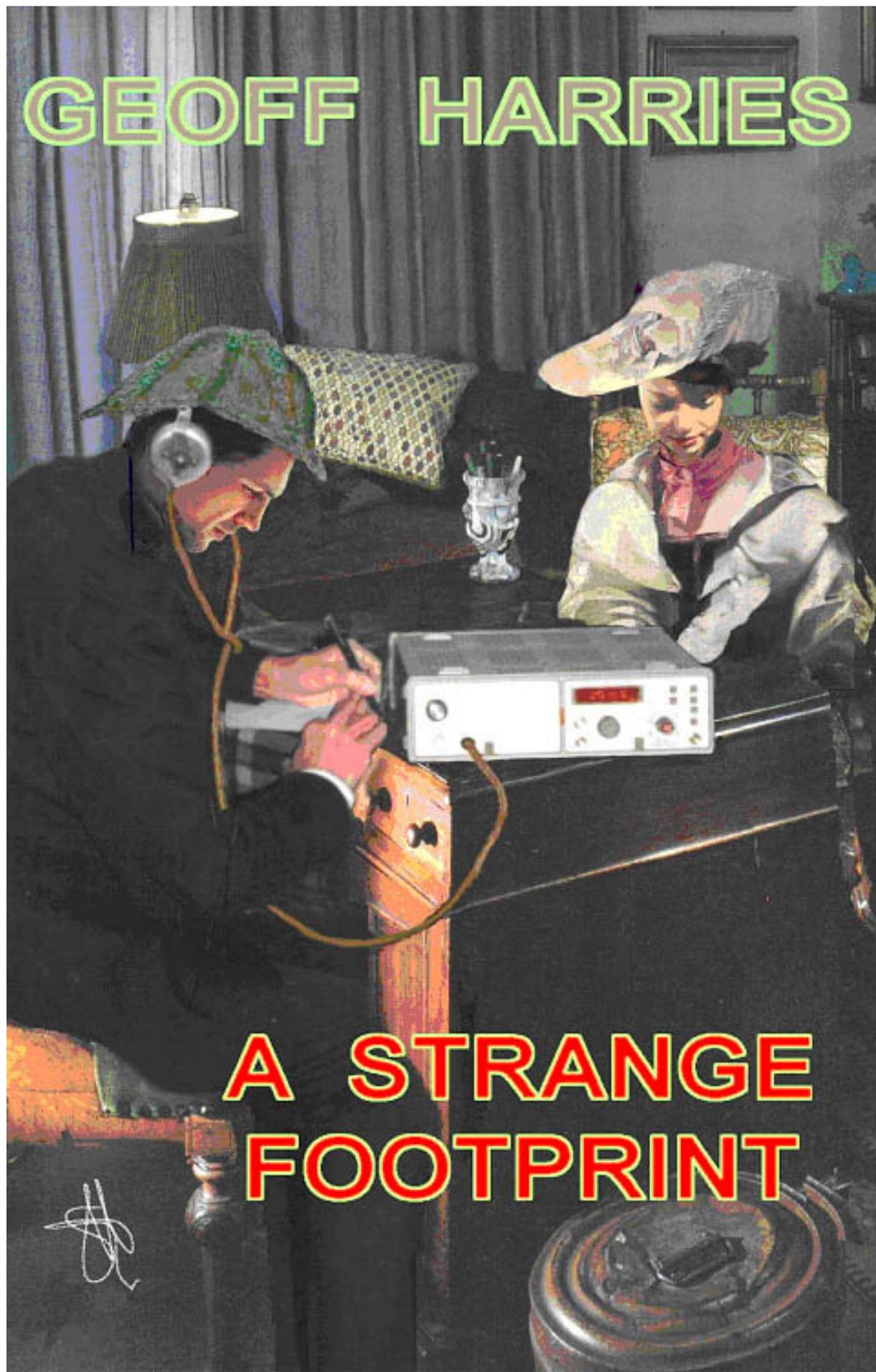


GEOFF HARRIES



**A STRANGE
FOOTPRINT**

[Handwritten signature]

(CHRONDISP 2)

Chapter 1

I was in the workshop, reassembling a 16th Century duelling pistol, when I heard voices from the front of our shop. Intrigued, I put it down on the bench and stuck my head around the door.

A tall thin figure was standing in front of the counter, and facing him on the other side was Heidi, Dieter's little bright-eyed six-year old daughter, dressed as usual in her cute Dirndl.

'We generally recommend at least a fifty joule model for home defence,' she piped, holding with difficulty one of our new Colt lasers. 'The aperture can easily be 'justed, and the state of charge is at ...at all times ...ja... at all times clearly visible.' She expertly flipped open the butt plate with a gesture I recognised as my own then suddenly swung the weapon round. 'There are three trigger positions and...'

But my visitor was lying flat on the ground and under the menace of the wildly swinging muzzle I was crouching down beside him too. Still stooping I rushed round the counter, grabbed the laser from her and put it on "safe". Then I scooped her up.

'Oh, Uncle Dig,' she said, switching to German 'Why did you come in then? I had almost sold him one.'

And he had almost bought it.

I shook her gently, her little face level with mine.

'Look, Heidi. How many times have I told you that you mustn't come into the shop? I should tell your Papa and you know what he'll do.'

He'd paddle her, that's what. Family discipline still exists in the 21st Century in Bavaria. Her eyes filled with tears and she put her arms round my neck.

'No, no, Uncle Dig, promise you won't tell him! I was only trying to help.'

Little girls don't need to learn how to manipulate men; they're born with the ability.

'Then you promise never to come in here again unless Papa or me is here too?'

'I promise! I promise!,' she said, tears disappearing instantly from deep blue eyes that one day were going to be infinitely more dangerous than a small home-defence laser. As I put her down I felt something hard in her Dirndl pocket and dug my hand in. Dear God! Four big shiny .45 cartridges. Live! Before I could say anything she had wriggled away and fled.

The sooner we moved into those new premises the better. I dropped the cartridges into a drawer and then turned round to the customer with an apologetic expression. A shock of surprised recognition!

The tall thin-faced man opposite me had climbed to his feet and was brushing down his dark expensive-looking suit.

Dr Duluth! Last seen at the Chrondisp Institute in the middle of the Sahara desert! We shook hands silently and I found myself looking again into those cold grey eyes under straight black eyebrows.

"The Chrondisp Institute". Ah, that stirred memories! This time last year I had spent a never-to-be-forgotten month with them, well not all the time, and yet physically I had been there all the time – but "time" is a word one should use cautiously when talking about Chrondisp. Perhaps I should explain, in case anyone out there still thinks the "Chrondisp Institute" is just another holo series.

It's real all right. It really is possible to send people back into the past - well, that's not quite right, it's possible to send you back mentally into the past, as an Observer. I had been one of the selected Observers and this time last year I had had a very hectic time, both at the Chrondisp Institute in the middle of the Sahara desert and also as an Observer in the France of Napoleon.

'I really just dropped in to see if you had the time to come round to my hotel tomorrow morning where we can talk some more. We have something that may interest you. I'm at the ...' He pulled out a key and read the label '... the Bayerischer Hof. It's just round the corner.' About the most expensive hotel in Munich.

'Shall we say 10 o'clock?. Ask for Jones.' Again that odd neutral accent, southern English but with an occasional American intonation.

I certainly had the time to see anyone from the Chrondisp Institute. Curious and surprised I agreed, and as he stepped outside, a long black limousine with a uniformed chauffeur slid smoothly up to the kerb and he climbed in. I watched him leave thoughtfully. Why hadn't he just phoned for a meeting?

*

I looked round the small shop, the sun slanting in from the quiet street onto the rows of gleaming muskets and the old suit of armour by the door. There was the familiar smell of warm gun-oil.

I had lived in Munich for two years now and had never regretted it. After the War (or the Pakistan Affair, as they had called it) against the Yellow People Federacy, where I had served in the Infantry, I had come to Bavaria to unwind and had just stayed on. I was co-proprietor of this small "Waffen" shop in Maxberg Strasse where we sold old and not-so-old weapons. It's a nice part of the world, Bavaria. Lakes, mountains, countryside, and all within half an hour. I suppose the only thing missing is the sea... but you can't have everything.

*

The Affair had not really solved anything. It was just one episode in the West's defensive struggle against Eastern despotism. The Federacy, the YPF, or more often just "Asiablock", had probably received its impetus because the Orientals, and in particular the Japanese, had done all they could to achieve success in the world, but were still regarded as industrious ants with completely alien thought processes. Rejected by the world they had turned in to their common heritage with two other Asian peoples - the Chinese and the Koreans - and together had evolved a new religion that was a mixture of Communism and Tao (the Way). It was very appealing to these other members of the "Yellow Peoples Co-prosperity Federacy", and their self-discipline had certainly made it work better than the late unlamented Russian version. But, as with most new religions, it was for export.

To start with it had been just the gentle proselytising of an idealistic faith, but gradually the mood had darkened as power had become concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, until finally the Federation had developed into one of those efficient dictatorships which are strewn across human history like black stains. Already they had a "Committee for Ethical Re-education" - the CERE - which had a fearful reputation for bland barbarism.

So when the Chrondisp technique was discovered by accident a few years ago, it became yet another weapon used by both sides in the struggle for the hearts and souls of mankind.

Chrondisp, or Chronological Displacement, has revealed a lot about the structure of time. Basically the past has been found to consist of a series of Critical Events, joined together on the Main Timeline. They're fixed and you can't change them. A much quoted Critical Event occurred in 1759 when a French sentry fell

asleep at the top of a narrow, supposedly secret path leading up to the Heights of Abraham outside Quebec in Canada, where the French Army was camped. The British under General Wolf climbed this path one night, lugging their artillery with them, and when the French woke up in the morning - surprise, surprise there was a superior army facing them.

Result - Canada became British.

But most of human history consists of Branch Timelines. Most people live and die, generation after generation, on Branch Timelines. They live unimportant lives, unimportant in the Great Scheme of Things. They never get struck on the head by an apple and discover gravity, they never write $E=MC^2$. Or if they do, they never tell anyone. You'll never make the Main Timeline if you write 'Hamlet' and then just put it away in a drawer. Well, not immediately anyway. Because it has been found that it is possible to go back and Observe an invention or discovery and bring it forward into the present where it may be useful (if it hasn't been rediscovered or reinvented in the meantime, of course). It had in fact been my job (or Mission) to go back into Napoleonic France about 200 years ago and discover a lost invention (actually a rapid-firing musket). I had gone back as an Observer into the French gunmaker living at that time who had actually made the invention.

Apart from discovering the secret of this musket, I had made two other interesting discoveries: 1. I had found I was one of those rare individuals called an Empathiser. Practically this means I can be Inserted into a Host and not only Observe his activities and thoughts but also talk with him. And no, he doesn't go rushing off to a psychiatrist on hearing my voice - he just thinks it's his own internal thoughts. 2. Follows from 1. If you can talk to your Host, you can sometimes influence his actions - modify his Branch Timeline, in the jargon, which sounds like a Godlike power, but isn't really. You can't make him do anything he wouldn't do himself.

I looked at my watch. It was Saturday midday and I was supposed to meet Dieter, who owned the other half of the shop, at Hirschau, a tennis club in the nearby Englischer Garten, bringing Heidi with me. I was satisfied my new serve would still give me the edge over him, but he had been slipping away from the shop a lot recently and coming back looking hot and red. After my recent experience in France I would have not have had the slightest doubt as to what was going on. But Dieter - an affair? Unthinkable. He was happily married and had two children. Also he had once tried to hide the tennis racket he had been carrying - I was pretty damn sure he was having secret coaching. I closed the shop up and went upstairs into his apartment to look for Heidi.

Chapter 2

The next morning I walked down to the Bayerischer Hof from my apartment in Schwabing. Being a Sunday, the church bells were bonging and clanging enthusiastically all over Munich. Not for the first time I wondered why they didn't ring the bells in chimes, or whatever the technical term was.

It was a pity, as they seemed to have lots of deep-toned pleasant-sounding bells, but they just pulled them at random and it made a terrible discordant clatter. German bell-pullers (you could hardly call them bell-ringers) must have visited England often enough, had they never been stimulated to imitate English bell-ringers? I remembered I had once lived in a little hamlet called East Hanningfield, in Essex. It had had a church with only three bells, but they had bell-ringers who used to practise

assiduously and could turn in a pleasant-sounding performance of a Sunday morning.

I must write to the Lord Mayor of Edinburgh. Why Edinburgh? Well, Edinburgh and Munich were "twin towns". Edinburgh sends us Scottish dancers and bagpipe bands now and then, and Munich sends over a sort of portable Oktoberfest during the Edinburgh Festival. Perhaps Edinburgh would send over a bell-ringing team.

By this time I had walked through the almost empty sunny streets and reached the Bayerischer Hof, a large old hotel, strictly in the heavy Bavarian style, solid oak tables, forest green decorations, antlers on the wall etc. I called at Reception and a pretty young girl in peasant costume touched the screen set into the desk and told me Mr Jones would be down in a moment.

Incognito. The last time I had seen him he had been Security Director at Chrondisp. In fact, I suspect I had materially helped him into that job when he had discovered an Asiablock mole in Chrondisp.

The lift opened and he stepped out, looking as usual as though he had just come from an important meeting. He absently ushered me into the sunny break-fast-room and took coffee and croissants; I helped myself to tea.

We chatted a bit about mutual friends and he asked me about the shop. He seemed surprised I was still working there. 'Why the surprise?' I asked 'It's an interesting job and I'm half owner now so I can take time off when I want.'

'I'm surprised you're working at all, with all the money you earned with us. Did you give it away or something?' he asked.

Yes, I suppose it was a bit surprising really. I had indeed been paid a great deal of money, but I had hardly spent any of it. Sure, I had paid off a lot on my apartment, paid cash for my share of the shop, but the rest had just gone into banks - into savings accounts. I had few relatives but they were all well off and doing fine in their careers. So apart from my favourite occupation, learning things, I had rather run out of ideas of objects to purchase. One of the problems was that I had a wide circle of not very rich friends, engineers, teachers etc., and I felt that if I started flashing money around those friendships would suffer. And if a girl finds out that you're rich, you can never be sure if she really likes you. Wouldn't bother some people, of course, but...what had he said?

'What did you say?'

'Did you give any of it away? To religious organisations, for instance?'

I looked at him.

'During the last war I served two years as a volunteer in the Infantry, seeing ten months of active service helping stem the Chinese and Mongol invasion of Pakistan. It was dangerous, but nothing compared to that month at Chrondisp, where to my certain knowledge I was,' I ticked off with my fingers, '... almost electrocuted by a berserk military policeman, almost killed by a savage guard dog, almost gassed by I don't know who, and finally almost rendered insane by what turned out to be a computer. If you think for one instant that I am suffering from any sort of guilty conscience, allow me to tell you immediately that...'

He held up a hand pacifically.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Of course, it's absolutely none of my business what you do with your money. I personally think you earned every penny of it and I can assure you that when we asked you to help us we had no idea whatsoever that you would be subject to such dangers.'

Mollified I allowed him to pour me out another cup of tea. We then chatted desultorily about my life in Munich and I told him about my newly-discovered sport

of air-surfing. I described the absolute freedom as you zoomed across valleys, arms outstretched, the transparent surfer almost invisible.

'You feel you're nearer to the sky?' His cold eyes were looking at me strangely.

'Er, yes, I suppose so.' It was an odd way of putting it.

He liked Munich, "a nice clean city" with its wonderful churches. I mentioned the Deutsches Museum which was supposed to be the biggest technological museum in Europe.

But he was watching me sideways and seemed to have something on his mind. I assumed the purpose of the meeting was to invite me to do another stint at Chrodis; he had hinted as much, and I was wondering what was holding him back.

He was going on about the churches again, and then looking at his watch said 'I suppose you'll be wanting to go off to church now.'

