of the most important rules Mr Reid had taught him upon embarking on his career as a decorator was never to rush into anything, he had to take his time and remind himself of what he needed to do and the sequence of steps.

Harding had worked out the pattern with great skill, but his application of watercolours in thin washes was only indicative of how the frieze was meant to look when completed. The great craftsman expected the finished version to inspire awe and his decorators to achieve a result befitting his most illustrious clients.

Every time Harding engaged his employer, he stipulated either Mr Reid himself carried out the work or his master decorator. Because they both had form in interpreting Harding's designs and scribbled notes, Mr Reid could rely upon him.

Willis admired his employer but held no desire to set up a rival business and emulate his success. Mr Reid had around a hundred men in his employ, working on several commissions at any given time, producing everything from furniture, to stained glass, to metal work, to painted schemes. He was a busy

man who had to win new clients whilst juggling the expectations of those he'd already won. As successful as his business was, there was, nevertheless, the occasional fallow period between commissions.

Mr Reid was always scouting for fresh talent and Willis was instrumental in his employer's attempts to guard himself against the loss of good staff. Anyone who excelled at draughtsmanship would be taken on to provide the cartoons for stained glass windows and murals. If they were skilled at painting, they would be assigned to Willis, who would teach them how to recreate a design faithfully and to paint and decorate surfaces.

Otherwise, Mr Reid would develop the skills and interest of his staff by encouraging them to study the work of the various medieval trades.

Attendant anxieties aside, his employer's business was a success, not least because of Mr Harding's repeat business and one ecclesiastical commission often led to another. At the same time, his employer's success came with hidden costs. When admiring Willis's finished work, Mr Reid would express his regret that he rarely got to paint himself anymore. Willis enjoyed wielding a paintbrush all too much, ensuring his continued satisfaction.

Another reason why he didn't want to go into business for himself was because, he had witnessed Mr Harding and Mr Reid being ill-used. They had tried to work with others to recreate the medieval guild system, ensuring strength and protection through their number and shared wealth, but some of their former associates had used their winning charm to serve their own interests and to feather their own nests. All three men despised avarice and self-glorification.

One regret he knew the two men felt keenly was having been being quite so accommodating when the architect Seymour Thoday had introduced them to his friend George Edson Guest. Consequently, Guest became their protégé and learnt their trade secrets.

Willis knew that dwelling on that chapter of his life affected his work adversely, so he pushed the memory of it to the back of his mind and focused on the matter in hand.

Somewhere in the house, one of the builders began warbling a popular show tune, which amused him and lifted his spirits.

Willis had worked on numerous commissions and knew to rejoice because the owner of Park View House had settled for ceiling papers, saving himself a considerable sum and Willis from getting another crick in his neck. Better still, Reid had tasked one of his colleagues to put them up.

Ever since Rosalind Howard had ordered ceiling papers for both Castle Howard and Naworth Castle, and the First Commissioner of the Office of Works had ordered them for St. James's Palace, they had been considered an acceptable alternative to a painted design. Thereby, Willis knew the owner of Park View House would find himself in good company and no one would think any the less of his taste.

It would be at least a good two days before he picked up the bespoke paints and his brushes. Just as a seamstress will put all her effort into pinning and tacking, before readying her sewing machine, the first few days would be spent marking out the design using the templates he had brought, into which an apprentice had punched holes at regular intervals - roughly four per inch - following Harding's lines, which had been replicated to scale. Willis pinned the template to the wall and began to apply a fine powder held in a tied loosely woven fabric square. Just as a dressmaker will use chalk to mark where she must sew or put in a dart, enough powder would penetrate the punched holes and stick to the walls. When he was first apprenticed to his employer, Mr Reid himself had shown him the technique.

"This is called 'pouncing'," he had told him.

Several cups of tea and much tedious toil later, he was ready to join the powder-dots. But, as it was nearing four of the hour and the light outside was beginning to fade, he decided to call it a day. Despite the opposite wall being nearly all window, save for a few narrow supports, the room was already in shadow and it wasn't work one can easily do by gas light, at least not until he had worked his way into the repeating design and could anticipate in which direction the rose stems would twist or the leaves would turn. Similarly, a flower might face the viewer or away and could be multi-petalled, like a peony or simple as a Tudor rose, or still budding.

It was a task best suited to the morning when he was wide awake and not likely to become confused by a white wall covered in dots. Besides, he could hear the workmen clattering about, suggesting they were readying to leave too and would need to secure the property.

He rolled up the template and put it in the artist's tube and left it together with his case by the tea chest.

Tuesday 6th January 1885

It had been another cold night. The fog hadn't lifted, worse, it appeared to be drifting. Willis could see thicker, brownish bands, as though smoke produced by factories had been trapped. Consequently, the red brick Park View House look like it had been painted in the rain using watercolour, as all its sharp architectural lines appeared to be dissolving.

Inside it was more welcoming. Once again, the head builder was full of good cheer and offered to get a cup of tea brought up to him.

Willis took off his coat and put on his overalls, then opened his case and got out his pencil. He familiarised himself with Harding's design then located the powder-dots of a side stem leading to a large tea rose and began to join them up.

He had only been working for an hour or so when he heard a familiar voice coming up from below.

"Comrade Harding!" announced the head builder. "Good to see you."

Whereupon he heard Mr Reid's voice join in the conversation.

The chatter moved into one of the downstairs rooms.

After only ten minutes or so, Willis heard footsteps ascending the stairs.

"Comrade Willis?" called out Harding. "Where are you?"

"In here, Comrade Harding," Willis replied, even though it seemed odd to adopt such an overt socialist stance.

Moments later, Harding appeared, carrying his Ulster slung over his arm. His jacket was undone, so Willis could see his waistcoat was straining to contain his ample stomach. His wild, greying hair and beard was like a mane about his face, lending him a dishevelled appearance.

When they were working on the dining room at the new London house of their other patrons, the Howards, Harding's greatest collaborator and friend, Edward Finchley-Browne, or Ned as Harding often referred to him, had revealed that Harding had been considered handsome in his youth. Certainly, he had kindly eyes and a pleasant face, but he was not a man one would describe as handsome. Moreover, when he became riled about something, his eyes would blaze with anger making one back away.

