

HEAVEN ON EARTH

By Simon Clark

PART ONE: THE RETURN

"What's been going on here, then?"

Hubert slipped off his cap and scratched the top of his head with a grimy finger as he stared out at the expanse of dry mud.

Charles sighed. It was a typical Hubert question that sounded closer to someone grumbling at being woken too early on a morning rather than any indication of genuine curiosity.

Charles reigned back his horse. "Well, what do you make of it, Hubert?"

"Looks to me as if the river's gorn and dried up."

"Looks the same to me." Charles shot Hubert a tired smile. "And it looks a good deal easier going for the horses than this over-grown path."

"You mean we ought -"

"That's exactly what I mean, Hubert. We'll ride down there along the riverbed. Come on."

Charles urged the horse down the banking and onto the dry bed of the river that looked like some kind of dark, dry pastry beneath the April sun. He heard Hubert grumbling behind him as he followed. "Better we stopped in that there barn ... this looks downright queer to me."

"Hubert. The faster we go, the quicker we'll meet up with Jenny and the others."

"But my back's giving me gyp. It ain't been right since -"

"Hubert, trust me. This way's quicker. Here, have an apple." Charles had long since found the easiest way to stem Hubert's interminable grumbling was to hand him something to eat.

They rode in silence along a concrete hard mud that was littered with fish skeletons.

Charles constantly scanned the over-grown riverbanks for signs of life. They were in unfamiliar territory here, and they'd seen enough of what bandits could do not to take their own safety for granted. The line of the river was almost as straight as a road. Every now and again they came across the remains of a boat or barge resting on the riverbed. In one such barge Charles glimpsed the skeletal remains of a boatman laid out in the wheelhouse. The Death came faster to some than others.

"Why do you think it's gorn and dried up fer?" asked Hubert as his discoloured teeth worked at the core of the apple.

"Ah, I don't know; it can't be drought, considering the rain we had over the winter. Perhaps it became blocked upstream."

"You can't just stop a river".

"Not stopped, maybe, but possibly diverted. Either by accident or design."

"Who'd do that then?"

Hubert's questions could be child-like at times. Charles smiled.

"That I don't know, Hubert. But rivers sometimes do changetheir courses quite naturally. A banking erodes, the waters break through and find a completely new route to the sea."

"Still looks funny to me. I don't like it."

"It's not for us to like, or dislike; just accept it as a God-given highway back to a comfortable bed for the night... and don't mention that barn again. The place was swarming with rats."

"Rats are natural," Hubert observed gloomily. "This ain't. Someone's drained this river for a reason."

"Well, if you're right, Hubert, I hope I meet the man or woman who did this, so I can shake them by the hand."

"You might regret meeting anyone doing anything as unnatural as this. Ungodly I call it."

"Ungodly, Hubert. To what? To move hundreds of tons of earth? To build a dam to divert millions of gallons of water into a new purpose cut channel?" Charles felt a tingle of excitement. "No, Hubert. They must be one hell of an engineer."

"Might be Preston's work?"

"Greg?"

"Kind of thing he'd think of doin'."

"Yes, but good grief, man, you know as well as I do that Greg died months ago."

"I'm not so sure".

"You know he did, Hubert".

"We never saw the body?"

"Agnes said..."

"And Agnes might have her reasons for lyin'."

"Reasons. What reasons, Hubert?"

"She fell in love with Greg, didn't she? And him with 'er. Maybe she were tryin' to stop Jenny from finding where he were."

"Then what? So he could shack up with Agnes here in the middle of nowhere? Where they could divert rivers together!" Charles felt the fury belting through his Celtic blood. God Almighty! Hubert could be so dense sometimes ... so flaming, impossibly, stupidly dense.

"Greg's dead!" He bellowed at Hubert so loudly that the horses jittered back startled. Hubert nearly dropped the rifle he carried in his hand. "And if people got that into their heads then the better we'd all be! The last thing we need is a religious cult surrounding Greg Preston. Yes! The man did good work. He sowed the seeds of a federation that would link all those little communities out there into something resembling a nation again! With roads, and transportation, and electricity and trade. But Greg Preston is dead! Dead and buried!"