'Any minute now,' I thought sardonically. I had just caught sight of a man who had put his tennis kit on the floor while he went up to the breakfast buffet to serve himself. I felt a surge of emotion. Dieter, the crafty bastard, had been taking tennis lessons and had beaten the pants off me yesterday, 6-3, 6-4. He had pulled out a new top-spin backhand that had shattered me. He had even used it to return some of my best serves. I had just watched numbly while they snapped over the net, right outside my reach. The only way I salvaged any games at all was by throwing up lobs which I knew he hated - a type of tennis I would normally avoid also. I had been spending far too much time on air-surfing lessons. I really must get my tennis back up to speed.

There seemed to have been a long silence. I raised my eyes and found Mr Jones looking at me intently.

'If you have to go, you mustn't let me detain you,' he said, laying his hand sympathetically on my sleeve.

I stared at his hand and hurriedly scanned back in memory.

Detain me from where? Detain me from church?! I pulled my hand away and sat up abruptly, knocking over the tea-cup.

'Church,' I got out finally. 'And why the - why should I want to go to church?'

Very crass. I didn't know anything about Dr Duluth's personal beliefs. Perhaps he was religious and I had offended him. Thinking back there had been a odd religious tinge to the whole conversation. To hide my embarrassment I started to blot up the spilt tea with a napkin.

'Look, I'm sorry,' I began. 'Actually I'm not a regular church goer myself, but I understand they have er ...masses and things fairly regularly throughout the day here: I'm sure Reception will have all the times available .. I would be more than pleased to walk you to the nearest church.'

He set my cup back on its saucer, leant back and looked at me closely.

'You don't go to a church?'

'Well, no. I mean I'm not against religion; I think everyone has a right to their own beliefs. It's just that I like to feel that if I do something it's me that's doing it and if I make a mistake it's my own fault.' ("I'm an atheist, thank God" as someone said once).

'But don't you think there is something "behind" what we can see? Don't you believe in telepathy? In the Influence of the Stars? In a Guiding Intelligence?'

I looked round desperately. How the hell had we got into this conversation?

`One, two and three, no. And four, I'd like to see some more evidence of one. Nor do I believe in Palm Reading, the Bermuda Triangle or the Secrets of the Pyramids,' I added.

There was a girl in my circle of friends who believed passionately in all of the above and more, and if she wasn't so damn pretty...

He was looking at me again, but I was getting impatient. I respected Dr Duluth but he wasn't pretty enough to get me to discuss metaphysics and philosophy.

`What's this all about?' I said irritably. `Why the sudden interest in my religious beliefs? You didn't show any when we worked together last year.'

He carried on looking at me intently for a while and then lowered his eyes. He seemed to have reached a decision.

`Very well. I owe you an explanation and after all it only confirms what our investigations have revealed about you. I just had to make sure. The problem is quite simple to state: a lot of the people we have used as Observers at Chrondisp, people we have sent back into the past, have in some way changed their characters, usually in the direction of becoming religious or mystical.'

He poured me out some more tea.

`You remember Yvette, that Belgian girl?'

`Married the soldier? The rifle champion?'

`That's the one. She entered a nunnery last week. Left the daughter to be brought up by the husband who doesn't know what hit him. Then there's Al, who used to be an instructor. He's gone back to America and formed some sect. Of course he was a Californian already, but even so.'

`And Jim?'

`Ah, yes. I remember you were friends with him. No, he's OK. He's in our computer section - we probably keep him too busy for him to turn mystical.'

He paused.

`We have had about 20% turnover of the Observers. They go on a Mission, seem fine for a while then start visiting museums, reading history books, going to church or taking an interest in psychic research societies.'

`Enemy action?' I suggested. Asiablock have their own Inserters, of course, but that doesn't prevent them trying to sabotage our operation.

`First thing we thought of, but we can't see how.' He took a sip of his coffee.

`Someone from the future?' I suggested.

`We think not. What we are doing is surely Mainline stuff and can't be changed. But of course we'll never really know until we get to the future.'

He paused a moment then continued:

`Another idea is that it's just the normal reaction of sensitive and feeling people to seeing the whole scope of history and human activity. No one has been exposed to that sort of experience before.'

And I hadn't been affected because I wasn't a sensitive and feeling person.

`Unless you count people who've had experience of drugs,' I said. `I seem to remember that when people started taking those psycho drugs sixty years ago there was a wave of mysticism.'

`It's an idea,' he said interested. `The Peruvian Indians have a hallucinogen-drug based religion. And opium was once supposed to give "insight". Perhaps we could give potential Observers some sort of drug susceptibility test before training. It could lead us to a new understanding of the reason for this effect.'

He looked into the distance, twisting his gold watch strap.

`But the reason for this meeting ...' I nudged.

He returned to earth.

`Well, we want your help of course,' he said faintly surprised. `When can you come?'

Now I like short verbiage-free proposals, but this seemed a little too concentrated even for me. I said so.

`Well, I really don't know anything about what they want you to do - all I can say is that I believe you will find it interesting. I haven't been told much about the Mission myself; being now in Security I was just asked to see if you were in good shape. Why don't you come to us and hear the whole story at Chrodisp?'

I agreed to at least visit Chrodisp and he said they would be contacting me. We shook hands and parted.

Chapter 3

I expected the invitation would come within the week and started making preparations for a one month absence. I had told no one that I had worked for Chrodisp, it was forbidden anyway in the contract I had signed, so I just let it be known that I had to go back to England for "reserve army training".

My cat Sabs normally lived in the shop during the week and over the weekend with me. Dieter agreed to look after her while I was away. More difficult to dispose of was Herta, a girl I was currently "walking out with" (Herta's expression - she was reading "Jane Eyre"). She had been to my apartment several times and had been trying to establish a more permanent bridgehead by forgetting various items of cloths, tapes, etc. By the way she calculatingly looked round my usual squalor I knew she was thinking it "needed a woman's hand".

Maybe it did, but it wasn't going to get it.

She had frankly disbelieved my story of having been in the Army and having to go back for re-training, but fortunately I had a uniform at the bottom of an old suitcase which I was able to show her. It was terribly creased and she had insisted on ironing it. And then of course I had had to put it on. It had had a most peculiar and unexpected effect on her...so much so that I spent the most of the next day sleeping. Little calm blond Herta ... time for a cooling-off period there.

And the uniform needs ironing again.

I tried to think of anything special to take with me to Chrodisp. Remembering my last stay there, I would have liked to have taken something lethal from the shop but that would never get through airport security.

The rather boring waiting period was filled in with some quite unique old muskets arriving at the shop for possible purchase. They were virtually experimental breechloaders and must have had great historical value. Since my Mission last year I had started taking a lot of interest in these and our little shop was fast gaining a European reputation for expertise in this now exotic branch of weaponry. What made the last delivery particularly interesting was that I was sure that I had actually seen one of them in Paris 200 years ago. It was a strange feeling to hold it, still in quite good condition, and see it new at the same time, as a sort of overlay.

And then the expected piece of plastic arrived.

It was my air-ticket to Chrodisp.

I took the Underground to the airport, pushed the card into a slot to select the seat I wanted and received another plastic tab which I tied onto my bag and pushed onto the moving baggage belt.

It's all do-it-yourself in the 21st Century.

My flight to Tangier was called and soon we were rising vertically through the clouds. The jets tilted, the flight stabilised, and we were on our way.

I looked around me but the other passengers were mostly holiday-makers on their way to Africa or business men, looking at their computers open on their knees and telephoning. Off to Milan probably.

Using the screen set into the seat-back in front of me I selected the output of a camera mounted somewhere under the aircraft and pointing south. I watched the lakes and mountains of Bavaria slowly slide past. It was an unusually windy day and lots of multicoloured sails could be seen on the deep blue lakes. The last lake and lush meadow disappeared and the deserted snow-covered ridges of the Alps drifted into view. I switched off the screen, pulled out one of the magazine chips I had purchased at the airport and pushed it into my viewer. There was an interesting article on the new Individual Weapon being issued to all SEATO troops. It was small, light, and the muzzle velocity could be varied. On the highest velocity it was incredibly lethal; on the lowest it was no more deadly than a small pocket pistol, but could be almost perfectly silenced.

The author was pointing out that for hundreds of years soldiers had had to use the gun they had been given and could not vary its power in the same way the old-time soldiers could vary the power of their muskets by using different powder charges. The author wondered why the modern soldier had had to wait so long for the same flexibility to be available to him.

The article should have been signed by "Jan le Foc" for it was his idea. It had been my last Mission at Chrondisp to go back to him in the year 1815 and bring his ideas into the 21st Century.

In the meantime we had taken off and landed at two or three airports and were now finally sinking down into Tangier International.

It was relatively quiet - Africa is more popular in winter as a holiday centre. I passed Customs and was met by a blue-bereted soldier who saluted then escorted me to another part of the airport where the Chrondisp private jet was waiting. A long flight across the hot empty desert and then into the quiet Chrondisp airstrip, somewhere deep in the Sahara.

A short hot walk across the tarmac from the jet to the hangar and then the welcome coolness of a lift sinking deep under the desert into the busy underground city that was the Institute for Chronological Displacement.

In Security my guide disappeared behind a thick glass screen and I had to put my palms on the fingerprint scanner, look into the eyeret reader and speak several words into a microphone. A camera watched me carefully for a full minute as did a cold-eyed MP officer who had a file of photos open in front of him. A green light came on in front of the MP and the tension relaxed. In the wall behind me a laser I hadn't noticed whined back out of sight and a flap slid up to conceal the opening. My soldier escort reappeared from behind the thick glass screen.

'All that's new, isn't it?' I asked.

'Since the break-in last year, sir.'

We then took the underground transport system to another lift. Three floors up, a long quiet carpeted corridor, my escort saluted and left and a slender Arab secretary smilingly showed me into Dr Duluth's office.

All the Chrondisp Mahogany Row offices had a wonderful view over the desert, but this office was surprisingly sparsely, almost austere, furnished. A small picture of a sailing boat heeled over in an otherwise grey and empty ocean, and a complex earth globe with many control buttons on its base, were the only

non-essential furnishings. He had intrigued and worked hard for the position of Security Director but apparently didn't care much for the trappings. I was rather absently offered a cup of coffee and I made some remarks about the more stringent security measures.

'It's called putting a bigger lock on the stable door after the horse has left,' he said contemptuously. 'If one thing is sure, Asiablock won't try to send a sabotage team in again that way.'

We chatted a bit about the attack on the computer data-bank last year and my part in defending it.

'Yes,' he said in answer to my question. 'The data is all in molecular memory now, and we have back-up copies in case of attack. We'll never be so vulnerable again.'

He paused and put his cup down.

'Well, as you know, I can't tell you much about the Mission yet; they want to do a few checks on you first.'

'I'm OK,' I said irritably, 'You said you'd checked. I haven't gone mystical or anything. I feel fine.' They were getting on my nerves.

I rather ungraciously gave him my card and he slipped it into a slot in his desk and tapped on a keyboard. He returned the card to me.

'This will take you to your room in the training area. Pete - you remember Pete? - will contact you there.' We parted.

I pushed my card into the slot in the lift at the end of the corridor which then descended to the train platform. I pushed the "Request stop" button on the platform and about five minutes later the rubber-wheeled train hissed around the corner and stopped.

I climbed in and pushed my card into a slot by my seat. We moved off.

There were not many people on the train, just a few lab technicians and two bored soldiers. Was this because only four Observers in five could be reused?

Duluth had got me worried. Had I had a personality change? I thought uneasily of how Dieter had looked at me in surprise when that man had tried to sell us a 1914 Lee-Enfield rifle. I had just told him we didn't buy reproductions. Normally I would have wrapped it round his cheating neck.

And Herta, who had made it quite clear that a marriage proposal from me would not be misplaced.

Even Sabs, the cat, had taken to sitting on my knees in my office at our "Waffen" shop!

Had I "mellowed" or was I just getting old? It was worrying.

The train pulled into a station. A soft voice said: 'Your stop, sir.' I would have thought they could have done without "Voice Courtesy" here. These days they were adding it to everything and you couldn't make a piece of toast without the damn machine telling you to "mind your fingers on the hot toast". As for sitting in a car...it never stopped yakking at you. I pulled it out of everything I bought.

I climbed out onto the platform and pushed the card into the steel door stencilled 'Training.' It hissed open and I walked across a small reception area to the lift. Card into slot again, the lift rose to the third floor, stopped, and a voice said:

'Room six, fifth on the left, sir.'

'Thank you, and have a nice day,' I said.

A man had been waiting for the lift. He looked past me into the empty lift, then at me. I nodded to him and walked down the corridor, looking at the numbers.

My card opened room six and I stood aside as it clicked open. Once you've seen the effect of a booby-trap on someone who walks straight into a strange room, you're cautious for life.

But the room was empty.

I stood listening. Silence except for the whisper of air conditioning.

My luggage was on a rack by the door. I unstrapped it and pulled out a small device I had bought in Munich just before my departure. I unfolded the instructions and after reading them switched it on and extended a short antenna. The box made a loud humming sound, clicked several times then stopped with a green light glowing.

No bugs.

I set it to "Alert". Then I opened the cupboards, ran my hands along the hidden edges, looked over and under them, under the bed, the bathroom and especially just behind the door.

Nothing.

Overcautious perhaps, but a lot of strange things had happened to me during my last stay at Chrondisp.

I took a shower and as the water hissed down, thought of history and of what Dr Duluth had been saying. Did contemplating it make me feel religious? It certainly filled me with a sense of awe, but so did lots of other things, like looking up at the stars from a mountain-top, or the incredible miniaturisation of a mosquito, so casually squashed. I was also filled with awe at Man's ingenuity and industry, how we were exploring the fundamental particles of matter at one extreme, and the overall structure and age of our universe at the other. With medicine and now genetic engineering we were changing the ground rules by which we lived, really taking our fate into our own hands. Taking the universe apart and rebuilding it for our own convenience. I was all for it. It was an exciting time in which to live, with new discoveries coming in every week.

To be able to actually participate in one of these activities, and furthermore to be paid for it...

Paid for it.

I turned off the shower, dried myself and went over to the bed. There was a phone directory and holding it open with one hand, I punched Dr Duluth's number in with the other. He came on the line and I announced myself.

'One little point may have escaped your attention. When I came here last I had to sign a contract ...'

'Oh, I see. Well I imagine you won't have to sign it again.'

'Good. But a contract goes two ways; there's the part I do and then there's the part you do.'

Pause.

'I'm afraid I don't understand.'

'The remuneration, the emoluments, the stipend.'

'Eh?'

'The money,' I said concisely.

Chapter 4

I returned to my room a couple of hours later feeling quite pleased. Same terms and conditions as the last time. Although I now had enough money to last me forever, I had always found it a good principle to haggle for the highest possible salary. People treated you more respectfully, you had to be

kept happy, they never gave you routine work, they never wasted your time - it was their money they were wasting now.

As had been my routine when last at Chrodisp I had set several "traps" in my room, to see if anyone had entered in my absence. This time it was not necessary. The small device I had used to debug the room was on the table. I punched in a code number and the small green light glowed. No visitor had disturbed the ultra-sonic pattern of standing-waves it set up in the room. But something had changed.

There was a message on the screen asking me to call Pete, someone I had met on my last visit to Chrodisp. I did, he recognised my voice and asked me to push my card into the slot under the phone. There was a burst of beeps as he programmed it.

`Just follow the card,' he said `Half an hour?.'

`I'll be there.'

The reprogrammed card took me to an office on a lower floor with "Peter K. Zarda" on the door. He saw me looking at it as I entered.

`It's Turkish. My father worked in Germany for a while and then emigrated to the States. I was born there.'

It explained his dark colouring and thick bulk. We shook hands and he lifted some files off a chair for me to sit down. He spoke absently; his mind was obviously elsewhere. His desk was piled with folders and printouts; he looked thinner than I remembered him.

He flopped into his chair and rubbed a hand over his face.