His employer, Mr Reid, appeared from behind Harding. He had been blessed with a noble face. With his moustache and pointed beard, he looked like he belonged in one of the medieval stained-glass windows at St. Mary's Church in Fairford, or perhaps on a playing card. Then again, he was too old to be a Jack and too young to be a king.

"Comrade Willis, I'm here to take you and comrade Reid to see something extraordinary. I won't take 'no' for an answer as it has to be today."

"Why today?" asked Willis.

"Because it is the Epiphany," said Harding.

Willis was none the wiser.

"What are you waiting for?" asked Harding.

Willis looked at his employer.

Reid said, "I think I know what this is about. Guest and I had the privilege of seeing it when I assisted him at Castle Howard. Harding is right to want to show it to you. It deserves to have praise heaped upon it and is truly as wonderful as they say. I'd rather get on, if you don't mind.

"In respect of Mr Willis, if Comrade Harding says the work can wait, then it can wait. I will see you tomorrow instead. I wish you two gentlemen a good day and much enjoyment."

"You are welcome to share our hansom?" Harding said.

"Thank you, Comrade, but I'm not done here yet. I need to check off the delivery."

As soon as he had bid his employer adieu, Willis traded his overalls for his coat and the two men

headed out. Harding wasted no time in extracting his pipe, cupping the bowl with one hand and lighting it with the other.

"Helps me think," said he, between gritted teeth as they gripped the stem.

He flicked out his lighted match.

They had walked only a few yards along Holland Park Avenue, when they saw a cab for hire. Before Willis had time to react, Harding had already hailed it.

Willis knew Harding only took a hansom cab when he was short of time. Otherwise, Harding liked to walk as much as possible for his constitution and because it was egalitarian.

"Where to, Sir?" asked the cabbie, when they had climbed in.

Instead of answering him, Harding handed him a note to maintain the mystery of their destination.

Harding settled into his seat alongside Willis and closed the mud guards.

Willis was primed to ask Harding how his daughters fared or a detail about their commission to avoid being subjected to politics, but he missed his moment.

"Have you heard my news, comrade?" asked Harding, as the cab lurched forward and the horse's hooves began to clatter on the flagstones.

"I don't believe I have, comrade," said Willis, taking his gloves off so he could do up his top button against the chill wind.

"We finally did it! The Socialist League was founded last week and has taken up temporary offices in Farringdon Street."

"Congratulations, comrade," said Willis, putting his gloves back on.

"As you can imagine, I have devoted hours of my time to the cause and more is required. Between giving speeches and lectures, I am currently working on the first issue of the 'Commonweal', which will be our regular newspaper and, if all goes to plan, should be ready for publication in February.

"My daughter, May, insisted I have a day that isn't consumed by my socialist aims. She fears my talent for design will become blunt, if I only interest myself in politics. And, what a fortuitous day it is!

"Remind me, where was it we first meet?" asked Harding.

Willis threw him a queer look. Harding was about twenty years older, which made him at least fifty. Aside from his abundance of grey hairs and his reliance on glasses for close-up work, Harding was surely too young to be showing the more feared signs of aging. His ardour and drive were legendary, and, if they were embarking on an adventure, albeit within easy reach, Willis could take comfort in Harding's zeal not being diminished.

Harding tapped his head.

"Rest assured, comrade, the memory of it still resides in here. As I said, my socialist work is beginning to take its toll. A day spent doing something restorative and all will be well again."

"We first met at All Saints Church in Cambridge," said Willis.

"Ah, yes, I recall," said Harding in a tone sapped of joy. "You were engaged to decorate the walls and ceiling, and my company made the East window based on a design produced by my constant ally Ned."

Willis was curious to know how Harding would react if he mentioned 'Guest', whether time was the great healer.

"We were all working for the architect Seymour Thoday, who asked you to talk to his friend George Edson Guest about church decoration, whereupon you invited him to look at the chapel ceiling you designed for Jesus College just across the road and invited me along."

Harding laughed.

"I think I know what you are about to say," said he.

Willis ventured, "That, to make your point, you promptly went into a tirade about the parchment-frieze Thoday designed for All Saints, the one I had just finished painting? How, whilst being true to medieval Church design, it was an abject failure as, being dead straight, there was no life in it."

Harding laughed again.

"When you compare Thoday's scroll to the one comrade Reid painted according to my design, which curves and undulates, creating interest, is mine not better? Does mine not succeed in captivating and beguiling the beholder's eye for longer?"

"I said it then and I say it again now without any reservation, your scroll is far superior to Thoday's" said Willis, raising his voice above the clatter of another cab over-taking theirs.

The sudden increase in traffic indicated that they had just passed the intersection with Westbourne Grove, which provided a direct route to Paddington Rail Station. Fortunately, the wide roads, marking their proximity to the royal palaces, helped to prevent a bottleneck.

Willis glanced at Harding. His face had dissolved into such an earnest expression, the Cambridge man was rendered unable to make a jocular remark as to whether they were about to have an audience with her Majesty.

"As I said to you and Guest at the time, people observe but they do not see. On my visits to Ghent to see the famed altarpiece I gave myself leave to really look at every detail. I studied other works by Jan van Eyck and those of his successor, Hans Memling. These medieval masters above all others of their ilk taught me much, not least that banderoles and scrolls can be used to great effect.

"When I see a Guest window it's as though his undulating, curving and arching banderoles are taunting me. How sorely I regret every utterance I shared with him that day at Jesus College, nuggets of wisdom that he later repeated to his draughtsmen and workmen. It was my observations and his workers' skill, talent and labour that set him onto the path of glory and riches."

As he listened, Willis noted the lines of winter trees, the ones which marked the stretch along

Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park, were coming up ahead. The installation of wooden barriers to prevent pedestrians straying into the path of on-coming horses did nothing to stop anyone determined to cross. Sure enough, he could see the lone figure of a man weaving between the cabs, trollies and carts.

Harding said, "Had comrades Reid and Thoday and I suspected that Guest was possessed of sufficient gumption and inheritance to set up a company to rival ours, we would have given him a wide berth." Harding gave a hollow laugh and Willis threw him a sympathetic smile. "How we were all taken in by the unpromising Guest, the man possessed of a prodigious stutter and little talent." He held up his hand to prevent Willis from protesting but, tellingly, no protestations were forthcoming. "A harsh and uncharitable assessment, but a fair one. Yet, he has an abundance of charm and wields it to great effect. I've seen him talking to his clients and drawing them under his spell with a subtlety akin to devilry.