Most would have flinched before Charles furious outpourings. Hubert merely rubbed his stubbled chin doubtfully. "I don't know..."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"But we've eard stories. We've met people who've seen Greg quite recent."

"Yes, seen him at a distance, or - or met someone who's brother's friend's wife has talked to a stranger who fits Greg's description. Now, look here, Hubert." Charles levelled a gloved finger at him. "Those are rumours - nothing but rumours. And I don't want you passing them onto Jenny. She's going through enough as it is. Got that?"

"Aye."

Hubert grumbled a few more words that Charles didn't catch. Nor was he interested. The sun would be setting in an hour or so. Instead he urged the horse into a rapid trot. They rode in silence once more. There was no sign of human life. The fields flanking the dry riverbed were a jungle-like riot of weeds and wild flowers that seemed to cast a reddish blush over the vegetation. Once a feral cat hissed at them from an over-hanging branch. Charles noticed how much bigger they were growing now, well-fed on a diet of mice and rats, whose populations had exploded with the demise of humankind. And the mice shall inherit the earth. Charles smiled grimly. Now, that would have been one prophecy with more than a grain of truth about it.

They urged the horses on, maintaining the fast paced trot. Ahead, a freighter lay between the V shaped banks of the river. Its white paint was all gone, leaving it the colour of rust.

"'Ere." Hubert pulled the horse up. "Charles, what the heck's that?"

Charles shielded his eyes against the low sun and stared hard. "A ship. Nothing more than that, Hubert."

"But look how it's laying. That ain't no co-incidence, is it?"

Charles looked it over. Its position did look odd. But he didn't want to voice any doubts in case it set Hubert off on his 'Ungodly' talk once more. The ship had appeared to come to rest right across the river, its stern wedged into one bank, the prow in the other. If anything it looked like a huge steel barrier.

"Whatever's happened," Charles said softly. "She's blocking our way. We'll have to go round her."

"I don't like this," Hubert grumbled. "I don't like this one little bit."
Cautiously now, because the banks were so high they prevented them seeing beyond them into the surrounding fields, they followed the river bed until the banking became less steep, allowing them to reach the path once more. Hubert paused to check his rifle.

"Don't take all day about it, Hubert; not if you want some supper tonight." Charles rode the horse up the banking. There he stopped and stared. Because he'd seen something that simply could not be.

In front of him, where there should have been the flat fields of Eastern Lincolnshire was a lake.

Here and there, the remains of houses broke the surface of the waters. He even saw a church tower in the distance, standing like a stone finger from the glassy surface.

"Good heavens," he said in an awe struck voice. "If I didn't know better, I'd say someone deliberately created the lake by damming the river with that ship."

"And I can tell you that someone did."

Startled by the stranger's voice, Charles looked down to see a lone figure rowing a boat from the shadows of the ship.

He recovered from his surprise and quickly assessed the figure. She certainly didn't appear to pose a threat. She was slightly built with long red hair. A smile - almost a secret smile, at that - played on her face.

"Hello," he said. "My name's Charles - "

"Vaughan. Charles Vaughan. Yes, I know."

"You know my name?"

"Of course. I was told to wait for you here. And that gentleman with you is Hubert."

"That's right, Miss." Hubert said confused. "But how do you know about us?"

"I know all about you. Now, please tether your horses I'm here to take you across to the other side."

"Now, wait a minute ... " Charles began.

"Please," said the woman in a light, pleasant voice. "You'll be safe. And your horses will be looked after."

"But who told you we were coming this way?"

"Someone you know well," she said.

"And who is that, then?"

"Greg," she said, smiling. "Greg Preston."

PART TWO: WHATEVER GETS YOU THROUGH THE DAY

"'Eaven on Earth, that's what it is. 'Eaven on Earth."

"Well, Hubert, you've changed your tune," Charles said. "Just yesterday you were saying how ungodly it all was."