`"Observer Drop-Out" it's called and it's a major disaster. It started with just one or two Observers not completing their Mission properly, or simple mechanical problems like Inserting into the wrong Host. So we took more and more precautions, increasing their training time and placing their Host so far from anyone else that they would have to be blind to not Merge into him. But the ratio of failed Missions continued to rise and now we have this new problem of Observers becoming actually unusable after a Mission.'

He moved some papers on his desk.

`You were in one of the first groups of trainees, if I remember rightly - I was in charge of training then. But since this latest development I have been taken off training and told to find a solution.' He looked up at me intently. `And believe me, it really is a problem; it affects the whole Chrodisp concept.'

`What!' I said. `You don't mean someone is trying to stop the idea of sending people back in time?'

`I do indeed. The Chrodisp Institute has always had its opponents, people who think it's overexpensive, overdramatic, élitist and tampering with something we don't understand anyway. But the sharpest criticism comes from the computer lobby who say we are unnecessary.'

`Unnecessary!' I said `In spite of all the results that Chrodisp has achieved?! Why only last week someone found the solution to that Prime Number problem that had been bugging mathematicians for centuries ...'

`You're right of course. But they say everything we can do, they can do better and cheaper by CC.'

CC. Computer Correlation. It was the latest buzz word. Computer data banks were so vast now, access times so small and the programming so clever that it was possible to feed in masses of unrelated data which the computer would sort out, correlate and file. And vast teams of people all over the world were doing just that. So

if I wanted to find what my grandfather did on a certain day I only had to ask a terminal and I would be told he was at this school learning the following subjects and then in the afternoon he played this other school at football. Then he went home and listened to the following program on the wireless (as it was called then). All this information from old school timetables, old school magazines, memoirs of contemporaries etc.

`But they can only feed the computer with data that exists,' I said.

`True. But it's amazing how much data does exist hidden away in the most unlikely places. Old letters, old newspapers, police records. Humanity has always liked to write things down. The CC people say they will put all of human history in data banks and be able to plot any Timeline you want. I think they will too, but they're going to need Chrondisp to help them. Chrondisp for spot checks and the computers for memory and interpolation. The two methods are complementary.'

He paused, then went over to a side table to pour himself some coffee. It was a measure of his preoccupation that he didn't offer me any.

`So we must solve this Observer drop-out problem.'

`I heard something from Dr Duluth,' I said. `Perhaps if you gave me some more info, I might see something ... wood for the trees, you know.'

`We need any help we can get,' he said. `Where shall I start?' He sipped his coffee.

`They go through training without any problem. Intro, Simulator, test Insertion, the works. Then they go on a Mission. And there the trouble starts.'

He laid a big hand on a folder.

`As you know, we give our Observers ample time to perform their Missions but we can't leave them Inserted for ever; at the end of what we consider an appropriate time we switch off electro-narcosis and bring them back anyway. I don't think we ever had to do this up to six months ago. Since then we've had to do it on 10% of our Observers as their time ran out.'

`If they had performed their Missions and just liked hanging about ...' I suggested

`The point is they hadn't. They came back with starry eyes and just went on about how wonderful it was, how it gives life a new meaning, a pattern etc. And when we ask them about the Mission, the reason we sent them in the first place, they would tell us, what's the word, defiantly, that they thought the Mission was useless and they had decided not to waste their time on it.'

Noting my expression he added:

`Exactly. We had to tell them we wouldn't be Inserting them again, of course.'

`How did they react to that?' I asked.

`Weird. They all seem to feel it's their right to be Inserted again and we must do it. We have had quite painful scenes and some of them have had to be forcibly put on the plane back to Tangiers.'

I digested this.

`10%, that's half of your drop-outs. What about the other 10%?'

`Yes. Well, we get 10% on the first Insertion. Then the 90% who performed OK are sent home and told we may call them back for another Mission, if something comes up in their line.'

`Like me.'

`Right. So something comes up and we contact them again and ask them if they would like to step by and do another assignment for us. They arrive here and

about 10% have what we call "gone mystic". Beads, sandals, black suits with dog-collars, you name it. We looked at them kinda doubtfully but what the hell, a man's religion is his own thing and we use him because he is a top-level chemist or whatever.'

`So you send a "Mystic" on Mission.'

`Yes, and we find he comes back like the first 10% - just fooled and ignored the Mission. Useless. And the same arrogance, the same demand to be sent back. I tell you we check all our Observers now, and the slightest sign of interest in the occult and they're O-U-T, out.'

`Well, I'm OK so far,' I said. I leant forward to knock on the wooden table, then thought better of it.

`Yes,' he said `One in five Observers can't be reused. What's more, it's getting more difficult to recruit new Observers; they know they have one chance in five of suffering a character change. Who can blame them from hesitating?'

`But were they all OK when they started their training?' I asked.

`We're as sure as we can be. But of course the human personality is very complicated and it's possible that those that drop out are different from the others in some way we're not measuring.'

`No one's feeding them drugs somehow?'

`Ah, yes. I remember it was your idea to see if there was any positive correlation with psycho-drug activity. A good idea, incidentally, and we're working on it, but we have no results as yet. But in answer to your question, we can't see how they are being drugged, if they are. We've put all sorts of filters on the air-conditioning of their living quarters and the food is as pure as we can make it.'

`How about that feed-back trick that was played on me when I was on Mission last time? Something to do with feeding my own EEG signal back to me. I nearly went bonkers.'

`No, almost certainly not. We monitor the EEG's of all Observers very carefully now and would bring them back immediately if anything like that happened again.'

`Duluth said it wasn't possible that Observers from the future were entering our Observers and manipulating them as we were on a Mainline. But what about Asiablock Observers Inserting into our Subjects in advance and screwing them up in some way so our Observers would be affected when they were Inserted into them later?' A bit complicated.

`Possibly, but it's difficult to see how they would know in advance who our Host was going to be.'

He paused.

`And I really don't believe in this idea of Observers being so overwhelmed by what they are experiencing,' he continued. `People these days spend hours in front of a holo projector experiencing all sorts of shattering emotions. And at the end of the story they just switch off and go to bed. It's real weird.' Another pause.

`Well, I suppose we'll find a solution sometime, but in the meantime we have to do some tests on you.'

I must have looked surprised.

`No, I'm sure no one thinks you've gone mystic - its just that we have a lot of fancy new tests and we haven't tried them out on an Empathiser yet - if you are agreeable. There's no risk involved; it's just a lot of looking at patterns and hearing sounds. It'll take about a day.'

I shrugged resignedly.

He then led me along the corridor to a room fitted up with what looked like a dentist's chair and a screen on a movable arm. There was no one else in the room except a slim young woman in a white nurse-type uniform writing at a desk in a corner. She was introduced as Sara. Sara was dark, had beautiful glistening brown eyes and a very English accent.

'Now I want you to keep a close eye on this guy. Give him the complete works and don't let him give you no lip. He's a Bridisher too like you. Check?'

'I understand perfectly, Mr Zarda,' she replied in that cut-glass accent. It was some on-going joke.

I then had to put on a standard Helmet, which I knew was really just a lot of EEG or "brain-wave" pick-ups with their preamplifiers. I leant back in the chair and listened to the voice in my ears. It was a recording.

'Think after me - "mother, red-hot poker, a cloud, holiday"...'It was like the standard calibration routine as done just before an Insertion.

There was a pause while a computer somewhere digested it all.

Then I heard various sounds - a rising tone, sharp clicks, the rushing sound of white noise. Another pause and then different voices. A soft feminine voice asking me to "come up and have some coffee", a bellowing masculine voice telling me to stand up straight, to wash myself, to work harder, to get my hair cut...

Sarah then swung the screen up in front of my face and asked me to look at it - rather a pointless request as it completely filled my field of view. I had to concentrate on it and various geometric designs appeared, each followed by a blank.

The pictures were then repeated but this time accompanied with some fairly equivalent sound - like lots of clicks for a picture containing large black dots on a white field. I hoped my reactions meant something to the computer - I was just bored.

But next came a number of pictures of objects, all with emotional connotations - a glittering knife, a view over a cliff edge, a kitten - and finally some very interesting and instructive pornographic scenes.

And that was it. I climbed out of the chair and lifted off the Helmet. As I turned to go I thanked her for her help and complimented her on the excellent quality of the pictures I had seen. I wondered if perhaps as a memento...?'

'I'll make you a hard copy,' said Sara, expressionlessly.

Chapter 5

That evening I had made an appointment to meet Jim, an American who I had met during my last visit to Chondisp. He had originally been an Observer like me, but had been taken onto the Chondisp permanent staff in the computer section. The familiar stocky figure was bent over a screen when I walked into the computer section. He seemed tired and his blond hair looked thinner.

He showed me round, but I've never been turned on by rows of metal cabinets. He reeled off figures and I made sounds of admiration when it seemed appropriate. He introduced me to some of the other personnel but they just looked at me absently as though estimating my bit storage capacity or how many instructions I could do in a second. Except one who was writing in a corner. Tall, thin and unhappy looking. Sam, he said his name was.

`Captain Digby!' he said. `We've only just finished writing up the reports on what happened when you were here last time. And now you're back again.'

I looked at him carefully to see if this was a joke but he said it dead-pan and then turned back to his writing.

`Sam's in charge of software administration,' said Jim, as though it was an explanation. We returned to Jim's desk. He shuffled some files together with long spatulate fingers.

`Squash!' he said in reply to my suggestion. `I haven't had my head up from a computer screen for the last six weeks. First we had to transfer all the Databank from film to molecular memory and then write programs to make available the enormous amount of molecular-based data available at other centres. But OK, it's a good idea. Let's play squash.'

After the game and a meal at the restaurant we went outside for a stroll. The temperature of the desert was dropping rapidly as we stood and watched the fantastic sunset.

After the last red glow had disappeared from the western horizon he started talking about his work.

`The programming is a real drag, but someone has to do it, and we have had to do it all ourselves. We'll never send work out again after that last experience. However, Duluth has some real snappy ideas coming up and it will be a pleasure to work on them. More in my line of ECM.'

`Electronic Counter Measures,' I said `I don't see any application here at Chrodisp.'

`Going on all the time. Has no one told you about the Inserter signature?' I admitted ignorance.

`Well, as you know, the purpose of the Inserter is to simulate a lightning flash. Now a lightning flash makes a lot of radio noise, the clicks and crashes you sometime hear on radio, especially long-wave, are due to the radio frequency pulses from lightning. And the Inserter makes a radio-frequency pulse in the same way.'

He felt in his pocket for a pencil, looked round for somewhere to write, then put it back.

`Well, about six months ago some scientific agency put up a special satellite with very long antenna wires, to measure very long radio waves - they call them "whistlers" because that's how they sound, believe it or not. Nothing to do with us. Anyway, they also started picking up strange weak signals which we found, to cut a long story short, were coming from Chrodiski.'

"Chrodiski" was the name the Western media had given to the Asiablock Inserter - in Manchuria somewhere.

`We were all excited - we thought that by comparing their signals with our own signals, which we could also pick up, we would be able to say where and when they were sending their Observers. Would have given us a terrific edge over them. But no, there's no relation between the signals, or signatures, as we call them now.'

`So what are you going to do? You've got to break the code somehow.'

I remembered we had had a French Intelligence officer with us in Pakistan. He was always trying to break the coded transmissions the enemy troops opposite were sending out. During a quiet period he used to get us to do odd things like all shoot at some point or move troops around. He would then look for reports on those events in their transmissions. Worked too, sometimes.

`Yeah. Code breaking. That's what it amounts to. If only we could find where and when they were sending an Observer and see his Inserter signature...'
He paused, looking up at the stars.

`And then someone had the thought that if we could pick up Asiablock signatures, Asiablock could pick up ours,' he said.

`So we screened our Inserter,' I said. `I suppose it is possible to screen the Inserter signature?' I asked as an afterthought.

`Yes, it should be possible to screen it, and as to whether we are going to do that, the answer is yes and no.'

I let this enigmatic lot hang in the air.

`Let me tell you a little story that is a classic in the history of ECM,' he said.

`In WWII everyone was in to beams - radio beams that bombers would fly along to reach their targets. Initially the Germans had the advantage because they started first. But the Allies, and in particular you British, because you were in the front line, caught on quickly and started developing their own beams. (The Allies couldn't do much at the time except bomb Germany so they came out with all sorts of bombing aids). Now one of these beams worked at 200MHz and was used to guide the high-flying pathfinder aircraft which would mark the target with flares. The main bomber-stream arrived a few minutes later and would bomb the flares.

Well, the Germans began to suspect the presence of a beam guiding the pathfinder - after all they had built the first one. It wasn't easy to find as it was quite fine and very high up. But they found it in the end, and started to jam it. Now, in the meantime, the British had discovered a way of generating much higher frequencies, 3000MHz, which could be used to make a guiding beam more than ten times finer. So they started using the high frequency beam, and here is the clever part, they kept generating the low frequency beam and used it in parallel with the high frequency beam. That is, they left the low frequency beam switched on, even though they weren't using it.'

`What on earth was the point of doing that?' I asked.

`Well, if the bombing continued, as it did, and if there was no low-frequency beam, the Germans would know there must be something which had replaced it and would start to look for it.

But the Germans thought the Allies were still using the low-frequency beam and started to build up an elaborate network of jamming stations at 200MHz. And they were naturally very discouraged to find that their jamming was having zero effect and the pathfinders were still getting to their targets. And of course the British sometimes pointed the low-frequency beams at targets they had no intention of bombing which caused the Germans to mass their fighters far away from the intended target.'

`So what did the Germans do then?' I asked, fascinated.

`Well, nothing - the war ended before they even discovered the existence of a second beam.'

Very clever.

`But what's that got to do with us here?'

He looked at his watch.

`If you're interested and have the time, I could show you,' he suggested.

I said I was and I did.

Jim dug in his pocket and pulled out his phone. He punched a number into it and spoke a while. Then he punched in another number and spoke again. The conversation seemed to have the right result as he snapped it shut and returned it to his pocket.

`Must be careful at night - a lot of people have become trigger-happy since the big break-in last year.'

We walked back across the now cold sand to the door by which we had left the underground town that was Chrondisp. It was bright and warm inside as we took a lift down to the rubber-wheeled train, still running endlessly round Chrondisp. We climbed in and Jim said:

`I'm going to show you part of the Inserter that very few people see, although most people have heard of it.'

`The Resonator,' I guessed.

`Right,' he said `and the latest modifications thereto.'

The steel doors to the Insertion Complex were open and lots of engineers and technicians were going in and out. Armed guards were on the platform outside and all cards were being carefully scrutinised in their hand-held card readers. We got through without any difficulty.

We walked past the door I knew, the door to the enormous chamber where the time traveller was suspended in a cage between the discharge spheres of the Inserter, to be sent on his journey into the past. I peeked in as some lights were on. The silver-plated Cage was lying partially disassembled on the ground and two technicians were high up on one of the voltage-multiplying columns, shouting to another on the ground who was looking at some instrument.

Then we carried on walking down the corridor. The walls were lined with cable ducts and through the thick concrete could be heard the noise of a distant drill. Technicians were hurrying past in both directions pushing trolleys loaded with electronic equipment.

The corridor ended at a steel door and we had to show our cards again. Now we were in another corridor, higher and wider than the first and curving sharply away in both directions.

`This corridor goes around the Resonator sphere,' explained Jim. `The Resonator is behind here.' He tapped the steel side of the corridor.

We walked a bit further along this corridor until we came to a place where a section of the wall had been removed.

`Lucky,' he said.

The removed section showed that there was another steel wall inside and by looking to right and left we could see the Resonator was an enormous metal sphere, supported at regular intervals on big waxy yellow insulators. There was a viewing port but although I shaded the glass with my hand from the nearby lights, there was nothing to see.