"My grievances are nothing. He saved his greatest outrages for your employer. After Guest had milked their association, he allowed his workers to treat comrade Reid without the respect due to him. Naturally, comrade Reid protested in writing. Guest's reply did nothing to address his concerns, thereby confirming his nagging conviction that Guest lay at the root of the problem, leaving him no option but to sever their informal business ties.

"Thereupon, comrade Reid suffered an even bigger blow when he lost his apprentice Alfred Thompson to Guest. And, what a great loss it was! Thompson is the only man of my ken, other than my dear friend Ned - Mr Finchley-Browne to you - who paints faces onto glass which are possessed of real character."

Willis supposed Harding did not think he was ignorant of his employer's unhappy association with Guest, but it seemed that, by recounting Reid's woes, Harding could unburden himself of his own feelings towards their rival.

"As for Thoday, what choice has the man got but to remain on friendly terms with Guest as he cannot maintain his success without him. He can be thankful that he continues to be awarded prestigious commissions to design new churches, even if it's on the lamentable condition that Guest provides the windows, thereby excluding his own stained-glass workshop and mine.

"Now he is the most sought-after manufacturer of stained-glass, Guest guards his prestigious commissions jealously and never thinks to award elements of the work to us or recommending us to his wealthy patrons or royal clientele. Worse, it is they who influence taste, thereby, perpetuating the insult."

Willis glanced between the trees into the park. It was a pitiful sight with so few people strolling about and no flowering plants to adorn its gloomy borders. When the weather was clement, one would see ladies walking arm in arm, shaded by their matching parasols. And, riders would be out on their lively mounts.

Harding continued, "It never occurred to us to place any conditions or agreements on our association with him. Unlike other upstanding men, who would, nevertheless, consider themselves bound to a code of honour, it seems he does not consider himself indebted to us.

"It will come as no surprise to learn that Guest, whose wealth was created by the labour and talent of others, is one of the reasons why I am backing the socialist cause."

Willis could recall suppressing his amusement the first time he saw Guest and Harding standing side-by-side. Guest was tall and awkward, and Harding was short and round. Guest looked dapper in his fashionable suit, whereas Harding paid little heed to his appearance. Together they looked like a double act from the London stage.

Whilst working on previous commissions, Harding had encouraged Willis to visit museums to look at illuminated manuscripts and paintings, especially those which depicted nature, and had urged him to seek out works by early Flemish and Italian masters. Harding had told him to study every detail, for example, how foliage twists and turns, and to note how the artist depicts it in shadow and how the surface changes when it catches the light. He could recall Harding's words. He had explained that nothing in nature is uniform, that changes in scale, shape and colour create interest.

Once, in Oxford, Harding had accompanied him to ensure a curator made his collections available. They had spent the day studying the work of medieval monks who, in turn, had sought to mirror God's design.

Their visits had left Willis frustrated and inspired in equal measure. He couldn't imagine a time when he could give free reign to his creative impulses. Otherwise, Harding's guidance had served him well in his work.

He had been blessed with a kind employer in Reid, so he hadn't considered himself in want of encouragement. Concerned that Harding wanted to poach him, he had asked Reid why Harding would occasionally single him out. Mr Reid had assured him that his attention was borne out of Harding's admiration for those who regularly taught at the Working Men's College in London, and that his patron's lack of patience held him back from volunteering.

Seemingly, Reid had won his first commission from Harding because the latter had taken lads from the Industrial Home for Destitute Boys, in the hope of teaching them a skill, but it had met with disaster. That the great craftsman hadn't been discouraged whenever he had met with failure impressed Willis the most. He had assumed that, as a man of means, everything had come easily to Harding, not realising his success had been hard-earned.

As their cab turned into Park Lane, Harding changed the topic of conversation and seemed to brighten, suggesting they were getting close to their destination.

The cabbie took a left onto Piccadilly and continued all the way past Green Park and finally came to a

stop outside the Royal Academy.

"Out you get!" urged Harding.

Willis did as he was bid and waited patiently as Harding settled-up with the cabbie, then they struck off across the courtyard towards the main doors.

Once inside, Harding said, "The private view for the Winter Exhibition was at the weekend and it opened to the public yesterday so, if we're lucky, it shouldn't be overrun with people. If there's one thing I can't stand it is crowds. No matter. For this one painting I'm prepared to make an exception."

Harding paid their entrance fees and they headed up the grand staircase.

He showed the doorman their tickets and asked, "Where might I find gallery IV?"

As the doorman gave directions, he handed them two exhibition catalogues. He then tipped his hat.

"Good day, sirs," said the man and extended his arm, thereby directing them to the rotunda.

"The painting I want to show you is considered the great feature of the exhibition. Another good reason for visiting today when it will be quieter," explained Harding.

Willis asked, "Have you've seen the mystery painting before?"

"I saw it at 'The Art Treasures of Great Britain' exhibition in Manchester and have lived with the regret of not having devoted more time to it when I had the opportunity. How was I to know it would be another 28 years before it was put on public display again.

"By all accounts it is quite remarkable. At the Manchester exhibition I had no patience to look over the heads of the other visitors filing past the exhibits and just gave all the paintings a cursory glance. To my shame, I went and looked at some carved ivories instead."

They strode through a gallery containing numerous fine oils, but Harding did not so much as glance at any of them. If Harding could ignore sentimental scenes of hunting dogs with fowl hanging limp from their mauls, pictures of women attending to their chores and others of labourers in country settings having a rest from their toil without so much as a casual glance, it suggested the theme of the painting Harding wanted Willis to see was religious.

"Mr Harding!" said a voice.

Harding ignored it and kept walking.

"Mr Harding!" said the voice again but louder.

Willis turned to look and saw it was Mr Howard, who had commissioned them to decorate his London home and was standing with two gentlemen whom he didn't recognise. He gave Harding's arm a gentle tug and he stopped.

Mr Howard approached them, his face beaming.

"Gentlemen!" he said, lifting his top hat.

"Mr Howard!" they chorused, mirroring his action with their less impressive hats.

"As I made to leave, I said to Mrs Howard that I was sure to run into Mr Harding at the exhibition. Sir, of all my acquaintances I could be certain that, if you came at all, you would make every effort to see 'The Adoration of the Magi' on the Epiphany. It's good to see you. And, it's good to see you, Mr Willis."