"Ah ... but we know different now, don't we?"

"You mean you've filled your belly with good food and beer, more like."

"Look at this," Hubert picked a banana from a bowl full of exotic fruits.

"Bananas. And melons and grapes and whatnot - I 'aven't seen fruit like this in years."

The red haired woman who'd brought them across the water to the island smiled as she poured more beer into Hubert's glass. Her name was Pandora, and a smile played constantly on her full red lips. "It's all grown in the hothouses. We also have maize, strawberries, oranges, apricots, peppers, paw-paw -"

"Satsumas. I like satsumas, got any of them?"

"No, Hubert, sadly not. More beer, Charles?"

With another warm smile illuminating her beautiful face she leaned forward with the jug.

Charles quickly covered the glass with his hand. "Thanks ... but no."

"As you wish. Some wine perhaps?"

"Not for me, thank you. You've taken care of our stomachs, but you see the one

thing that needs feeding now is my curiosity. Those greenhouses you showed us are vast. How are they all heated?"

"They were the property of the Ministry of Agriculture. A research establishment or laboratory, that kind of thing. I'm told that they're heated by a natural deposit of orimulsion that's piped in from just beyond that hill over there."

Puzzled, Hubert scratched his stubbled jaw. "Ori-what?"

"Orimuslion, Hubert." Charles said, "It's a form of natural flammable gas." He turned to the woman. "I'm surprised the gas is still flowing."

"We have one of the original work force in our community. She knows how to operate the gas regulators. What's more, she says there's enough gas underground here to heat the greenhouses for another fifty years. Now what more can I tell you?"

"Oh, there's lots, believe me. Your skills and your produce will be vitally important to the people out there. You know, we've encountered communities that're are dying out for want of food. Here you've literally a cornucopia."

"Cornia-what?" Began Hubert, but Charles surged on enthusiastically. Hubert was right. This was a Heaven on Earth. He'd hardly believed his own eyes when Pandora rowed them across to the island, which was surrounded by a vast lake from which the roofs of buildings protruded. He'd even marveled over the state of Pandora's hands. The nails were wonderfully shaped; the palms uncalloused, beautifully soft to the touch (she'd actually took him by the hand when showing him and Hubert around the community of sixty-seven souls). The people there showed no signs of the ravages of the last few years. Charles was familiar with the typical Survivor who, more often than not, would be clad in scavenged clothes, often scruffy with unkempt hair and work-ravaged hands - a testimony to clinging to life in a hostile environment.

Here, Charles was struck by the untroubled expressions of the people. They smiled constantly. With peace and food aplenty life was good here, no doubt about it. Now they sat in Pandora's cottage that looked onto the pair of little hills that formed the highest parts of the island. Acres of glass roofs glittered in the April sun.

"Now this island ... " Charles began, hungry for more answers.

"This island is artificial as you quickly realised." Pandora favoured him with another of her beautiful smiles. "He saw that our community was threatened by wild dogs and bandits so he dammed the river using the cargo ship. Now that we are separated from the rest of the world by a barrier of water we have a safe haven. He saw to that."

"He? Who is this He exactly?"

"Come, Charles. I mentioned his name yesterday."

"Greg Preston?"

"Yes."

"But Greg Preston is dead."

"Believe me, he was truly alive when I saw him last."

"When was this?"

"A week ago."

"A week!"

Charles rocked back. His head spun. "Greg's alive? Now that is one hell of a revelation, believe me."

"I told you so, didn't I?" Hubert took a huge swallow of beer as if rewarding his own genius for deduction. "Like I said, we none of us saw the body."

Charles rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, and then looked at Pandora. "If you've got time, I'd like to ask you more questions?"

"By all means, Charles. I love talking to you."

"Hubert, you might like to take a walk."

"I don't want nothin' of the sort."

"Hubert."

The warning growl in Charles' voice was plain to hear. Pandora spoke gently to Hubert, "Why don't you talk to Timothy. He's baking in the kitchen. I'm sure he'd love your company."