`It's about eighty meters in diameter and is an almost perfect vacuum. Just before an Insertion the inside wall is covered with a thin layer of plasma from the Driver. The Driver input coupler can't be seen from here, it's on the far side. The flash you see during an Insertion is coupled to the plasma layer through a sort of big wave-guide down to the right. You probably know the purpose of the Resonator is to artificially prolong the length of the Inserter flash. Nature makes mile-long flashes every day, but we can't do that yet.' He smiled.

Maybe not. But this was a pretty impressive device and explained why there were only two Inserters in the world. Cost-wise it must be bracketed with a space program.

`So this is where the radio frequency pulse, the signature, comes from?' I asked.

`That's right,' said Jim. `Now while we were wondering whether we should screen the Resonator so its signature could not be detected from space, someone remembered the story about the beams.'

`"If we screen our Resonator," the argument went, "the Wipe will just up the sensitivity of their satellite-borne instruments or find some other way of finding what we are doing."

"The Wipe"? - he must mean the Yellow People Federacy or YP: I hadn't heard that particular abbreviation before. I nodded.

`But if we leave the Resonator unshielded,' he continued, `it keeps them happy by giving them something to measure and perhaps leads them to think that we haven't thought of that method of measuring their Inserter activity yet.'

`Involved,' I said `so what then?'

`So follow me,' said Jim.

We walked on a bit, stepping over thick cables, until we came to a section where a large piece of the wall had been removed and the top of the sphere was visible. Bright lights had been rigged and about twenty engineers and technicians were clambering over the top of the sphere, wearing felt over-shoes. They were all looking upwards where a large construction was being slowly lowered. It was quiet and we seemed to have arrived at a critical moment. A white-smocked young engineer at the entrance motioned us back impatiently.

`That's it,' whispered Jim, pointing. `It's a circular ring about a meter thick and its diameter is eighty meters, the same as the Resonator sphere. It's supported on hydraulic jacks so it can be moved up and down and also slightly tilted.'

We craned up to see it, but there were so many supports and cables it was difficult to make out any definite shape.

`They call it the "Phase-shifter",' said Jim. `Super-cooled to minimise losses, of course.'

`Of course.'

He grinned at me. `I really don't know how it works.'

`Except that it's going to confuse the YP,' I said.

`Yes, that's the idea. It twists the polarisation of our Inserter pulse, depending on how it's hung with respect to the Resonator, and they can also introduce different resistor elements in the Phase-shifter ring, to partially attenuate the pulse too. So the sneaky Wipe will see an Insertion signature, and be able to measure it, but it won't bear much relation to the real Insertion".'

Sneaky us, too.

`So like the Brits in WW2,' he continued `we don't eliminate what the enemy are measuring, but just make sure that what they measure is useless to them.'

`Very subtle,' I said `But what's to prevent the er.. Wipe from using the same argument and falsifying their Inserter signature with a Phase-shifter too?'

`Nothing. We just hope we've thought of it first.'

`It's all part of the complicated game of bluff, double bluff, treble bluff ... It can get a bit Byzantine at times,' he admitted.

I believed him. I had been in meetings where our Intelligence was represented and it was all "They think we are going to do this, but we know they think we are going to do this so we won't do this but that". Then someone says "But the Chinese have a treaty with the Pakistanis, who we think have just found out that the Indians, whilst denying they have a secret non-aggression treaty with the Vietnamese, have never-the-less been seen on satellite photographs to have started to install rocket bases almost certainly aimed at the Pakistan airfields - so this puts a

different complexion on the whole affair". By this time I was usually slowly sliding under the table.

We chatted a bit more and then I went back to my room and turned in.

Chapter 6

The next morning I returned to Pete's office. He was rather gloomily looking through a folder of print-outs. By turning my

head to one side I could see my name was on the top.

'Everything's OK, I hope?,' I asked nervously. I hadn't seriously thought about it, but if the computer revealed anything wrong I'd be very annoyed. In fact I'd sue them for a million for changing my personality and they'd have to settle quietly out of court because if anyone else heard ...

'No. I mean yes. You haven't changed at all. But the new tests don't seem to have found out why you are different from the others, why you are an Empathiser. We had hopes of finding out something.' He sighed. 'Ah well, back to the drawing board.'

'We have you programmed for a test Insertion at four o'clock this afternoon, but I'd like to do a dummy run first - check your EEG sync and electro-narcosis level.'

'Into "The Arab" again?' I asked. There was an old Arab about fifty kilometers north of Chrondisp guarding his flock of goats and he was used as a convenient target. Sorry, he had been guarding his goats there about twelve years ago. The first time I had ever been Inserted was into him, and to my surprise, and everyone else's, I had found I could talk to him - to Empathise with him. I had found that most people when they are Inserted can only passively watch what their Host sees and does.

Pete reluctantly folded my psychogram print-out and put it to one side. He looked at the wall clock and stood up. We left his office and walked down to the trainer Inserter control-room at the end of the corridor. The Mission control panel was on and a technician was running test patterns on the displays.

'OK?' said Pete.

'Ready to go,' replied the technician. He typed a moment into the keyboard and all the screens returned to a neutral grey.

Pete then went over to a table in the corner and picked up my personalised Helmet which he handed to me. I looked at it reflectively; I had had some strange experiences wearing it.

'You needn't sit in the Cage for this,' he said 'we've rigged up a couch over here.' It was actually a cheap collapsible garden-chair which had been opened out almost flat by the side of the Mission control panel. There was a plug for my Helmet on the ground beside it.

I put the Helmet on, plugged it in and lay back.

There was sudden silence in the room and then I heard Pete's voice very loud in the earphones. I hastily turned the volume down. I could hear him talking quietly to someone else and then he spoke to me asking me to think of the following subjects ... the usual pre-Insertion calibration. Then there was the familiar drone of the electro-narcosis and I knew no more.

I opened my eyes to find Pete looking down at me.

`Seems OK.' He looked at the wall clock.

`We usually break for lunch now and go down to the canteen - if you want to come with us ...'

"Have some lunch and then we'll send you into the head of an Arab, fifty kilometers from here and twelve years in the past," I said to myself.

`Yes, sure,' I said. I climbed from the couch, lifted off my Helmet and laid it on the floor.

I walked down the corridor with Pete and two of the techs to the lift to the canteen, pausing only to pick up Sara from her room.

When we returned to the trainer Inserter control room there was a lot more activity. The Inserter control unit was on, and techs were making adjustments. A group of trainee Observers were doing their first Insertion. Four of them who had just been Inserted were holding their Helmets and talking to each other excitedly in the corner. The fifth and last was waiting by the door to the Inserter hall.

Dark and rather fat, he was playing nervously with his Helmet connector. I remembered my first Insertion and felt sympathetic.

The door opened and Joe, a tall thin tech, and the trainee passed through. Out of curiosity I moved to the observation window looking into the Inserter hall. The silvery Cage was resting on the ground, the door had been swung up and Joe was helping the trainee into it. He plugged the Helmet socket inside the Cage, closed the door and stepped back. The Cage rose rapidly until it was midway between the two large discharge spheres.

The door to the control room opened and then closed again as Joe reappeared. He gave a thumbs-up sign to someone behind me.

I could see the trainee in the Cage moving slightly as he adjusted his microphone and then he leant back against the head-rest. I knew that the Mission controller behind me was talking him through the thought calibration routine. There was silence in the control room now and I could see a blue glow building up over the voltage multiplier columns in the far corner of the Inserter hall.

`One for the Arab in two minutes,' said a voice behind me.

I carried on looking out into the Inserter hall; even a short-distance Insertion like this is a spectacular event.

The clock on the far wall of the Inserter hall was counting down: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 ...There was the thin bright line of the laser trigger between the two spheres, followed immediately by the flash and muted crash of the discharge. For an instant the Cage was enveloped in a violet glow of ionised air.

The tension relaxed behind me and I could hear the Missions controller talking to himself: `That's it, not too fast, good. He's in.'

I turned away from the observation window; there was nothing to see now. The trainee was slumped back in the couch, apparently asleep, actually "Merged" into an Arab, fifty kilometers away and twelve years ago.

Pete was talking to the techs at the Inserter control panel and they glanced at me. Obviously telling them I was next. The Mission controller was sitting in front of his set of screens, looking at them closely and sipping coffee from a paper cup. Abruptly he put down his cup and stood up. He nodded to Joe. Mission finished, time traveller returns.

Joe opened the door and went out into the Insertion hall. Pete came over to me.

`In about ten minutes,' he said conversationally. `I'll be controlling your Mission. It'll just be a quick in and out as a final check.'

I said nothing, but I wished people at Chronosp would stop saying "It'll just be a..." Everytime they had used that expression before, I had fallen into some convoluted and dangerous adventure.

There seemed to be some hold-up. Pete glanced out of the observation window and stiffened.

He said something under his breath and ran to the door. I followed him more slowly into the Insertion hall. The Cage was on the floor, its door was open and Joe was struggling with the trainee who was shouting and apparently didn't want to leave the Cage. He was fighting and hanging onto the bars of the Cage.

'No, no! Don't take me out, you must send me back.' His voice ended incoherently as Pete prised his fingers loose and Joe heaved him out.

'Get those trainees out of there,' Pete hissed to me.

I walked back into the control room and went up the Mission controller. I pushed between him and a technician he was chatting to.

'There's been some sort of an accident. Pete says to get the trainees out of here.'

He reacted admirably quickly, walking over to the waiting group and speaking quietly to them. There was a burst of laughter and they made for the exit.

As soon as the door had closed behind them he ran to the Insertion room door where he met Joe and Pete holding the still struggling trainee Observer who was now half shouting, half sobbing. Between them they got him into the room next door.

Pete returned a few minutes later.

'Another drop-out - worst I've seen,' he said.

There was nothing I could do so I just sat down and watched as a medical team arrived, followed by Dr Duluth.

A few minutes later Dr Duluth and Pete came out of the room next door, looked round and then walked straight towards me. They looked as though they had been arguing.

Dr Duluth locked eyes with me.

'There is something strange going on out there. You have seen the effect it had on an inexperienced Observer. I am asking you to volunteer to investigate.'

Pete was about to say something but Dr Duluth put his arm out sideways. He carried on looking at me.

I tried to think clearly over the voices of three generations of military forbears who were screaming "Never volunteer!" at me. I was that rare bird an Empathiser and if Duluth wanted to risk me it must be because he thought it was worth it and that I would be OK. On the other hand if Peter...

'OK,' I said impulsively.

("You prick, you stupid posturing idiot, the Hero Volunteers Again. The last of the Digbys and just to make an impression...you superficial conceited fool... you witless egotistical cretin..." shouted the voices)

Without another word Dr Duluth started snapping out orders. Pete was about to say something but turned away to the Mission control panel. Joe handed me my Helmet and hustled me out to the Insertion Cage. As we crossed the floor he looked up apprehensively at the shimmering corona build-up on the voltage-multiplying columns which was already tugging at the hair on the back of my hands.

'Shit,' he muttered.

What the hell was the hurry?

Now I was in the Cage, the door slammed and before I had my Helmet properly on, the Cage whined up rapidly to top between the slowly orbiting

discharge spheres. As soon as I put the Helmet on I heard Pete's urgent voice. We went rapidly through the thought calibration routine and then:

`Here is your Key Thought for emergency return - repeat after me "Digby return now".' I dutifully repeated it.

There was some muttering.

`And again,' he said. I repeated it.

`Good luck.' The buzz of the electro-narcosis followed immediately.

I was rushing through a white glow, the 10 year Marker. A feminine voice "Prepare to turn" then the green target marker. I "turned" and there was the complex swirl of the target. I drifted up to it and "Merged".

As the last time, he was sitting under the shade of a thorn bush, looking out across limitless sands. It was pleasantly warm and relaxing - the sky a deep blue and not a cloud to be seen. His goats were a little way off, heads down in the scanty scrub. There was a warm feeling of familiarity, of friendship, of being expected. I looked out of his eyes contentedly. This was a lot better than the panic at Chrodisp.

He had his stick in front of him, slowly swinging it backwards and forwards, the end a few inches in front of his face. His eyes were following it, to the right, to the left, to the right...

Now he was speaking in a slow monotonous reedy voice:

`You are one of the Chosen Ones, you have come across the vast stretches of space and time to bear witness to the wonders of Him.'

Before I had time to feel surprised the voice changed, becoming deeper and more resonant.

`You are one of those who have been chosen to carry the Message. You must carry back the Tidings that He is everywhere, that He can see you everywhere, can see everything. Across space and time He has chosen you to witness the wonders of His creation. You must purify yourself, you must study to make yourself worthy of being chosen to carry the Message.' The deep resonant voice had a tremendously strong personality behind it and sank into my innermost feelings. My eyes were following the end of the stick as it swung slowly backwards and forwards, the omniscient authoritarian voice slowly rising as it approached and slowly falling as it moved away, as it approached, as it moved away...

The yellow of the desert was merging with the blue of the sky, they were swelling and blooming in a big pulsating balloon, expanding, contracting, in and out ... it was warm, comfortable and relaxing. And the voice was right too. I was different, I had been chosen. I had been away a long time, it was wonderful to come back home, all was warm and welcoming...

But behind the warm confident voice there was another annoyingly familiar voice. I didn't recognise the words but by the tone I knew what it was saying.

`Yes, it's warm and comfortable, but it's too warm and comfortable.' It was a female North Country voice and I knew it was telling me it was wrong to be so comfortable when I had done nothing to deserve it.

`The more you enjoy it now, the more you'll have to pay for it later,' went on the voice inexorably.

It was my mother's!

I pulled myself back slowly and reluctantly out of the feeling of glowing euphoria. I felt like a child on bath-night where I had had to climb out of a warm bath into a cold bathroom. I sensed a feeling of surprise that I should reject the warm water.

With a final painful tug I was out of the water and the spell broke.

`Who are you?' I asked, curiously. The stick stopped moving and there was a great feeling of consternation and confusion. It started moving again and the voice began again, though a little uncertainly.

`You must banish impure thoughts to receive the Message. Only by ...'

But I was fully awake now.

`For Christ's sake, stop waving that bloody stick around,' I snapped at the Arab. You're making me dizzy.'

The stick disappeared from view. There was a sudden sense of departure and I was alone with the Arab.

`"For Allah's sake"' he said reproachfully in his reedy voice. `We're all good Muslims round here.'

`OK, OK,' I said. `And what was all that about?'

`Damned if I know, mate. I get come over queer now and then. The Missus says that if I wasn't always slipping off to Kazmir and took her to the Mosque of a weekend like Mr Abrouah does his Missus, I'd be a lot better off. But she doesn't have to sit out in the festering desert six days of a week, watching these stupid goats that have nothing on their tiny minds except grass and sex. I tell you, for a man of refinement...'

`Yes, yes,' I said impatiently. Dear God, how he could go on. `How long have you been having these funny feelings?'

`I dunno. Last week and a couple of times the week before. Maybe more. I find meself waving me stick in front of me nose and going on like a preacher. And that's another reason I don't go to the Mosque. The preacher, all he knows about is books, he don't know nothing about real life, if you can call what I do stuck out in this poxy desert real life. Lemme tell you mate, if it wasn't for me weekly trip to Kazmir, I'd go straight up the bloody wall and then...'

There was nothing more to be learnt here and I'd got better things to do than listen to his ramblings. I looked round once more, but I was alone with a garrulous old Arab and five goats in a hot desert.

"Digby return now" I said/thought.

I opened my eyes and lifted my head up. The Cage whined down to the ground, the door to the control room opened and Joe, Pete and Dr Duluth crowded out. Joe slid open the Cage door and they all stood looking at me wordlessly.

I resisted the temptation to clutch the Cage bars and sob to be sent back. That would be very childish. More dignified would be to stand up and give them my benediction, like the Pope at High Mass.

They were still staring at me.

`I'm all right,' I said, reluctantly.

They let out a collective sigh of relief. Joe stepped forward, unplugged the Helmet connector and helped me out. I stood up.

`What the devil was going on there!?' asked Dr Duluth.