"The pleasure is all mine, sir," Willis said.

"You both go on ahead! I'll join you shortly. I want to take advantage of having run into Mr Conrad to do some business. There's a book that's about to be published with only a limited run and I want him to secure me a first edition."

They moved on.

"Conrad? Is he the gentleman who runs a bookshop in Piccadilly?"

"Indeed, comrade Willis. A most remarkable man. His enquiring mind is his greatest asset. He compiled a catalogue of the early productions of the printing press of all countries, a volume that torments me as much as it gives me joy."

"How so?"

"It is informative yet, my obsessive impulses require me to purchase an example of every publication listed. Therein lies Conrad's business acumen. He knows there are others like me so, for a long time, he has specialised in seeking out rare books to sell, ensuring his new cash register will always ring to the sound of another sale."

"Comrade Reid complained to me in December that he had visited the shop and spotted Guest perusing the latest publications, so he left to avoid having to exchange any courtesies."

Changing the topic of conversation, he said, "Mr Howard is always such a gentleman and, if I had to choose between all the commissions we've worked on together, their dining room at 1 Palace Gardens is my absolute favourite."

"How deeply gratifying," Harding said, sounding taken aback. "Considering how hard you had to work to get the woodwork and the gold lettering painted, I'm astounded that your hard graft didn't tarnish its appeal."

Willis stopped walking, prompting Harding to stop too.

"When we had got Mr Finchley-Browne's panels in position and cleared away the ladders and the dust sheets, it was truly astounding to behold. The journalist was spot on when he described it as 'glowing like pages of an illuminated missal'."

In the next room, they had to negotiate ladies in protruding bustles and others with skirts that trailed up to a metre behind them, ensuring Willis was constantly eyeing the floor so he didn't trip or cause the wearer to have an injurious fall.

"Why a garment that sweeps as one walks is becoming defies logic," he muttered, prompting Harding to laugh.

"I'm pleased to say all the ladies whom I hold in high esteem refuse to wear crinolines," said Harding.

As they walked into gallery IV, a lady viewing the upper most paintings through her opera glasses took a few steps back and walked into Willis, then had the audacity to demand an apology. He did so with a gracious bow, albeit one that only required him to tip forward only slightly. Harding, who couldn't abide affectation, sniggered. Willis observed the woman stiffen and no one could fail to hear her retort, delivered in a stage whisper, that such behaviour was to be expected since the Royal Academy started letting in any old riff raff.

The room contained religious paintings which had been loaned for the exhibition. Harding scanned the walls. Willis joined in, hoping to guess which painting it was he must see before Harding could point it out to him.

A huddle of visitors moved onto the next exhibit, revealing a painting which eclipsed all others in the room with its bright jewel-like colours and perfectly weighted composition. Willis didn't need to check the exhibition catalogue to know it was medieval and had originated from Flanders. Its subject celebrated the wisemen's visit to the Holy family, therefore, it had to be the masterpiece Harding had come to view.

Realisation struck Willis like punch to the stomach. He now knew why Mr Reid hadn't accompanied them. This had to be the painting Reid hoped Harding would never see. Willis's heart sank. He feared Harding was about to make a scene.

They both reached for their spectacles in the same instant.

"The Adoration of the Magi' by Jan Mabuse," said Harding, joining him. "Isn't it just perfection?"

Willis nodded.

As he took in every detail, he was reminded of the illuminated medieval manuscripts Harding had taken him to see, but, more than anything, it reminded him of Guest's stained-glass windows. He feared that, if Harding looked at it long enough, he would spot the similarity too and it would spoil his enjoyment.

Mabuse had placed the painting's subject, the Christ Child, at its centre, nevertheless, the naked Holy Infant was a mere side-show. Willis's attention was drawn to the embarrassment of riches. And, what riches! The Magi were wearing fur-trimmed cloaks and garments made from the finest damasks. All were heavily bejewelled. Melchior's doublet had been edged with an ocean's worth of pearls, which had been stitched so they touched.

Even their attendants were attired in fine fabrics, making the travellers stand out from the impoverished local labourers who were standing back looking on.

Willis had seen enough of Guest's stained-glass to know that his draughtsmen liked to edge bishops' copes with lines of pearls, one on each side of a line of cabochons, or they would use the same edging as

a decorative device to break up a background, allowing for two different treatments above and below.

Unlike the colours used by Mabuse and van Eyck or the stained-glass produced by Harding's and Reid's workshops, Guest generally preferred a much richer, deeper palette of colours: ruby reds, dark blues, berry purples, honeyed-amber yellows.

Willis continued to search for other similarities.

Two, chattering ladies came and stood in front of them, arm in arm, and peered at the painting. They made stabbing motions with their closed fans, which, fortunately, didn't make contact.

"Once you've seen one Flemish painting you've see them all," Willis overhead the one in navy silk remark to her companion in burn orange.

"Quite. They all look the same to me too," was her withering response.

"Ladies, I must protest!" said Harding. "The Italian masters owe a great debt to the techniques employed by the Flemish masters, especially Memling who ventured beyond the Alps."

With the corners of their mouths pulled down in disgust, the ladies looked them up and down.

Willis smiled back and Harding gave them a stern look.

"Well, I never!" the ladies proclaimed with an indignant huff before marching off.

With the ladies gone, the men took two steps closer and resumed their study of the painting.

Willis compared the two towering gold chalices about to be presented to the Holy Infant, which were so ornate and so splendid it suggested the kings Melchior and Balthazar had tried to outdo the other with the sheer scale of their generosity. The third and least impressive chalice, which Caspar had given to the Virgin, was filled with gold coins. Yet, as unlikely as it was, Melchior and the Virgin could hold their heavy cups aloft merely with one hand.

The Magi were depicted so convincingly, one might suppose encountering oriental kings had been commonplace in medieval Flanders. Certainly, the painting suggested the ports near Bruges were visited by trading ships carrying goods and crew from distant shores and Mabuse had paid a sailor to sit for him.

As for the setting of Mabuse's painting, the Holy Family had been discovered in the crumbling ruins of a once great palatial building, whose architectural features were exposed to the elements. It recalled to Willis's mind the memory of Harding encouraging Guest to visit the church in Fairford. The conversation had taken place in Jesus College Chapel as they viewed Harding's ceiling.