Muttering Hubert stood up, hitched his string belt higher up his waist, and then

left the room.

Charles didn't dislike Hubert. He was a good man to have at your side. But the fact of the matter was Charles wanted to learn as much about this mysterious resurrection of Greg Preston as possible, and Hubert could only be guaranteed to interject questions that could be just plain daft at times. Charles reached across the table and laid his hand on Pandora's wrist. "Pandora. It's important - vitally important you tell me as much as you can about Greg's visit here."

"Of course, Charles."

"When did Greg dam the river?"

"Oh, about eighteen months ago."

"He left after that?"

"Yes. Straight away. He said he had other work to do."

"But you told me you saw him just last week?"

"Yes, I was walking on the shore at night when I heard him calling me from across the water..."

Charles sat with his fingers knitted together listening gravely, thinking hard, and then framing the next question. He realised he must have sounded like a detective questioning a suspect, but he knew he must learn the truth before he said so much as a word of all this to Jenny.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen Hubert was enjoying himself. In fact, he hadn't enjoyed himself this much in years. He sat on a tall stool watching Timothy bake cakes in a wood fired stove. Timothy was a willowy youth with blonde hair and sleepy, good natured eyes.

Hubert found himself chuckling again at something Timothy had said.

"Help yourself to another cake, Hubert. They're good, eh?"

"Good. Very good. Can't get enough of 'em. How come they're so sweet when you can't get no sugar?"

"Ah, that's the honey, Hubert. We have our own hives."

Hubert chuckled and stuffed another cake into his mouth. "Yer pullin' my leg. It's still too cold for bees to be producin' honey."

"The hives are in the hothouses. The bees have been feeding on peach blossom."

"No wonder it's so sweet. Bloody good though. What goes in 'em?"

"They're our own recipe."

Hubert rubbed the crumbs from the stubble around his mouth. The smile on his face became wider and wider. He'd not felt this good in . . . how long?

Gracious. He'd never felt this good ever, he realised. Good food, and a soft bed the night before, had magicked away all his aches and pains. Why, he couldn't even feel the dull ache of lumbago that usually haunted the bottom of his back like a vengeful spirit. As for the rheumatic pairs in his shoulders, they'd vanished completely.

"So, you like it here, Hubert?" Timothy smiled as he lifted another tray full of the golden cakes from the oven.

"That I do." Hubert spoke with feeling. "'Eaven en Earth, it is."

"You're right there, Hubert. It's a good life here."

"And so I told 'im through there - Charles. But all he does is want to ask questions. Y'know if he found the goose that laid golden eggs he wouldn't be content until he'd cut it to pieces to find out how it worked. That is if he could skin a goose. Architect he is. One of these who never used to get 'is 'ands dirty in the old world, not like us ... " Hubert chuckled. "What good is all 'is learning now and diplomas and such-like?" This struck Hubert as being even funnier and he laughed until his stomach muscles ached in protest.

Timothy said simply, "Hubert, why don't you stay?"

"Stay 'ere?"

"Yes. You'd be a useful man to have around the place." "I am that. I can neuter a ram in the wink of an eye." "Stay then."

"Charles . . . 'im through there, wouldn't have none of it."

"We can ask him, can't we? We need help to harvest the crops in the greenhouses. The nectarines will be ready for picking soon. Often we have so many they rot on the branches".

"'Ere. I've been meaning to ask . . . why is it all this fruit ripens so early in the year?"

"Special plants and trees. Before the Death, scientists had developed plants that would produce fruit at different times of the year."

"You mean apples in April, that sort of thing?"

Timothy nodded as he mixed more flour and butter.

"Seems rum to me," Hubert said, frowning. "Weren't it scientists meddlin' with stuff they knew nothing about that got us into this mess in the first place?"

"No-one really knows. More cake, Hubert? Try the one with the cherries."