`I know part of the reason you're getting Operator drop-outs,' I said.

Chapter 7

`Hypnotism,' said Dr Duluth.

We were all sitting round the desk in Pete's office. Pete had his feet on the desk and even Dr Duluth had loosened his tie. I had told them all I had seen and they had shown me my EEG's. The wiggly lines on rolls of paper meant nothing to me, but apparently they did to the others, especially in combination with my story.

'It's quite fascinating,' he continued. 'I didn't think it was possible to put two Observers into one Host.'

'Perhaps, but the Wipe can't keep an Operator on permanent duty in our Arab, just on the off chance that we're going to send in one of our trainees,' protested Pete.

'And it would need to be an Empathiser too,' he added. 'No one can squander Empathisers like that.'

'Unless they know exactly when we are going to use the Arab,' said Dr Duluth.

'But how can they know that? We didn't even know ourselves that those trainees were going to do their test Insertions until this morning. We had to change the syllabus because their instructor, Fred, caught a bug. So either the Yellow Peril have finally got Zerodisp or we've got a spy. Again.'

'"Zerodisp?" I asked.

'Right now we can send an Observer into a Host anywhere in the world but it must be at least nine years ago,' explained Jim. '"Zerodisp" means "zero displacement" - sending an Observer into a Host "now". Theoretically possible, but we at least haven't done it yet.'

'You mean the YP may have found when we were going to use the Arab by putting one of their Observers into someone here, like say this morning?'

'That is what "Zerodisp" would mean,' said Dr Duluth pedantically, 'but there is a much more likely explanation.'

'Telepathy?' I said. They ignored me.

'How long did we take to run those first four trainees through?' asked Dr Duluth.

Pete considered.

'Four Insertions, ten minutes each - say an hour with calibration time and chit-chat.'

'And how long does it take to get our Inserter charged up for an Insertion of say, 12 000km and 12 years?.'

Pete tapped on his desk computer.

'About half an hour - wow! You mean the Chinks...?'

'It seems obvious to me,' said Dr Duluth.

'The crafty bastards,' said Pete.

I stirred impatiently.

'Is anyone going to tell me what happened?'

'Sorry,' said Pete. 'We know the YP can see the heat pulses from our reactor cooler from one of their satellites, and when they saw equal small Insertions one after the other they guessed we were using the Arab. So they warmed up their own Inserter, which is 12,000km away, and put an Empathiser into our Arab hoping to catch a trainee Observer, and hypnotise him.'

'But they caught an experienced Operator, and an Empathiser to boot,' said Dr Duluth.

Pete was chuckling but Dr Duluth was looking into the distance thoughtfully, twisting his gold wrist-watch strap round his wrist.

'This means we've finally got to do something about our heat signature,' he said at last.

`As well as the radio frequency signature,' said Jim. `That's going to take us over budget for this year.'

There was a gloomy silence.

`But now you know the answer to the drop-out problem,' I said. They seemed to have forgotten that I had just saved the Chrondisp Institute.

Dr Duluth stopped twisting his watch-strap and looked up at me.

`You're right. You did a good job and we must have a celebration.'

Pete opened a cupboard and pulled out a bottle of whisky.

`I've a better idea,' said Dr Duluth, picking up Pete's telephone. He got through to the canteen and we heard him ordering a dozen bottles of champagne.

`Yes, training Inserter conference room, right away,' he said. `And make sure they're chilled.'

Chapter 8

It had turned into quite a little party. Dr Duluth had said some nice things about what I was now beginning to realise was my impetuous stupidity. I sensed that I had had a narrow escape. That hypnotiser had had a very powerful personality and if I hadn't arrived unexpectedly and surprised him, I too might be making daisy-chains now.

When I confided my fears to Sara, she told me I was never in any real danger as everyone knew that it was impossible to hypnotise children and mental defectives. Thank you, Sara.

General opinion was that the Empathiser in the Arab had been using post-hypnotic suggestion on lots of our Observers, during their training. But for some reason the "delay" part hadn't worked on that last trainee. He had "gone mystic" immediately and shown us where the trouble was.

I had asked how hypnotism worked - I had seen an impressive demonstration of it once, but each scientist I asked gave me a different answer. Which is surprising. It's been around at least since the Egyptians and still no one has much idea how it works.

As I looked round the party, and there were about thirty of us, I realised that Chrondisp must have been under a strain recently, and it wasn't all due to the Observer drop-outs.

`You're right,' said Wolfgang, one of the engineers. `We've been living in a siege economy here. Since the break-in last year and the discovery of the mole, everyone's been looking over their shoulder. Security was bad enough before the break-in, but now...'

`That's it,' said Paul, another engineer, `We're really confined to base here. It's not that there's much to see in the neighbouring towns ..'

Wolfgang snorted.

`Kazmir's the nearest and that's 100km away.'

`But it would just be nice to get out now and then, away from the bloody guards,' continued Paul.

`Claustofrobia,' said Wolfgang. He went to get some more wine.

`We just seem to be sitting here and defending ourselves from the Yellow People,' said Paul. `Maybe we're really giving them a hard time over there in Manchuria where what we call Chrondiski is supposed to be. And maybe we're just not being told about it for Security reasons. But I doubt it.'

And I was beginning to doubt it too. Conventional military thinking says you're asking for trouble if you just sit in a defensive position and wait for the enemy to

come to you. They will come, they'll stroll around, leisurely study your Maginot Line and then put in a surprise attack at the weakest point.

In the meantime your troops' morale suffers if all they have to do is to fearfully watch the enemy coming closer and closer. You must send out patrols, find what the enemy are doing, ambush his working-parties, keep him away from your fixed defences. By being in contact with the enemy your soldiers will get to know him, to realise his soldiers are just men like you and have their own weaknesses.

On the way to the table to get another beer, I looked for Dr Duluth to tell him of my general views and in particular of an ingenious idea I had just thought of, which consisted of sending an Observer, an Empathiser Observer, in fact me, into a Asian about 10 years ago and getting him to plant a bomb under where Chondiski was going to be built. It would have to be a Asian who had access to explosives, of course. Or we could parachute some to him ..er ..we could have parachuted explosives to him 10 years ago. OK, so we would first have to Insert into one of our people and get him to parachute a bomb into China 10 years ago. Of course his boss might wonder what he was doing flying over China ... we'd have to fix him up too .. that is we would have had to have fixed him up too... Right, so the bomb is now in China, near where Chondiski is, that is, was going to be built. He plants the bomb with a...a time delay. Good idea that - a 10 year time delay. Of course the Asian now has to forget about the bomb, or maybe he could defect (could have defected) to the West. Alternatively he could have died. That's it! All we had to do was to find a Asian labourer who had lived in Manchuria before Chondiski was built and had died since, and get him to place a time bomb!

I looked round for Dr Duluth but he seemed to have disappeared. I felt tired and all the chairs were occupied.

I stretched out on the floor near a group sitting around Sara. I tugged the elbow of one of the engineers listening and he reluctantly unglued his eyes from her. I explained my fantastic idea to him.

`No way,' he said `they're Main Timeline,' and turned back to the group.

I sat there gloomily holding my beer. If they were on a Main Timeline, we were on a Main Timeline too, so we were safe from time-bombs too - a danger I had only just thought of. We were OK because we were OK. There seemed some logical inadequacy there. I turned to the engineer but he was intent on what Sara was saying.

They were talking about telepathy - a subject I remembered having brought up that afternoon, only to be ignored.

`Of course, there's proof!' Sara was saying hotly, her beautiful brown eyes challenging the group. `How often have you just known that something was going to happen, and it did? I've read books describing the most extraordinary events amongst the Bushmen in Central Australia, documented by people of the highest integrity. I think we all had these powers once, we could all see a little way into the future, we could all find water underground. We lost them when we learnt to talk.'

`Uh, I think we'd better stick to one phenomenon at a time,' said the engineer I had been talking to.

`The problem is that we engineers need hard evidence,' said Jim apologetically. `I mean if telepathy really exists, it really is going to upset our whole view of the universe.'

`There's just no place for it. It isn't connected to anything else. If it exists it's just an isolated phenomenon,' said someone who I couldn't see.

'Well, what about all those card guessing tests?' said a blond man on the other side of the group, in a German accent. 'They have had incredibly long runs of correct guesses, runs that could only happen once in ten million times by chance.'

'Exactly!' said Sara 'Surely that's scientific enough for you.' She looked scornfully at Jim.

'And that's what's meant by "chance",' Jim snapped at the blond man, obviously relieved to have a male target. 'How many people did they have to test before they found this guy? Hundreds. And how long could he keep it up? He couldn't. After that one run he was just like everyone else. It's not a proof. You have to ask yourself "could the same thing happen if there was no telepathy?" And of course it would. That's what statistics means. Everything has a finite chance of happening.'

'What about the argument that we all had telepathy once, and primitive races still do?' I asked.

'Garbage. I don't believe man ever had any special powers. Telepathy, and even more precognition, would have given any species that developed it such a tremendous evolutionary advantage that it would have outbred all others.' I looked at Jim in surprise. Such passion could only come from the disappointed ex-believer. And looking at Sara it needed no telepathy to see that his views were not going to give him any breeding advantages there, evolutionary or otherwise. It reminded me bitterly of my short turbulent marriage. My wife was into astrology, and against the advice of all her friends had married a Scorpio. To start with she had been pleased with my criticism of astrology - typical Scorpio. But then I started compiling lists of people who didn't quite fit. How did it go?

Libra "Expresses himself through his artistic activity, creating beauty in form, colour and sound. They are delicately balanced ..desiring peace at any price ..anger disturbs their physical harmony". The General who had commanded the Armoured Division which had supported us in Pakistan had been a Libra.

Pisces "Chief characteristics are sensitivity and emotional response. Their qualities are expressed in warmth of heart, sympathy, compassion, understanding and a rather mystical attitude towards life. They are naturally quiet, trustful, loving, courteous and hospitable, can sense atmosphere and when they find themselves in an uncongenial environment they are easily cast down and made despondent". The MP sergeant in charge of our battalion police had been a Pisces.

I had unforgivably read out the above at one of the meetings she attended, and shown photos of the General and the MP. I had found statistics which showed that the Armed Forces of Britain and America have no preference for any Star Sign. All the Star Signs are represented, just as though there is no relation between Star Sign and character. There had been some embarrassed laughter from the husbands, particularly at the photo of the MP, a particularly brutal-looking pug-face, and it had caused our first big row. I had "shown disrespect for her views".

Leaning back I took another pull at my beer. I looked at the label on the bottle. It was in French, for some reason. Not bad, but then you wouldn't expect the French to do anything incompetent with food or drink.

I thought regretfully that there probably weren't any gods, any haunted houses, ESP or astrology. It left the world a duller place. It would have been

very comforting to think there was Benevolent Intelligence looking after us (after me, actually) and that when you die it isn't just like being switched off and forgotten.

Jim came and sat beside me.

'The destroyer of illusions,' I said.

'Why can't I keep my big mouth shut?' he sighed.

I poured some beer into his glass.

'But is it true? I mean are there really no inexplicable things? UFO's, Bermuda Triangle, Lost Cities of Atlantis, all the religions? All smoke and no fire?'

He sipped moodily.

'You can never prove that something doesn't exist, of course,' he said.

'Something might turn up at any moment, so you've got to keep an open mind. But no, I've not seen anything that can't be explained by normal science.' He paused.

'Although you might have to stretch the word "normal" if you'd seen some of the people I've interviewed about paranormal phenomena.'

'Yes,' he continued a bit defensively 'I was very interested in it once. I would have liked to have made a wonderful discovery, way out of the predicted forward path of science. Something overlooked by everyone else so far. But nothing I tried worked, and everything I looked into turned out to have a normal explanation. So I reluctantly jacked it all in and got back to my studies.'

He took another pull.

'And now, after a few years of practice as an engineer, I'm pretty immune to strange phenomena. Not because I don't believe in them anymore but because I've seen so many.' He grinned. 'Only yesterday we couldn't get one of the diagnostic circuits to work. The young engineer was convinced it was due to an unreported break-down of Ohm's Law in the presence of the 'Complication Field' (his words) of the new computer. He had discovered a whole new class of phenomena, he was going to write a paper on it...It turned out a piece of invisible Scotch tape had fallen down between the thingummy and the whatsit. And do you think he thanked me for finding it?'

The party wandered on and my recollections got more and more vague. At one point we had Sara sitting in the Cage and someone was going to send her back into herself so that she could advise herself not to take a job at Chrondisp.

Fortunately the power was off and the Inserter controls were locked. I remembered climbing into the Cage as well, with the intention of teaching her how to Empathise - but she said something about being able to do it perfectly well as far as I was concerned and the swinging as she tried to get out broke the cable.

In the meantime an argument had started on the logical impossibility of Observing yourself, with some drunken voice shouting 'You can't bend a Main Timeline!' over and over again.

The party seemed in danger of slowing down so I remembered the game of High Cockalorum which had always been very popular in our Mess. I explained the rules and it was eagerly accepted. All the armchairs from the nearby offices and waiting rooms were lined up in a row down the middle of the conference room. One team had five minutes to get some object over this barrier and touch the wall on the other side with it to score a point. The other team, manning the barrier, had to try and stop them. Then the roles of the teams were reversed. Sara was the referee, standing on a table while we fought a plastic waste-paper back and forth. The basket was not very strong and didn't last very long, so the other team, looking round for something else, and feeling Sara had been too partisan to our side, had seized her. 'Put me down!' she had screamed 'I'm the ref!'

'Don't worry,' they had assured her, 'You'll still be able to see everything.'

They were trying to carry her over the barrier of arm-chairs and we were just as enthusiastically trying to stop them when a lot of police arrived with masks on and sprayed us with something.

The next thing I remember was being wheeled down a corridor on a stretcher. A voice said:

'Here, number 6.' My door was opened and I was carried off the stretcher and dumped on my bed.

Chapter 9

The next morning I rather overslept and when I went down to the restaurant about midday, it was almost empty, with only a few people drinking coffee. The whole training area was very quiet.

Back in my room, the screen, usually filled with appointments for me, messages to call someone, etc. was blank. I called Jim, Pete, Dr Duluth - but they were all in a meeting.

The training Inserter section was closed and my card would not open the door. Feeling I had made an adequate effort to report for work, I returned to my room, plugged in my computer and dialled up my apartment in Munich to see if I had any mail.

I was busy paying bills when a bell sounded softly and a message appeared on the screen requesting me to call Jim.

I went over to the bedside phone and punched in his number. His voice sounded a little tired but he told me that a small party were taking a trip to a coastal resort called Agadir and if I was interested we would be leaving in an hour.

Great. I had a quick look on the map to find that Agadir was on the West coast of Africa, opposite the Canary Islands. Then I quickly packed a grip with some leisure clothes and took the lift to the reception area where we were to meet.

There were actually four of us; Jim, Sara, the blond programmer who had talked about card-guessing tests last night, and myself. When I asked what was it all about and why, Jim said that some top people in Chrondisp had finally realised that keeping the personnel inside the Chrondisp compound for the whole of their service period was making them restless and they were going to try a policy of letting small parties visit the local towns now and then.

'And me?' I asked. I was only expecting to be there a month at the outside, and most of that on a Mission and therefore sleeping.

'Yeah, well they figured you might like to get rid of some surplus energy too.' He had a piece of sticking plaster under his left ear. I grinned at him: I hadn't played "High Cockalorum" in ages.

We all took the underground train to the Airport Exit platform. Security check just consisted of pushing our cards into a slot under the watchful eye of an MP.

Up in the lift to the surface, a short pause in a waiting room and then we walked across the tarmac in the blinding sun and heat to a small jet. I noticed the blond programmer, Max, was limping slightly. He had been playing on my side last night.

The jet already had about ten other passengers and we took the last seats. The door thumped closed and about a minute later the jets whined up the scale and we were off.