"That's a day's journey and a long one at that. There must be churches in Kent I can look at?" Guest had grumbled.

"Indeed, but none of them boasts a complete set of medieval stained-glass windows," Harding had retorted.

Willis knew from his employer that, after visiting the church, Guest had paid Reid and Alfred

Thompson to travel there to sketch various saints so he might use them in his own designs.

For Harding, much of the appeal of the Fairford windows lay in the fact that they had been designed by a Flemish master glazier. Willis wondered how Guest would have fared if Harding hadn't told him to visit Fairford and had explained which elements of their design made the windows so attractive.

Similarly, Reid had shown Guest's draughtsman how to prick a design then pounce it onto a church wall. It made one feel ill to think of all the guidance and techniques that had been handed to Guest on a plate, whereas Harding and Reid had had to learn it all the hard way.

Regardless, Willis preferred Harding's stained-glass over Guest's because it celebrated, albeit unintentionally, God's design. Whereas Guest's over reliance on architectural motifs to make the otherwise dead spaces framing his saints interesting only served to celebrate the achievements of man. In stark contrast, Harding and his long-time collaborator Edward Finchley-Browne placed their angels, saints and biblical personages in nature, after Botticelli's 'Primavera', whereby foliage, trees, fruits, and flowering plants were typical features of their work.

Harding raised his glasses momentarily so he could read the painting's assigned number.

"Two-hundred and thirty," he repeated quietly to himself, as he searched for the corresponding entry in his catalogue.

The uniform format of the entries meant that the owner was listed in bold type to the left of the title of the work, which was positioned centrally. Willis already knew who owned the painting but, if Harding didn't, it was sure to come as a blow.

Sure enough, Willis noticed Harding's look of childish delight vanish in an instant. His face took on a curious expression, one of disappointment mixed with deep hurt. Before Willis could enquire what ailed him out of polite concern, Mr Howard appeared with Mr Conrad, who removed his hat and shook hands with them. His odd inflections, which coloured his speech, served as a constant reminder that he had originated from abroad.

Without taking pause to judge their mood, Mr Howard said, "The painting was restored last year but required only minimal retouching. Pretty much all the paint was applied by the artist himself and, as you can see, it's as fresh and vibrant as the day they were mixed."

Mr Howard's lack of tact was uncharacteristic. Willis had liked him from the moment they had first been introduced. He was not handsome, but he was possessed of an appealing character and fierce intelligence. He eschewed affectation, though he clung to the odd jarring belief befitting his class. He pursued and admired art, which had led him to seek out Finchley-Browne, who, in turn, had introduced him to Harding.

"You must have seen the painting when you worked at Castle Howard. If you recall, my uncle kept it in a small, locked room, hidden under a protective cover," gushed Howard.

"I've never visited Castle Howard," said Harding, who started pacing and becoming agitated.

Willis noted that Harding's behaviour had the positive affect of keeping the other visitors in the gallery at bay.

Howard was so dumbfounded he momentarily lost all power of speech.

Recovering, he said, "But, sir, you designed the frieze and the windows for the Private Chapel. You must have visited to ensure the work was being completed satisfactorily?"

"Harding & Co. provided the windows based on Ned's cartoons, that is all. Neither of us visited. Mr Guest provided the measurements. In his note he insisted the work was going well and we weren't required." Harding held up a finger and wagged it at us. "It's all coming back to me. His exact words were '...Without a doubt, Castle Howard is the most magnificent example of Baroque architecture on our soil and as a committed medievalist you would find it abhorrent...'. One can't accuse the man of lying. Doubtless every word is true and was skilfully deployed to ensure I stayed away."

Everyone who came into Harding's orbit knew how much he admired all things medieval. Aside from his greatest treasure, Thomas Malory's 'Le Morte d'Arthur', Harding admired the works produced by the Flemish masters, of whom he held Jan van Eyck in highest esteem. Willis could only think that Guest had derived some cruel enjoyment from denying Harding a chance to see Mabuse's 'The Adoration of the Magi' without being disturbed by maddening crowds.

"As for the frieze," continued Harding, "I didn't provide the design."

The look of disbelief on Howard's face became etched even deeper.

"But it has all your hallmarks: angels holding banderoles, pomegranates, trees laden with fruit, flowering plants, a tapestry effect. Well, if you didn't design the frieze, who did?"

Willis looked around to see if anyone was staring at them. Indeed, their raised voices and Harding's constant back and forth were attracting glances. Harding must have noticed Willis's anxious expression as he moved closer and stopped pacing.

"Comrade Willis, did you go to Castle Howard?"

Willis shook his head and answered, "No, sir. Guest just sent for comrade Reid and his man Thompson."

"Did comrade Reid mention the frieze?" asked Howard.

Willis nodded.

"Yes, sir. He leant his assistance to Guest's draughtsman in good faith. Guest's blatant plagiarism was one of the reasons why my employer severed ties with him. Comrade Reid was certain that, should comrade Harding find out about it, he would no longer use him as his preferred decorating firm, thereby excluding him from further illustrious commissions. Guest's ill-treatment of him ensured there was no contest in respect of whom comrade Reid would favour with his loyalty.

"So, it was Guest's doing," said Howard.

Willis nodded.

"Did comrade Reid see the Mabuse painting?" asked Harding.

Willis glanced at Howard and Conrad, then looked back at Harding.

"Yes, comrade."

Harding's fingers curled repeatedly through the ends of his greying beard, as he said, "Guest's men were at Castle Howard for three summer seasons, so it can't be argued that it was an oversight that Ned and I weren't encouraged to visit."

Willis said, "If it's any consolation, sir, comrade Reid's time at Castle Howard became soured when it became apparent that Guest was denying him access to clients, marking the turning point in their business dealings. Although Guest tried to scupper his chances of meeting his lordship and seeing the painting, comrade Reid outwitted him at every turn."

"Go on!" said Howard.

Willis glanced at the other two men.

"Yes, go on!" encouraged Conrad. "I want to know what happened."

Harding simply nodded his consent. Thereupon, he began to curl his fingers through his beard again.

"Well, sirs, comrade Reid had only been there a few days when Guest informed him that he had arranged for a cart to take him back to the station the next morning, but Thompson would continue working at Castle Howard. As the work in the chapel was far from complete, comrade Reid thought it decidedly odd.