Hubert ate. The cake really was delicious. So delicious in fact he forgot to worry about why trees fruited in the early spring. He was just thinking he might stay here when Charles walked into the kitchen. He was pulling on his gloves in what seemed to Hubert a depressingly business-like way.

"Come on, Hubert. Time we were moving on."

"Stay and 'ave some o' this cake. You've tasted nothing like it."

"Oh, I'm sure that I haven't. But we've got to be getting back to Jenny and the rest."

"But we could -

"Hubert. Get your boots on."

Hubert shot a glance at Timothy and then at Pandora who stood in the doorway. Smiling, she gave a shrug which seemed to say, 'Well, I tried.'

In a borrowed boat Charles rowed across the lake. Hubert lounged idly back, trailing his fingers in the water. He nibbled almost delicately on a hunk of cherry cake as he sang, or rather grunted the words to a song.

"Michael, row your boat ashore 'allelujiah. Michael row your boat - "

"Hubert, do you have to sing?"

Hubert grinned "I like singin'"

"You might. But, if you forgive me, I don't care for your style."

"Michael row the boat ashore, 'alielujiah ...

"Oh, good God in Heaven."

"Charles ...what... what did that woman 'ave to say about Greg?"

"Oh, Pandora? It took some piecing together. She seemed to have a fairly laissez-faire attitude to life - reality in particular."

Charles paused rowing for a moment. The boat coasted slowly under its own momentum. A cool wind blew, rippling the waters.

"Well, Hubert," he said slowly. "It's true Greg was here around eighteen months ago. At a time we knew him to be alive."

Hubert chuckled.

"What's so funny, Hubert?"

"I'm just thinkin' how he blocked the river with the boat and made an island for 'em. I reckon that was a clever idea." Hubert chuckled again and Charles glared.

"Anyway," Charles continued, "Pandora told me that Greg moved on after that."

"But he came back last week. She saw him."

"Yes, she did, Hubert. At least that's what she told me."

"You believe her?"

"I believe she believed what she saw."

"Ow'd you mean?"

"She said she walked along the banks of the island last Eriday night and saw Greg. He told her to expect two of his friends would be coming this way and to give them a message to pass onto Jenny."

"So he is alive then?"

Charles looked at Hubert's wide-eyed expression. The crumbs of cake stuck around his mouth.

"No, he's dead, Hubert."

'Ere, you're talking daft ... how can he be talking to this Pandora and be dead at the same time? You mean she saw a ghost?"

"No, Hubert. I don't think she even saw the ghost of Greg Preston."

Charles shook his head. Hubert was grinning stupidly from ear to ear. He explained slowly for Hubert's benefit. "You see, Hubert. On that island they grow more than fruit and vegetables in their greenhouses."

Hubert bit off a mouthful of cake. "What's that, then?"

"Well, why does Pandora and the rest look so ... so indestructibly happy all the time?"

"You mean they're groin' somethin' funny?"

"Yes, Hubert, something very funny, and they've put it in that cake you're eating."

Hubert giggled, then he looked at the cake through strangely glazed eyes.

"Yes, Hubert. Dope, hemp, marijuana, whatever name you care to give it, it's part of their staple diet."

"So, this Pandora woman l-loo ... luccinated about Greg lastweek?"

"Yes, she hallucinated."

"So, what message did she say we had to pass on to Jenny?"

"Never mind that. It's not important now we know it was nothing more than a dream."

"But how did Pandora know our names? And to expect us coming this way?"

"Greg must have told her our names when he first visited here eighteen months ago. The drugs did the rest. Now, you might as well sit back and enjoy what's left of this ride because we've still a good eight hours on horseback ahead of us".

Hubert still wore the huge goofy grin. "And that lot feel like I do all the time? Sort of warm and floatin' on air?"

"I imagine so. They must have been permanently stoned for God knows how many years."

"It's good - a flippin' good feelin.'"

"These are difficult times to live in ... " Charles shook his head, a ghost of a smile on his lips. "So whatever gets you through the day, Hubert. Whatever gets you through the day."

Gripping the oars once more, Charles rowed on across the waters.

THE END

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