The rest of the passengers were in a holiday mood but we were a silent introspective group in the rear. Anti-hangover pills are very effective, but they also

contain a sedative, probably added on purpose to discourage further immediate dissipation.

I looked out of the window but we were flying directly into the sun and below us was just the brown desert. There was nothing in the pocket in the back of the seat facing me except instructions for use of the life-saving jacket under my seat. It was in seven languages and I studied it trying to find which gave the message in the most compact form. No problem with those languages using letters, you just count the letters. But how do you compare the "complexity" of letters with the smooth curves of Arab script? By the time a document reader takes to read it, perhaps. I've often thought there should be a "Unit of Complexity". The least complicated item would be an unchanging point. This I would call the "plex" and it would be like the "bit". Or maybe a grateful society would insist it be called the "digby". It would then be possible to compare the complexity of a pair of scissors (17kDy) with (say) a ball-point pen (15.3kDy). Or a piece of verse (7.3MDy) with a forehand drive at tennis (8.2MDy).

I tried to interest Sara in this, as she was sitting next to me, but she just snapped at me for waking her up.

It was getting quite dark now and we had lost altitude. Some isolated lights could be seen below and then a voice told us we were about to land, and would be taken to our hotel. We were reminded to observe the Security regulations and never let anyone know that we were from Chrodisp.

When we stepped out of the jet, it was already quite cool, with a slight breeze. We seemed to have taxied to a remote corner of the airport, as the normal reception buildings were only visible in the distance. A coach was waiting for us and there were a lot of dark-faced police standing around in French-type uniforms. The coach moved off immediately and after driving through some boring and impoverished looking suburbs, was now rolling down a modern well-lit thoroughfare lined with illuminated shop-windows, restaurants, bars, flashing hotel signs and strolling pedestrians. We pulled into the driveway of the "Hotel Marhaba", behind a large coach disgorging tourists.

After being told once more not to let anyone know we were from Chrodisp, we stepped out, collected our luggage from the trunk, and joined the tourists as they flooded into reception.

We picked up our keys and Jim said:

`I'm going to get something sent up. See you-all at breakfast, 9 o'clock, OK?.'

The other two nodded and they all disappeared.

I didn't feel particularly tired, it was only 8.30 and I was hungry. I glanced into the ornate dining room where a head-waiter was greeting the entering diners, seating them and handing them the menu with a flourish, summoning up other waiters with a snap of his fingers to take orders for aperitifs ... No, no. Not for me.

I turned back to Reception which was now almost empty and changed some Deutschmarks into Dirhams. I made for the door which was immediately swung open by a boy dressed in what could only be a Grand Vizier's uniform.

I took him aside.

`Where's a good place to eat?' I asked. I crinkled a note.

`French, Arab, American, Italian or Swiss?'

Swiss?!

`French and Arab. Just good food. And not like..' I waved my hand in the direction of the dining rooms.

`Not pompous' he said.

`Very good' I said admiringly. `Not pompous.'

He crossed to the desk and came back with a map. He marked it with an A and a F and then wrote the names in the margin. He then looked at me appraisingly. He moved his hand up and down indicating my clothes.

`For French, OK. For Arab ..' He held his hand out, palm down, and rocked it to and fro.

`Too pompous?'

He smiled, relieved. I handed him the note and took the lift up to my room. Open the door, stand to one side, push it open with the foot. Then hand round the corner to the light switch. Pause, then enter.

Very nice. A big picture window with a view down the length of the bay. The coastal road was clearly defined by the moving headlights of cars, the blinking red of rear lights, the innumerable multicoloured glow of bars and restaurants, sweeping into the hazy distance. The sea was a dark unlit mass, filling half the frame. On the other side of the bay there were some faint lights on a distant hill-top.

I unpacked my grip and after a shower changed into some jeans and an old blue sweater I usually wore when sailing. I walked down the back stairs and left the hotel by a side door.

Outside I opened the map and studied it under the yellow neon street lighting. The recommended Arab restaurant was about a kilometer away. I set off, looking round me. In this part of the town the roads were brightly lit but deserted. The style was that of the better-class Parisian suburbs.

I crossed the main street, and on the other side the building style rapidly changed to that of the poorer suburbs of Paris. Little stalls with bright hissing paraffin lamps, people sitting in bistros, lots of noisy motor scooters with oily smelling exhausts. Almost all Arabs.

I found the restaurant at last, "Au bon Bouff", with some Arab script underneath. It was half full of locals, if you could judge by the dress - talking, drinking, eating. I would have said I was the only European there, but I could have been wrong. There had been no apartheid when it was a French colony and everyone got mixed up.

The waiter brought me a menu, in French and Arab. I glanced at it but the French seemed to be mostly imitated pronunciation of Arab dishes, so I just showed him some money which corresponded to a medium priced dish, and indicated I left it up to him. He pointed to two items with his pencil tip and I memorised them. To drink, I chose a beer.

The beer arrived and I looked around. Apart from the dress, mostly long brown or grey robes (kaftans?), I could have been in any working class suburb in Paris. The same little tables, the same gestures, the same little baskets for the same pieces of baguette-type bread. No one was taking any notice of me; it was all casual and friendly.

The food came and it was absolutely delicious – a lightly roasted chicken, crisp on the outside and juicy on the inside, marinated in wine. Served with the inevitable cous-cous and some sort of sweet spicy sauce with raisins. The desert was an almond nut concoction, with a trace of ginger, and not at all too sweet.

I ate up everything, pushed the plates away and leaned back with a sigh of content.

Someone had left a local paper on the seat beside me and I opened it and looked at the elegant Arab script again, wondering how they made their typewriters, did they scan from right to left, like they wrote? What were their

computer terminals like, were all computer languages translated into Arabic? Why did a right-handed person start on the right anyway - wouldn't his hand smudge the ink or at least hide what he had just written?

And their Morse code? I smiled as I remembered my grandfather telling me about the way radio operators in the Far East during WWII had developed a syncopated way of tapping out Morse code. "Baghdad Morse" it had been called. He had demonstrated it and ...

A tall figure was standing in front of the table saying something angrily. An Arab, but meaner looking than the others. He was toughly built, about thirty-five years old, and had a line across his forehead, pale above, that showed he normally wore a beret. Overalls and American combat boots - a soldier in civilian clothing. He was swaying slightly and looked like drunken trouble!

He said the same thing again. Over his shoulder I could see his similarly dressed friend sitting at a nearby table, watching.

'I don't speak Arab,' I said.

'You think we funny,' he said in a strong Brooklyn accent, his thick brown finger pointing at my newspaper. 'Well, we think mother-fucking Americans funny too.'

He was working himself up into a rage and was going to attack me at any moment! The rest of the restaurant was suddenly silent. I looked round quickly - I'd got to get out of here!

'The Koran says Arabs shouldn't drink because alcohol is too strong for them,' I said, keeping my eyes on him but pulling my feet under my chair.

He seemed to swell in size. 'Stand up you Yankee cocksucker I'll...'

He reached forward, grabbed the front of my shirt and heaved. I put my left hand on top of his and rammed my fork into his palm. He gasped, pulled his hand away sharply and leapt back. I braced myself against the wall and as he rushed forward again I shoved the table up and away from me. He jumped back again, just in time as the edge of the heavy cast-iron table smashed on the floor millimeters in front of his feet. Plates, bottles and glasses sprayed out and smashed on the stone floor. I pushed myself away from the wall and still in the crouched sitting position rushed towards him, grabbed his legs just below the knees and pushed with my shoulders. Arms flailing he went over backward to crash his head against the edge of a serving table. He lay on the ground stunned. There was a gasp from the rest of the diners.

I grabbed a carving knife off a nearby table and stood sweating as his friend rushed forward. He put his hand in the top of his boot and I thought I was going to have a knife fight on my hands but he was swaying slightly too and must have decided he was not in the best condition. He glared at me uncertainly then bent down and pulled his friend up.

The rest of the customers drank up quickly and left. A chair fell over somewhere.

The patron hurried up, then seeing my face backed away. Trembling with reaction I put the knife down.

'He attacked me first,' I said aggressively..

'Yes, yes, I saw it. But you must leave quickly. I have called a taxi.' He bent down and picked up my wallet.

'Here, you have dropped your money and your...your credit card. No, no, there is nothing to pay.'

Feet crunching in the broken glass, I fumbled my wallet open, put money and a very generous tip on the table.

`Here is your taxi,' he said with relief.

I turned, climbed into the taxi and told him "Hotel Marhaba".

As we drove down the road, two hee-hawing police cars passed us, going fast in the opposite direction.

As I wiped the sweat off my brow I noticed there was a strong smell of some perfume on my hand which must have come from that Arab. Attar of roses. My wife had used it sometimes.

Chapter 10

As arranged, we met in the restaurant for breakfast and Max laid out a lot of tourist literature he had collected. Agadir had been destroyed by an earthquake during the night of 1st March 1960 and 15,000 people had died - about one in five of the population.

`"The ruins were cleared away and the rebuilding started in 1962. Morocco has a long history. First traces are from 14 centuries BC by the Berbers who still form the core of the population. They attempted several times in vain Egypt to conquer. Then in the 6th Century BC came the Carthaginians who formed several trading settlements on the coast. After the destruction of Carthage by the Romans in 146 BC, the Romans began to occupy Morocco until around 300 AD when they started to pull back ..."' Max was German and was translating his guide book for us.

`Oh, come on Max,' said Sara `You can read all that to us on the beach.'

We finished off our coffee and went back to our rooms.

I unpacked my bathing trunks, selected a towel and waited for the others downstairs, looking at various overpriced trinkets for sale in the tourist shop.

When everyone had descended from their rooms we left the hotel and went through a sort of tunnel which led us under the coast road, directly onto the beach. Sara looked around carefully then picked out a spot and opened a large bag containing her beach kit. We sat and watched as she unrolled a straw mat, laid a large towel over it, inflated a cushion for her head, donned sun-glasses, pulled a book and a radio out of her bag and put them on the towel. She then looked up at the sun and after studying a complicated dial on her wrist, delved into her bag again, pulling out small white bottles one after another, looking at a number on the label.

Finally she found one with the right number and started to cover herself with the contents.

The others watched in silent fascination, but I had seen it before.

`It's called the "U-Vometer"' I explained. `It measures the amount of ultra-violet in the sunlight and tells you which protective cream to wear.'

`"Protective"!' said Jim, `I thought the idea was to get brown.'

`"Brown but not burnt"' I quoted. Sitting once on a beach by my wife's side, I had read the thick manual which came with the U-Vometer from cover to cover.

`But isn't she going to have to change the cream, as the angle of incidence of the sun increases?' asked Max, interested.

`No, no.' I said. You choose the type of cream for the type of sunlight and then put on more as the sunlight strengthens. There are three ultra-violet components to sunlight ...'

`And then there is the coefficient of reflection of the skin,' interrupted Max.

`Pale skin must reflect more of the sunlight.'

`But pale skins are more sensitive,' I told him. `Have a higher ASA Index, as you would say. It's quite involved. There are tables for skin types, for time of day,

for whether you are on a mountain top or a beach. And of course for how long you have been sunbathing -how brown you are already.'

'I'd never realised how complicated it was,' said Max. He looked up at the sun nervously. 'Perhaps I should put something on too.'

'But why doesn't she just cover up when the dose is exceeded, when she starts to fry?' asked Jim.

'You don't come to a beach to "cover up". Do you want her to "cover up", anyway?'

We all looked at Sara, stretched out on her mat in her minute briefs.

'I guess not,' he said.

Sara took off her sunglasses and sat up.

'How would you boys like to go and play football or something?' she said.

We lay down and sunbathed.

*

Something was worrying me, but I couldn't place it. That stupid Arab yesterday. He had been high on some drug and just psyched up for a fight. He didn't look like the other Arabs here, leaner and harder somehow. I didn't want to meet him again, sober. And I wouldn't be able to go to that restaurant again either, which was a pity because the food had been fantastic.

But it wasn't the Arab that was bugging me. I gave it up.

I can sit on a beach for about an hour. If you lie on your back you must close your eyes or you get blinded. If you wear sunglasses, you won't get brown around the eyes and at the end of the day you will look like a sort of reverse panda. To read you need to lie on your stomach and prop up your head with your arms. After an hour I am hot, bored and have a headache, but my wife could easily spend the whole day on the beach, dozing, reading, oiling herself, listening to the radio. It was one of our incompatibilities.

Max was looking in his guide books. I resisted the temptation to ask him to read them out to us - he would have done so willingly - and just suggested we took a walk round the town. He agreed eagerly.

By daylight the town showed its French influence even more strongly than by night. The boutiques and bistros on the main road were pure Paris. Inland, behind the main road, there were large buildings constructed out of concrete, with a faintly oriental air about them. But the contents at least were Arab. Cavern after cavern of Arab clothing, brass-ware, leather goods, carpets.

But they were virtually empty of people and I wondered if the enormous displays were justified by sales. Outside were "salesmen", as often as not asleep on one of their own carpets. I reminded myself to bring Jim here. With his camera.

We stood on one of the balconies looking down. It was a beautiful day, sunny, dry and invigorating. The air was clear, and across the bay I could see some ruins on a headland. That must have been where the lights were last night.

'California without the smog,' I said.

'But what do they live on?' said Max. 'No one seems to be buying anything.'

'Tourism, I guess,' I said vaguely. I had a Bavarian friend who called tourism the "ultimate prostitution".

'They visit your country, they smile and joke at your funny customs, have themselves holo'd in quaint national dress, and push up the prices so much that the locals can't afford to eat in their own restaurants. And all the kids run after the tourists begging, when they should be in school. The whole population become servile waiters, hands outstretched for a tip. And who makes all the money? The

hotel and night-club owners and they put it in foreign bank-accounts. Does nothing for the country".'

Some truth in it. But that Arab last night hadn't been particularly servile. And then I remembered what had been bugging me.

I was sure that the waiter, who had picked my wallet off the floor last night, had known that my card came from Chondisp, and had tried to conceal his knowledge by calling it a credit card. Why had he done that?

We drifted around until about 3:30, Max being particularly interested in some kind of stone which was hollow and contained a sort of miniature grotto with stalagmites and stalactites. He had bought one the size of a football, with just one end missing, and was going to fit it up with internal lighting and a wooden pedestal.

At four o'clock we had arranged to meet Jim and Sara at an open-air restaurant facing the beach, so strolled back. They waved to us as we approached.

There appeared to be some tension between them and I guessed Jim had hoped that after several hours in the hot sun, Sara would want to return to the hotel for a shower and a lie down in the shade. He had invested a day in the hope that he would be invited to participate in these activities and it hadn't paid off. He now had sunburn and a headache.

However both of them did show some interest in Max's miniature grotto and held it up so the sun could shine into its depths.

Chapter 11

We all met for breakfast the next morning and discussed plans for the day. A French breakfast with those delicious croissants that just seem to melt in the mouth. I reflected that England, like Morocco, had also been occupied by the French once, but few traces had remained of them cuisine-wise. Sure we liked it, but we weren't prepared to go to the trouble of preparing it.

Sara had had enough sun for the moment and thought it would be a good idea to hire some transport and do a quick tour of Agadir. Any interesting spots could be visited later. We agreed.

Little did we know that the day was going to unfold quite differently.

Max and Sara departed for their rooms first. I left Jim at the table reading an American newspaper he had bought at reception and went to take the lift to my room. A party of tourists were leaving and the lifts were blocked as they brought their luggage down. I decided to take the stairs.

After three flights of stairs I opened the door leading to my corridor. Most of the room doors were open, with used bed linen on the floor outside. A girl in Arab dress was pushing a big laundry cart along, collecting the linen. Another cart was slowly moving down the corridor in front of me, being pushed by a man in a white jacket. I passed him and at that instant realised that the man was wearing combat boots and that one of his hands on the laundry cart handle was bandaged! It was the Arab I had seen in the restaurant! There was no way that he could be a hotel employee: he was here after me! Eyes front I passed him, hoping he wouldn't recognise me from the rear. I pulled my key out ready and carried on shivering, feeling his eyes on my back. If only I could get safely into my room ... I stopped outside my door, quickly inserted the key, turned it and made to slide in sideways. But not quickly enough! I started to close the door but there was another hand on the door-knob outside.