"What's more, he suspected that Guest meant to poach Thompson, and this incident did nothing to allay his fears. As Guest hadn't asked my employer whether Thompson could stay on, it only served to make him more determined to thwart his scheming.

"Unbeknownst to Guest, some months earlier one of his draughtsmen had mentioned to comrade Reid he ought to pack a formal evening suit because one was invited to dine with his lordship at the castle, giving comrade Reid an inkling as to why Guest wanted him gone."

"Naturally, comrade Reid objected to being, effectively, dismissed. In response, Guest told him he was trying to spare him the embarrassment of not being able to dine with him at the castle because he wouldn't be suitably attired. Comrade Reid kept quiet about his suit, so that Guest couldn't prevent him from attending by other means.

"Seemingly, thereafter, the difficulty lay in hiring a man with a trap to take him to the castle without Guest becoming suspicious. You see their lodgings were some distance away. As it turned out, the head gardener's nephew came to his rescue."

"When Guest recovered from the shock of comrade Reid's surprise entrance, he tried to engineer it so

that my employer was sat furthest away from his lordship. However, his lordship had spotted a new face amongst his guests and was eager to converse with him and wouldn't hear of it."

The men laughed.

"Guest's draughtsman had also told comrade Reid of an exceptional Flemish painting his lordship's collection, so Reid knew to ask if he could view it and that it was a matter of timing. When his lordship had polished off the requisite amount of Hock, he was only too happy to oblige. Seemingly, Guest nearly choked when Reid made the request, then attempted to bring the evening to a swift end.

"Much to Guest's chagrin, comrade Reid was given ample time to study the painting in his lordship's presence. Because of Guest's odd behaviour, my employer had become convinced there was something in the painting Guest didn't want him to see.

"Fortunately, his lordship didn't rush him, quite the contrary. He savoured his brandy and recounted what was known about the painting's history and how it had come into his family's possession as comrade Reid stared at the work. Alas, he couldn't see what had caught Guest's attention. He even made sketches so he might ponder on them at his leisure."

The men turned and looked at the painting.

"Well," said Harding, "he has used the idea of bejewelling copes with cabochons and pearls many times over, not that images of bishops adorning themselves is exclusive to this painting or Flemish painters. And, there are many examples in medieval stained-glass."

Willis was determined to be the one to discover Guest's secret and took another step closer to the painting. The others remained in a line. He could see from the angle of their heads they were studying the personages in the lower half of the painting, leaving Willis to focus on the angels.

In Mabuse's painting, God's messengers were curiously similar in appearance. Their eyes were set between puffy lids below arching, pale eyebrows. They either had fair or light brown hair, which fell about their shoulders in spiralling curls. Their mature faces leaned towards being masculine, in contrast to their fine, childlike hair and long dalmatics, which resembled night-gowns.

The angel in a bright, emerald green dalmatic, decorated with a repeating, gold pattern, was holding a banderole of thick parchment, which was loosely curled at one end and twisted and curled at the other.

And, the angel immediately to its right, wearing a white dalmatic, had a long, coral-pink ribbon slung loosely over its shoulders and crossing low over its chest, with long, trailing, kinked ends, which twisted and turned.

Willis pointed to the angels on the left and snorted a laugh.

"Jan Mabuse has painted his scroll and ribbons as if he overheard you lecturing Guest and I, comrade Harding," said Willis.

Harding looked to where he was pointing and said, "They should never be straight or flat but twist and

turn and have kinks. Or, as my dear friend Ned would say, they should look as if a mage has brought them to life with his conjuring. Mabuse has certainly done that.”

The angels’ multi-coloured wings suggested that Flemish merchants had traded in tropical birds or at least their feathers to have emboldened Mabuse, van Eyck and van der Weyden before him, and even the book illuminator Gaston Vrelant, to defy artistic convention and give their angels colourful wings.

The wings of Mabuse’s angel in white had different coloured sections, ranging from a pink-orange, muted turquoise, pale bluey-mauve, to a greyish-purple. This angel stood out from its host because, unlike its brethren, it had a small clump of feathers on each wing which looked like hat pins that had been savagely stuck into its pinions. The ends were tear-shaped, with a wide, flattened, gold edge, and each one held a dark, glassy, circular jewel, reminding Willis of an onyx scrying stone. At a quick glance, they could be mistaken for eyes.

Upon discovering the small, nevertheless, tell-tale eyes on the wings, Willis was certain he knew he had found what it was that Guest didn’t want anyone else to see.

“Look!” urged Willis, pointing to the angel in white’s wings. “It was Mabuse’s decorative detail that gave Guest the idea to give his angels peacock-feathered wings! Surely, that’s what he didn’t want anyone else to see so they couldn’t develop the idea for their own designs?”

Harding scratched his head, then pinched the loose skin between his eyebrows.

“That’s still quite a leap. I’m not saying you are wrong but there must be another piece to this puzzle.”

Conrad stepped forward and turned to face the men.

“Gentlemen! Guest is a valuable customer of mine, as you are, which is why I have stayed silent up until now but, I believe it wouldn’t be a breach of our long-standing association if I were to tell you of an exchange we had. Upon his return from Castle Howard, I forget which year, he told me his lordship had a copy of Crowe’s and Cavalcaselle’s ‘The early Flemish painters; notices of their lives and works’ and asked me if I could track down a copy for him. Moreover, he was adamant it had to be the second edition.

“I initially refused. You see he had asked me before on the strength of a recommendation made by you, Mr Harding, but it didn’t lead to a sale.”

The men looked at Harding.

“Ah, I believe Mr Conrad is on the right track. So, what happened, Mr Conrad? Why didn’t Guest buy the first book?” asked Harding.

Conrad straightened.

“Well, this was quite a number years ago, but Guest flicked through its pages and glanced at the, if I may say so, crude illustrations and said that, upon reflection, he had changed his mind.

“However, when, more recently, he came in to view the second edition, he flicked through the pages

and stopped at one illustration as if he had wanted to make sure it was there, suggesting it was the reason for his purchase.

"Sometime later, I happened to have copies of both the first and the second editions and compared the two. The latter has been extended and has additional illustrations."

The other men exchanged looks.

Howard asked, "Would you recognise the illustration again, the one that had impressed Guest, if you were shown another copy of the book?"

"Indeed, I would," said Conrad.

"How can you be so sure?" asked Harding.

"Because St. Michael's wings looked as though they were tipped with cascading boils," said Conrad, haughtily.

"Well," said Howard, "the Royal Academy has a library. Let's ask the head librarian if we may consult their copy?"

"I'm at your service," agreed Conrad.

"I think we owe it to comrades Willis and Conrad to see if their theories are correct," said Harding.

"In that case, follow me gentlemen!" said Howard, leading the way.

Willis was the last of the four to enter the library's cavernous space and released the door. The floor was tiled in a busy geometric pattern and the double-height walls were, as one might expect, lined with books. All the way down its central space were tables where students and members could take the volumes they wished to consult.

An assistant librarian was seated at the reception desk.

He peered at them over his spectacles, asked, "Are you members? This library is for members only."

Howard approached the desk and asked to see the head librarian.

"Do you have an appointment?" the assistant librarian asked, in a hushed tone.

His five words were laden with grating displeasure.

Adopting a contrasting soothing voice, Howard answered, quietly, "No, we don't but for us I'm sure he would make an exception."

"I wouldn't be so sure," quipped the assistant, who got up and walked off.

After what must have been ten minutes, the assistant returned.

"You will need to make an appointment," he said.

"Perhaps I should have introduced myself. I am Mr Howard, the Earl of Carlisle's nephew, whose work 'The Adoration of the Magi' is the main attraction of the Winter Exhibition. I was instrumental in securing the loan. Together with these men of letters, Mr Harding and Mr Conrad, and head decorator Mr Willis,

we would like to speak briefly with the head librarian. If he cannot spare us five minutes, we will remove the painting from the exhibition. Please relay this message to your superior.”

The effect was startling. The assistant scurried off.

Within a minute, he returned with a colleague who, directed by the assistant, offered his hand to Mr Howard.

“Please accept my sincere apologies. What can I do for you gentlemen?” the man said, looking at each of them in turn and smiling.

“We wish to consult the library’s copy of Crowe’s and Cavalcaselle’s ‘The early Flemish painters; notices of their lives and works’, the second edition. There is a matter we wish to settle that cannot wait.”

“Of course, gentlemen. Please be seated at the empty table and I’ll bring our copy to you myself directly.”

The men placed their hats and, in the case of Howard and Conrad, their canes onto the table.

They observed the head librarian in silence. The man didn’t need to consult any index card systems. He went straight to a shelf further back. He ran his finger along the spines until he found the volume and brought it over to them with a bow.

His assistant approached them from the other side of the table and placed a magnifying glass in front of Howard.

“Take as long as you need! If I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to ask.”

With that the head librarian threw an ill-tempered glance at his assistant’s back as if to suggest he didn’t condone his treatment of them.

Howard thanked him and slid the book over to Mr Conrad, who took it and began to flick through the yellowing pages. The bibliophile stopped at a crude sketch of ‘The Last Judgment’ and said that Hans Memling had painted the triptych. Willis didn’t need a magnifying glass to recognise the subject matter.

The mostly linear illustration of Memling’s triptych showed blessed figures being welcomed into God’s house by St. Peter in the first panel and the damned writhing in hell and being prodded by the Devil’s imps in the third. The central panel was shared by Jesus, seated up on high, and St. Michael below, weighing two figures in his scales. The illustrator’s efforts had been concentrated on St. Michael, suggesting he enjoyed drawing his armour and wings, as perhaps Memling had before him, so the eye was drawn to God’s messenger, being the most fully realised figure and the darkest part of the page.

“Well, you weren’t exaggerating, Mr Conrad. St. Michael’s wings do indeed look as though they are tipped with cascading boils,” commented Howard, handing him the magnifying glass.

Conrad took it and peered at the illustration and began to chuckle.

“What is it?” asked Howard. “What can you see?”

“See for yourself,” said Conrad, placing the magnifying glass on the book and sliding them towards

him.

"I believe Mr Willis is next," said Mr Howard sliding the book further along the table.

With the naked eye, Willis could see St. Michael's wings were feathered in distinct layers following the line of his pinions, then the artist's lines became dense and curved, like billowing clouds.

However, with the aid of the magnifying glass, Willis could see the tips of both wings looked like tapering feather-boas, and the curved lines were fronds. As for the boils, they were, in fact, curiously similar to the eyes of Mabuse's decorative hatpin-style feathers. Together with the fronds, which framed the eyes like cupped fingers, each of the cascading feathers could not be mistaken for anything other than peacock feathers. Willis also chuckled and passed the book along.

"I'll be damned," said Howard, when it was finally his turn after Harding. "Gentlemen, I think we can safely say we have found our missing piece of the puzzle."

He then took a moment to skim read the accompanying text.

"It says here that Memling's masterpiece was snatched by a pirate and found its way to Danzig, so it's unlikely that Guest has seen the actual painting."

He looked at the other men.

"As far as I know, he's only travelled as far as Nuremberg to look at the city's stained-glass," said Harding.

Howard pointed to a page of text and read, "...At the sound of the last trump, the happy and the wicked rise from their graves; and as St. Michael with peacock wings and bright gilt armour weighs the souls on the foreground, the condemned are divided from the blest.' Well, if Guest wasn't possessed of a magnifying glass - although I'm sure he would have tasked one of his lackies to run out and by one - he could, nevertheless, have got the idea to give his angels peacock-feathered wings from reading the description."

Harding, who had his eyes closed, put up a hand to silence the others.

Opening them again, he said, "To recap, Guest saw the Mabuse painting and noted the eye-feathers. This prompted him to consult the earl's second edition of Crowe's book to see if Mabuse was one of the featured artists.

"Even if the earl had told him Mabuse wasn't discussed by the authors, Guest wanted to consult it anyway because he was curious to see how other Flemish artists painted their angel's wings. When he saw the illustration of Memling's triptych, moreover, St. Michael's wings, he knew he had stumbled on a brilliant decorative idea, one that would set him apart from the medieval master glaziers he aspired to match."

Willis lightly tapped the table with his fingertips, as if corralling his thoughts, before he said, "I have viewed enough paintings to know that a simple, linear illustration suffices to convey the composition and

the ambition of the work, but it doesn't convey the power and majesty of the actual piece. The application of colour and its effect is everything. That's why the Mabuse painting is key. Having seen it, then having consulted Crowe and Cavalcaselle's reference book, allowed Guest to imagine just how unusual, innovative and spectacular St. Michael's wings must have been, and, as we know, he isn't the kind of man to ignore someone else's good idea."