`La service,' said a deep voice and the door started to open against my pressure. We struggled and I tried to hold it closed but he was stronger than me! If I could only off-balance him for a moment I could close the door and lock it. Perhaps remembering Judo, I reversed my force, pulling rather than pushing.

And it worked better than I would have thought possible! The door burst open and with a gasp his big form rushed past me into the room. I pulled the door open wider to step around it and escape but then I saw he had a gun with a silencer on it! He was only momentarily unbalanced; I would never get out of the door before he could turn around and shoot! With the force born of fear I abandoned escape, followed him into the room and before he could turn round completely, hit him just above the nape of his neck with the heel of my hand. He staggered. I measured the distance and desperately hit him again as hard as I could. He crashed to the ground, his gun sliding against a chair-leg. I bent down and quickly scooped it up.

I knew the type - American Army .45 Colt. It was fitted with a standard Asiablock screw-on silencer and some worn tape around the butt put the grip safety out of action. Panting I carefully drew the slide back and seeing there was a cartridge in the breech and more in the clip, let it gently forward. I checked the safety was off and thumbed the hammer back. I was secure! But the door to my room was gaping open behind me and at any moment one of his friends could arrive! I turned, closed the door quickly then stood with my back to it looking around sweating, breathing deeply and massaging my wrist.

The big brute was lying face-down on the carpet but would soon recover consciousness. I would have to go very close to him to reach the telephone. I looked around for my key to safely lock the door from the inside but the moment I realised it was still in the lock outside, there was a soft tap on the door and a man's voice!

`Ca va?' whispered the voice.

I moved quickly to behind the door; he would open it in a moment. The only chance I had was let him think his friend had been successful. `Oui, ca va,' I answered in a deep voice. `Entrez.'

The knob turned, the door opened and another Arab in a white jacket entered. His eyes bulged as he saw his friend lying on the floor and he made to jump back but I kicked the door shut behind him. He crouched, grabbed inside his coat and then froze when he found himself looking down the muzzle of the pistol in my hand. He transferred his coal-black hate-filled eyes to me. Younger than the other but just as tough, lithe and dangerous looking.

`Put your hands in your pockets and lie down,' I said in my schoolboy French. I don't know how correct my French was; as a schoolboy I don't ever remember using that expression. He didn't move. I was going to have to shoot him; the other would recover in a moment and I couldn't hold two in this position. In the chest was quickest. My finger tightened.

He must have sensed I was serious. Sweating and with a tensed body he slowly and reluctantly obeyed me, all the time his eyes on the pistol.

He made to lie down as far away as possible from the other Arab. Good move, but I had been well trained too. I impatiently motioned for him to lie next to his friend. I didn't want to be rushed from two different directions when the other woke up.

I was outnumbered here, and there could well be another discreet little tap on the door.

Keeping my eyes on them I hooked two heavy wooden chairs forward with a foot, so they were between us, and then slowly backed to the bedside table and felt behind me for the phone. I put it on the bed in front of me.

Keeping the pistol pointed and without taking my eyes off them for an instant, I picked up the receiver and when the operator answered, asked for Jim's room. I daren't push the buttons myself. While I waited for a reply I was very conscious of the unlocked door.

'I tell you I already know the number,' I snapped at the operator, 'but I am unable to dial it.'

Yak, yak. yak.

'Look, just dial it, or connect me to the Manager.'

Good food wasn't the only thing the Moroccans had inherited from the French.

'Thank you. Then perhaps you would make an announcement in the breakfast room. I can assure you it is urgent.' The receiver clattered as I replaced it clumsily.

A minute later the phone rang from Jim. I told him to come up quickly and tap three times on the door.

'Sure,' he said. The stress in my voice convincing him I wasn't joking.

While I was waiting I looked at the two Arabs, wondering what I would do if I were in their position. I hadn't thought of anything by the time I heard three knocks.

'Yes?'

'It's me, Jim.'

'Is there anyone else out in the corridor?'

'Just some cleaning staff at the far end.'

'OK. Take the key out of the lock and come in very slowly.'

I carefully stepped past the recumbent Arabs, lying there like coiled springs. Number one had recovered now and both were following me with hot unwinking eyes. It was unnerving, they weren't looking at me, their eyes were just following the gun in my hand, like wild animals in a circus looking at the trainer's whip. Jim cautiously stepped into the room.

'Holy Christ!' he said.

'Lock the door,' I said, not taking my eyes an instant from the two Arabs, I explained quickly over my shoulder that the one with the bandaged hand had pretended to be from room service and had tried to force his way into my room. I said nothing about my fight with him two evenings ago, nor of my suspicions about my Chrodisp card having been recognised. There was a click as Jim turned the key in the lock.

'And then this other one appeared,' I continued.

Jim, ever the Chrodisp man, made up his mind suddenly.

'These don't look like a couple of hoodlums out for a quick buck' he said.

'This has got to be some-thing to do with the Institute. I must check with the others.'

He carefully stepped around the Arabs, picked up the phone and started punching buttons.

He listened. 'No answer from Max. Nor Sara.' He was punching the buttons again. 'General call,' he said. We could hear the loudspeaker outside.

'Hold this on these two,' I said and then stepped cautiously out of the line of fire until I was beside the one who had come in last. I reached over him and patting his clothes fished out another Colt, also fitted with a silencer. As an afterthought I swung the gun back and rapped him sharply behind the ear. He groaned and fell back. One less for Jim to guard.

`You OK with these two? I'm going to check Sara and Max's rooms, 19 and 21 wasn't it?'

`Yes' he said in answer to both questions. I looked at him carefully but he seemed confident enough. He was ex-US Marine after all.

I wrapped my gun in a towel and opened the door slowly. The corridor was empty. I then left, after first hanging the "Do not disturb" sign on the knob.

Two floors down. I ran to the end of the corridor and then down the stairs. I opened the door to the corridor and peered out. Just a elderly tourist closing his door and further down a stationary laundry basket.

I unwrapped the heavy bundle in my hand and checked that the pistol was loaded and the hammer back. I wrapped the towel around it loosely and stepped out into the corridor. 25, 23, 21 - this was it. Holding the pistol under the towel I tapped on Max's door, but it swung open. Empty. A glance towards the bathroom showed it to be empty also.

I stepped cautiously in and then froze. That smell! Attar of roses! It was the same as the other Arab had worn in that restaurant.

I looked round the room again, but there seemed nothing out of order. The faint smell had vanished but I knew it had been there. Perhaps it was a commonly used male perfume. I closed his door and walked along the corridor to Room 19. I didn't need to tap on the door to see that it was open. I pushed it wider, and again that faint smell hanging in the air. I glanced around - but the room was empty. One white shoe lay on its side.

Something was surely wrong. Sara might perhaps leave her room without closing the door. Max too, though less likely. But both - it was not possible. And the smell in both rooms. On an impulse I walked round the bed and there it was! Any doubts I might have had vanished.

A small used hypodermic lay carelessly thrown down on the carpet! I slipped it in my pocket, returned to the door and glanced up and down the corridor. A few tourists talking, looking in their bags to see they had not forgotten anything for the beach, two children tugging their parents' hands. And at the end an Arab girl dressed in a white smock throwing the last of the used linen into her laundry basket. I ran down the corridor after her.

I overtook her, looking in her basket as I passed.

`Has there been another laundry basket on this floor?' I asked but she just looked at me in alarm.

I tried again in schoolboy French but she just shook her head.

`C'est très important,' I said, looking at her, but she didn't seem to understand. I turned away.

`Oui. Au bout,' she said suddenly. At the end of the corridor. She was pointing backwards.

`Is there a lift an..an...ascenseur ..er .. au bout?'

`Oui. Zay were beeg men. Two beeg men,' she smiled widely showing blackened teeth and a purple tongue.

`When did you see them?' Incomprehension. I held up my wrist-watch.
`Quand?'

She held up both hands with the brown fingers out-stretched. Ten minutes!

Perhaps I could catch up with them! Sara and Max must be in laundry baskets which had been sent down by the freight lift. I ran to the other end of the corridor to where it was. It was open and another Arab girl was slowly rolling her basket in. I pushed the basket in, shoved her to one side and pressed the lowest button.

Her astonished face disappeared as the lift-gates closed. The lift descended slowly with much grinding and then stopped with a jerk. After a pause the doors slid open. Good, we were in a wide room, the floor covered with boxes and also empty linen baskets. Along one side was a large door opening out to a loading ramp. Some food trucks were being unloaded. There were also two men arguing and another was speaking into a wall telephone.

'Has a laundry truck just left?' I shouted.

The two men turned round and glared at me

'Yes. It's just been stolen. What do you know about it?'

'Police' I said, showing my driving licence. 'What colour, how big, which direction?'

'White with a brown band,' said the man who was telephoning. 'As big as that truck,' he said pointing to one of the food deliveries. 'You got here quickly. Are you American?'

'CIA,' I said. 'How long ago did they leave?'

He shrugged. 'Ten minutes - that way.' He made a chopping motion with his hand.

I looked down the empty road, ran back into the hotel and took the normal lift back up to my room.

I knocked three times on the door and Jim opened up. I turned my back to the Arabs and whispered to Jim:

'They've got Sara and Max all right.' I showed him the syringe and told him about the truck and the direction it had taken.

'I must tell Chrondisp,' he said and made for the door.

'Best from here,' I said. 'Maybe there's some of them still hanging around. And don't talk about these two yet,' I added, 'You never know who's listening.'

I stood covering the conscious one while Jim made a call from the bedroom phone. He spoke rapidly using lots of slang - it wasn't a secure line.

'Yes. Sure we're sure. I've seen the needle. Brown and white, a laundry firm, fifteen minutes ago, heading along the coast road south...' He turned to me.

'How fast could they do in that thing?'

'60kW engine - could do 130k if they leaned on it but the speed on that road is limited to fifty.'

He repeated it and I watched Arab number two waking up. He glared up at me as he remembered where he was and pulled his hands out of his pockets. I pointed the pistol at the parquet floor between them and squeezed the trigger. A loud cough and a shower of white wood splinters leapt up in the air. I aimed at his leg and he put his hands back in his pocket.

Jim replaced the phone.

'Yes,' he said in reply to my look, 'They're convinced. They have a contingency plan worked out with the Agadir police and they'll have the place sewn up in a few minutes.'

'Let's tie these two up before we go any further,' I said. Number one was looking restless and muttering to number two.

Jim pulled a sheet off the bed and for the next five minutes nothing was heard but the tearing of linen. I watched them, holding both the pistols.

'That should do.' The two captives were tensing themselves again so I swung back one of the pistols.

'You want me to tap you?' I said to number one.

Sullenly he held out his hands.

`No, behind,' I said and Jim trussed him up while I watched the other.

I gave Jim the pistols to hold and checked the bonds myself, tightening them up a bit here and there and finally attaching wrists to ankles. I then searched them finding two knives, some Dirhams and Euros - no ID But each had a tin box, packed with cotton-wool and containing a hypodermic syringe - no doubt intended for Jim and me. Sweating we sat on the bed watching them.

`What a fuck-up,' said Jim bitterly.

It was nine-thirty and going to be another fine sunny day.

Chapter 12

They seemed to be safe for the moment. It was time to think a bit. I nodded to Jim and we stepped out into the corridor. I left the door slightly open so we could keep an eye on our two prisoners.

`At least four well-organised Arabs have tried to kidnap four Chrodisp personnel, but have only caught two. We have managed to capture two Arabs. Could they be working for Asiablock?' I began.

He had been thinking, too.

`I'm damned if I know.'

`Then if they're free-lancers, what are they after - money?'

`No way,' answered Jim. `Chrodisp is a big international organisation but has very little ready cash available. It would take a long time to raise money from all the Chrodisp member countries. They would be arguing for ever how much each should contribute to the ransom.'

`For what they can get out of Sara and Max?' I suggested.

`Max is a programmer and Sara an assistant psychologist. What they know is not very useful outside Chrodisp, even Chrodiski wouldn't be very interested in them, and I'm sure the Arabs don't even know what they do anyway. I'm sure they were grabbed just because they're Chrodisp employees. A way to lever Chrodisp.'

Release terrorist friends of theirs in prison? Hostages were sometimes taken for this but Chrodisp had no prisons.

`Media time?' I asked. Terrorists thirsted after publicity like desert travellers after water. The manual said you must isolate hostage takers immediately from any contact with reporters or journalists, who had shown themselves to be criminally irresponsible in such cases.

`Perhaps,' he said.

We thought.

`What ever it is,' said Jim at last, `Chrodisp will not give it, anymore than a State will pay a ransom. Give in once and you're a fair target for every hostage taker. But then no one has tested Chrodisp's nerve before.'

`It's a real screw-up,' he added. `Chrodisp just has no machinery for negotiating with terrorists. Sara is British and Max is German. Both those governments will have to be consulted, too. And neither of them have a history of giving in to terrorists. It'll all be up to the police here.'

`So what do they want?' I repeated. It was a key question. If we knew the answer to that we could predict the Arabs' next action.

`We can only wait,' he said, as we re-entered the room.

Hell, no. As soon as the other Arabs had worked out what they wanted, they would broadcast it to the world. Chrodisp would be besieged with reporters, there would be interviews with Sara's mother, Max's old father, civil right's activists

would be demonstrating outside embassies, there would be long holo talk-shows on the particular sect these Arabs belonged to, the Syrian ambassador would intervene, ... it could go on forever. Of course, they only had two hostages now so they could only execute one to speed things up - it would probably be Max. We must do something fast. I looked at the two recumbent Arabs, now both recovered and looking at us arrogantly. Their sneering expressions said that if we didn't have guns they could overcome us easily enough, man to man. Probably right, too. They looked pleased as well - they knew that at least part of their plan had succeeded and that they would soon be freed as part of the deal.

But there was something else we could do. Something that no civilised government could tolerate.

'Wait?' I said loudly. 'Well, at least we can have a little fun while we wait.'

I handed my pistol to Jim, who looked at me uncomprehendingly.

'Back in five minutes,' I said. 'Three knocks. OK?.'

I left the room and quickly went down to reception where I made some purchases at the tourist shop and then returned by way of the breakfast room. Fortunately there was no one there to see my curious behaviour.

I knocked three times and Jim opened up. Number one had been talking and laughing with number two and telling Jim what they were going to do to Jim and his family as soon as they were free. Jim looked a little pale. I took the pistol from Jim and put the safety catch on.

'Right,' I said, regretfully, 'I suppose we'd better gag them first. Until they're ready to talk, that is.'

I tore off some more strips of bed linen and gagged them both. Number two tried to bite me, like a wild animal.

I then pulled out my purchases, two throw-away cigarette lighters, and showed them proudly. I went over to number two and flipped the wheel. A two inch flame appeared and I held it near his crotch. He thrust himself away.

'Twenty minutes of flame they said downstairs. But we won't need that long.' I said reassuringly. I stood up.

'One for you' I pointed to number one 'And one for you.' I pointed to the other. I put both lighters on the table.

Looking at them I rubbed my hands together in anticipation.

'Now, who's to be first?'

'You can't be serious,' said Jim.

'Serious?' I laughed, 'Of course, I'm serious. It's not often you get the chance to put the question to someone. Gives you a tremendous charge.'

The two captives looked at me expressionlessly. I looked back at them consideringly. Number one was the older and tougher one.

'Eeny, meeny, miney, mo. You,' I giggled.

I seized hold of number one and dragged him jerking and struggling towards the bathroom.

'They always make such a mess,' I confided to Jim, 'Throwing up, pissing on the carpet, you know. Much better in the bathroom.'

Jim was white.

'But you can't torture them,' he said.