"I couldn't have said it better," said Howard.

"Here, here," agreed Harding.

Conrad raised a hand to his forehead and rubbed his brow.

"How can you be certain it was Guest who made the leap? He's a man of good taste but he is neither gifted with imagination nor inclined towards originality. Surely, it is far more plausible that his draughtsman Hughes consulted Crowe's book after seeing the Mabuse painting and found the illustration of St. Michael. Admittedly, he couldn't incorporate the idea without Guest's consent."

"I hadn't considered that, Mr Conrad," said Willis. "In which case, we mustn't forget Guest's other draughtsman John Carter who was also at Castle Howard. Hughes took the lead on that commission but upon leaving Guest's employ, Carter was made chief draughtsman. Mr Carter also gives his angels peacock-feathered wings so either he is simply re-using Hughes' designs, or he had a hand in the discovery of Memling's St. Michael."

"You wouldn't happen to know if Mr Carter designed the new window at Gloucester Cathedral, the one with St. Michael defeating the horned, trident-wielding Devil?" asked Howard. "It was the first thing that sprang to my mind when I looked at the illustration of Memling's 'Last Judgement' in Crowe's book. The imagery is by no means identical, but it is startlingly similar."

"Yes, sir, he did," answered Willis. "Interestingly, Carter's window was the first thing I thought of too."

Harding concluded, "The fruits of Hughes' and Carter's supreme talent suggests they both have a keen eye and the nature of their work means they look for inspiration and imagery they can adopt. Therefore, Mr Conrad's suggestion does indeed make more sense and I, for one, bow to your incisive Teutonic mind, sir," said Harding. "Alas, the outcome remains the same. If it wasn't for Guest, Mr Finchley-Browne and I would have seen the Mabuse painting at Castle Howard."

"As I said, Mr Harding, you are good customers of mine, Mr Guest included," said, Conrad.

"Rest assured, this matter will go no further," said Harding. "It has served to pique our interest on this otherwise miserable day. Who would have thought the Mabuse painting would give up a secret?"

"Perhaps we should celebrate our successful sleuthing," suggested Howard. "I know where we can get a decent late lunch. It's my invite so I don't want to hear any excuses." He raised a hand. "I insist."

"That would be most welcome," said Willis.

"It's a most kind offer and I happily accept," said Conrad.

"Well, I am enjoying everyone's company and am not yet ready to call it a day," said Harding.

The men got up and picked up their hats. Howard handed Conrad his cane before picking up his own. When they had left the confines of the library, Conrad asked, "Why suddenly the long face Mr Harding?"

"It's been twenty-eight years since I last saw Mabuse's painting. I'm fifty years old. If it takes another twenty-eight years for it to be put on public display again, I'll be seventy-eight. I'm already plagued by gout so I'm not sure I'll live that long."

Howard said, "Well, you can put that glum expression away! After the exhibition, the painting will be moved to Naworth Castle. When you and Mr Finchley-Browne stayed at my country estate, you said it ought to be England's most treasured medieval castle. Therefore, it will provide a more appropriate setting for the painting and you are all welcome to come and view it in its new home."

"Given this splendid piece of news, why does Mr Willis look downcast?" asked Harding, as they reached the grand staircase, leading down to the main doors.

Willis answered, "I feel wretched that comrade Reid didn't join us. He'll miss out on lunch. He guessed Mr Harding wanted to take us to see the Mabuse painting and declined. I suppose it would have served to remind him of Guest and how their association ended badly."

Harding nodded.

"Agreed, it's a shame he isn't here," he said, "but you mustn't let it spoil your enjoyment."

Howard said, "If we continue on this line, Guest will succeed in tarnishing the Mabuse painting for me too and I won't allow that."

"I apologise, sirs," said Willis. "Our success is, indeed, a cause for celebration."

With that the men descended the stairs, their heels clattering on the polished stone.

Thursday 8th January, 1885

"Mr Willis, a letter arrived for you this morning," said the head builder joining him.

Willis had got as far as changing into his overalls, opening his case and pulling out a new paintbrush. Mr Reid insisted he started each job with a new set of paintbrushes. Willis liked the familiarity of a used brush and disliked breaking-in a new one but couldn't risk transferring colour from a previous commission onto a his carefully prepared wall, so new brush it was. As for the paints, they had already been mixed by the supplier to Harding's specifications.

The head builder held out the letter. Willis took it and used the blunt end of his paintbrush to break the seal.

"Right you are," said the head builder, having lost Willis's attention. "I'll be sure to send up some tea,"

he said as he walked out the door.

"Thank you, Mr Fletcher," Willis called after him.

He checked to see who had signed the letter off.

It was from Mr Harding and addressed from his home in Hammersmith.

'I am still reeling from our visit to the Winter Exhibition.

It was a treat to see the Mabuse painting again and to take in all the sumptuous detail.

I stand by Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling as being the absolute masters of their craft, nevertheless, Mabuse's 'Adoration of the Magi' is an absolute joy to behold.

Guest continues to occupy my thoughts when I should be getting on with my socialist work. I wish to be rid of him. If my dear friend Ned were here, he would remind me that, by putting ill-thoughts down onto paper, they lose their power and one is exorcised of them. For good measure, one then burns the paper. I believe you and Mr Reid would benefit from his advice and I trust you to burn my letter.

Perhaps I shouldn't think too ill of Guest. Rather than think of the man, I should think of the glass that has been produced in his workshop. When he is no more, his glass will remain. His glass is the work of talented draughtsmen and glaziers and gives immense pleasure. It would be a great shame if the talent and hard labour of Guest's workers was not revered. If it wasn't for Guest, it wouldn't have come into being. It may be born out of vanity, but it serves to bring splendour and grandeur into our comrades' lives. And, who would not wish to gaze upon something beautiful when contemplating God in a cold church in mid-winter?

Willis rummaged for his jacket, which he'd covered with a dust sheet, and pushed the letter into his inside pocket. He knew he must try to think more charitably of Guest, but he wasn't going to let the man cast a shadow over the surprise of having received a letter from Mr Harding. The great craftsman and man of letters had written to *him*! His few lines pushed out the gloom of a cold January day and he took even more pleasure than usual in painting.