'Of course I can torture them,' I snarled 'Don't be such a fucking namby-pamby. And don't you try to stop me either,' I added menacingly. I went across to the door, locked it and pocketed the key.

'These are the people who let off bombs in supermarkets. Remember that last lot who cut off a little girl's toes and sent them to her parents because they told

the police? Terrorists don't have feelings. They're not really human. Think of them as robots. I'm just going to do a bit of information retrieval from a couple of robots. Right, enough chat.'

Kicking and bucking I had him in the bathroom now. I returned to the room.

'Forgot the heater,' I chuckled picking up one of the lighters. 'I can't remember - was the green one or the blue one for you? Forget my own head next.'

I closed the bathroom door and dipping in my pocket pulled out one of the syringes. He was face down as I rammed it into his thigh and gave him about a tenth. It must have been very strong as he relaxed immediately. Now to work.

I flipped the lighter wheel, turned the flame to maximum and pulled out of my pocket the piece of bacon I had purloined downstairs. I put a towel in my mouth and started to shout, to stamp on the floor, to kick on the door. The flame sizzled against the bacon and soon the bathroom was filled with evil smelling smoke. I let my voice be heard asking questions and then some more banging, thumping and muffled screaming. Jim was shouting and banging on the door. I opened it a fraction.

'Stop it for God's sake,' he said sweating.

'Stop it? You must be joking! He's just given me his lies and now he's going to give me the truth.' I leered confidentially. 'They always tell the truth when you fry their balls. Do you want to watch?'

He leapt back choking.

'You've got to stop!'

I closed the door contemptuously, and pulled off his socks and boots. I then took my knife and ripped open the front of his trousers. With the flame I singed the cloth. Then redoubled muffled screaming and thumping.

A few minutes later I opened the bathroom door and dragged him out by his feet. I waved the fumes away fastidiously with one hand as I dumped him in the corner.

'There now, that wasn't so bad was it?' I said to Jim. I held up the cigarette lighter. It was half full.

'I thought at one point he would last the whole lighter, but I guess it got too warm for him in the end. Too late to save any kids he might have wanted though,' I said regretfully. 'Ah, well, let's see if number two can last any longer.'

The younger Arab was shivering and sweating and Jim was pushing at me.

'Leave him alone, one's enough. He told you didn't he?'

'He told me a whole lot of things but how do I know what's true? So I give this one the same treatment and compare. Standard practice.'

I walked over to the table and picked up the other cigarette lighter and flipped the wheel. I carefully adjusted the flame.

'And anyway this one looks a bit stronger and should give a bit more fun.'

I leaned over and grabbed him by the collar. His eyes were glazed, his face was dripping with sweat, his limbs were trembling and by the smell he had voided.

'Come on, sweetheart, let's see how much a man you are. For as long as you are a man,' I added with a chuckle. Jim was sweating and struggling with me now.

'He'll tell you the truth, won't you?, you won't have to torture him. You can check what he says.'

The Arab was nodding frantically so much so that Jim was having difficulty in pulling off the gag.

`Oh, for Christ's sake, they always tell lies at first,' I said impatiently. I was unlacing his boots. `I'll just warm his toes up a bit to give him an idea of what's coming.'

The gag was off now and the words just came tumbling out, a mixture of Arab, French and English:

`They're at the airport. They're being sent in boxes to Libya. We're going to exchange them for a ... a "Memory unit".'

`A "Memory unit"! What the hell would you do with a "memory unit"?'`

`We give it to the Chinese for guns, many guns.'

I grabbed his foot and flipped the lighter.

`It's true, I swear it's true ...' He relapsed sobbingly into Arabic.

I went into the bathroom for the syringe, turned him over and jabbed it into his thigh.

`So it's true,' I said.

Jim got up, looked at the other Arab's feet, peered into his pants, went into the bathroom and came out holding a piece of burnt bacon.

`You bastard,' he breathed. `You made it all up, you tricky bastard, you made him think .. you made me think..'

`Couldn't have done it without you,' I said sitting down trembling. I felt tired, sick and dirty. We all have the Devil in us and to be convincing I had had to almost let him out. It would have been sickeningly easy and disgustingly exhilarating to have really tortured that Arab. He was still looking at me.

`You liked it,' he said softly `You really could have done it.'

`I don't know,' I said at length. `And are you sure you really wouldn't have liked to have watched?'

`And I actually thought ..'

`Let's talk about it later. Don't you think you should tell Chrondisp about all this?'

Chapter 13

He visibly pulled himself together, and went over to the phone. I looked at my watch - 10:15.

God, the apartment stank. I dragged the two unconscious captives into the bathroom and left them there with the exhaust fan working. It helped a bit.

`Yes, they said that Max and Sara are being sent as freight to Libya and there they are to be swapped for a Memory Unit,' I heard him say.

He was chatting on but I touched his arm and tapped my watch. He put his hand over the microphone and looked up at me.

`Tell them to get the police here to check all road and sea traffic. Look for a big packing case. Circulate their descriptions.'

`They're doing all that,' he said `Duluth wants to know ...'

I put my hand on the phone cutting the call.

`Duluth knows as much as he really wants to know. We've got to get to the airport.' I handed him his pistol and then as an afterthought asked him to make another call. He rang room service saying I didn't feel too well and please don't disturb me. I made a drinking sign.

`No, no. It's not serious. He had a bit too much to drink last night.'

`That's right,' he said and hung up.

A last look round the room, "Do not disturb" on the door knob and we hastened down to the lobby.

`Why the hell are we going to the airport?' he said annoyed. `They're more than an hour in front of us.'

`It's not like the States here. You can't just post off a crate. It's going to another country - there'll be all sorts of customs formalities,' I said, pressing the "Request taxi" button.

We hastened outside into the hot glare but it was going to be some time before a taxi appeared. Fortunately I saw a man, probably a cook as he was dressed in white, putting his key into a small car in the hotel employees car park. I motioned to Jim. We ran over and I flashed my driving license again. He was now sitting inside it and looked up at me.

`Police,' I said `We need your car.'

`What!' he said `You don't look like police to me.' And perhaps he was right at that but we had no time to stand there and convince him. Jim grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him out. I grabbed the feet and we moved him away from his car and laid him on the asphalt. He lay there stunned.

`We are desolated,' I said, as Jim climbed in and sat at the wheel. I opened the rear door and jumped in. We shot out of the parking lot and accelerated into the traffic. There was a few toots of protest from other cars but nothing compared to the blast of horns and screams of brakes when I pointed out to Jim we were going in the wrong direction for the airport and with squealing tires he just slewed right across the traffic to the opposite lane. I could see at least one driver shouting angrily into his phone.

I leaned forward over the front seat and rummaged in the glove compartment, throwing everything out until I found a local map. I opened it and turned it the right way up.

We were in the suburbs now, heading south. This section was speed limited to 50km and Jim was cursing. A large police truck passed us, siren hoo-hawing; hopefully part of the barrage Chondisp had ordered. But it was going to take us an hour to get to the airport at this speed.

`Can't you make this thing go any faster?' I asked.

`Just thinking the same,' he said, stretching his head up and looking into the rear mirror. He pulled abruptly off the road and braked then leant down and groped under the steering wheel. The hood popped loose and he jumped out. His head disappeared behind it for a minute then he slammed it down. He returned to his seat and switched on the engine.

`Takes me back; by-passing regulators,' he said.

The car was no longer reacting to the 50km limit signals from the cable buried in the road and we accelerated to 50 but didn't stop there. Soon we were up to 130 and flashing past the other cars. In the distance, in front of us, we could hear the hoo-hawing of the police truck as we got nearer. Jim slowed down as it turned off to the right.

I looked at the map.

`Straight on - about twenty k.'

`The battery's overheating as it is,' said Jim hearing the impatience in my voice.

`Another ten minutes and it can blow up,' I said.

We were bearing down on a large truck, going in our direction when:

`Christ! Police - watch out!' Two police motor-cyclists were approaching us from the direction of the airport, looking to right and left. Someone had reported us.

`Hang on!' shouted Jim and he pulled off the road to the right. Fortunately just packed dirt. I didn't see much of what happened next as I was thrown to one side and fell on my back. But I did hear the engine note rise to a scream and saw the loom of the truck as we overtook it in the wrong side, just as the two traffic cops were passing on the other side. We bumped back onto the road again under the nose of the surprised truck driver and as I looked back I could see the two traffic cops disappearing into the distance. Jim was grinning to himself. Another five minutes of fast driving down the dead straight road and gradually we were approaching the airport.

A muted roar and a sudden shadow over the road as a big jet slid down into the airport, not far in front of us now. Various buildings with the names of freight and airline companies and signs pointing to Passenger Terminal, Freight Terminal etc. We turned right and slowed down. Jim saw it first. The white and brown laundry truck, standing near the edge of a big car park.

`There!' he said.

With one hand he handed me his pistol. I checked it, cocked it and handed it back, then did the same for my own.

Our engine was wheezing now and it was distinctly hot in the back - but the car had done its job. We drifted along the row of parked cars and I had the door open ready. A momentary stop where I leapt out and slammed the door and crouched behind a truck. Our car wheezed off down the line and stopped on the other side of the laundry truck. Silence.

I slipped my jacket off, holding it across my arm with the pistol concealed, and then walked briskly down the line of cars, as though looking for mine. I saw Jim approaching from the opposite direction and slowed down slightly so that we both arrived at the laundry truck at the same time. The sun shining on the windscreen prevented me seeing if it was occupied.

I jumped sideways and pointed my pistol into the driving cab. Empty. There was a partition which prevented me seeing in the back of the truck so I ran round the side. Jim had just pulled the rear doors open and we both pointed our pistols inside. Empty.

`Shit,' said Jim. `They can be anywhere now.'

`Not quite anywhere. They have to get them on a freighter to Libya,' I said.

`Let's get in contact with the airport security.'

We ran back to our car but corrosive liquid was leaking out of the back and it was quite dead when Jim turned the key. Fortunately there was a block of offices containing freight agents nearby. We sprinted over.

At the desk of "Sofico" an elderly Arab grasped the situation quickly and phoned the airport security. The mention of the word "terrorist" had a gratifying reaction and a police car squealed to a stop outside the office-block door ten minutes later. A grey-haired, tough-looking Arab of about fifty sat in it with a young uniformed driver.

`Brigadier Azrou,' he said, still sitting in the car. `Where are the terrorists?'

Jim showed him his Chrondisp card which he looked at carefully and then slid into a reader. He looked up and handed the card back.

`Two Chrondisp employees have been kidnapped in Agadir and are going to be shipped in a crate to Libya.' I said.

He transferred his eyes to me.

`And who are you?' he said.

Jim was about to say something but I knew something about the prickly French from my last Mission.

`I am also a Chondisp employee .. temporarily.'

He ignored my proffered card but continued looking at me.

`You are one of these Observers, no doubt?' he said sarcastically. I looked at Jim, who nodded.

`Yes,' I said. `But is it not more important to stop this crate being shipped while we have time?'

`Do you have a description of these terrorists?' he said.

`Yes, I've seen one. He was ...' I thought about the one in the restaurant. How could I describe him other than "an Arab, 1.70m and 85kg"? I said this then stopped.

`I know,' he said, `all Arabs look the same don't they?'

He then looked up at me for a while but his face was unreadable. I wondered how a Moroccan police chief would feel about stopping fellow Arabs from taking Chondisp hostages. Chondisp must pay a high rent for its site and provide lots of employment for Morocco. But only as kitchen staff etc. There had never been an Arab Observer. There could be a lode of resentment here.

He turned aside and spoke briefly to his driver who pressed a key on the dashboard. A piece of paper wound out which he handed to the Brigadier.

`A freight plane is due to leave for Libya in one hour,' he read out, then looked up at us. `Its cargo has all cleared customs and without proper authority it is impossible for me to detain it.'

I held out my hand to Jim who was about to explode and stared at the Brigadier.

`Very well,' he said at last and turned to his driver. But the driver quickly leant forward and tore off another sheet of paper which had just emerged from the car's dashboard. He handed it to the Brigadier.

`The girl is 1.6m and dark and the man 1.8m and blond?'

`Yes - that's them!' said Jim. `And how about ..'

But the Brigadier had picked up a microphone and was speaking into it rapidly in Arabic. He put the phone down.

`You had better come with me,' he said, leaning back to release the catch on a rear door. We jumped in and the car took off with hee-hawing siren. No regulated motor here. The Brigadier snapped something to his driver and the siren abruptly died.

Jim was looking at his watch.

`It took two hours for our message about the terrorists to get here. Whose side are they on?'

We slid between various buildings and then accelerated rapidly along a perimeter track. With squealing tires we turned towards a big building with a loading ramp outside and jerked to a stop. Hastily we all climbed out and followed the Brigadier into the building. He marched towards a grill that was hastily opened for us and then snapped his fingers at two white-belted policemen; one carrying a machine pistol over his shoulder; the other a radio. We heard the clicks and hiss as he held it up to his mouth. Another man appeared with a clip-board and the Brigadier pulled out spectacles and was looking at it, flipping over the sheets. All work had stopped; the overalled workers were standing around looking at us curiously.

Five more police had arrived all checking their machine-pistols enthusiastically. I looked at the concrete floor and ceiling in alarm.

`Jeez, I don't want to be around if they start letting those things off in here,' said Jim, voicing my thoughts, `There'll be slugs buzzing all over the place.'

The Brigadier was now positioning his men behind cranes and fork-lift trucks.

'What's he trying to do, exactly?' said Jim.

'Apparently there is one crate that is on the way here and hasn't been presented to customs yet. They think that's it.'

'And what about all these other crates? They're all to be loaded too aren't they?'

'The one they're waiting for was only booked this morning,' I said.

We wandered round, looking at the crates. They were either too big to fit in the laundry truck or too small - unless...but I sheered away from that one. There didn't seem to be much to do but wait, so I sat on a packing case to one side watching. The police were all out of sight and the overalled workers seemed to be carrying on normally, sorting out various boxes, packets, heaps of tires, pieces of machinery. There was a lot of noise.

Then Jim appeared. An Arab was behind him, wearing the usual head-dress and lighting a cigarette.

'They think they've found the crate. It was delivered an hour ago and is in that bay waiting for loading,' he said excitedly, pointing. I looked round for the Brigadier but he was not to be seen.

We went over to the bay and ducked under the half rolled up steel shutter that was its door. It was filled with crates but otherwise empty. There was another bay further on, also provided with a steel shutter. We walked into it. Some old packing cases and a heap of junk. Otherwise empty. What the hell was all this?

With a sudden premonition I turned round to speak to the Arab when there was a rattle and the shutter crashed down. We rushed forward and tried to raise it but it was immovable. In the distance we could hear the rattle and crash of the other shutter falling.

Too late I smelled a faint scent of attar of roses!

Chapter 14

'That bloody Toe-rag!' swore Jim. 'He said he was from the Brigadier!'

We banged and kicked on the shutter but no one could hear us through the second door and the noise outside. I looked round. We were in a solid concrete bay about fifty by twenty meters, illuminated by sunlight slanting in through a grill at the top of the wall, about four meters from the ground.

Why had that Arab taken the risk to lure us into here? Because he had recognised me and thought I was at the airport to stop the shipment to Libya. He would have guessed we had captured his two helpers and tortured them to make them tell us their plan. It's what he would have done himself. Maybe they could avoid the police - or maybe the police would turn a blind eye. Either way we had to get out of here quickly. I looked at my watch: 11.35. The plane was supposed to leave at 12.15!

'That's our way out,' I said and started pulling packing cases together and piling them one on top of the other. But they were still too low. Jim tried another combination, putting them long-side up. It was a bit nearer but a lot more unstable. He made a jump standing on the top one but the whole pile fell down. We picked ourselves up.

'What are you going to do when you get up there anyway?' I asked. The opening was covered with a heavy grill.

Without answering he went over to the heap of junk. Tangled in it were lengths of steel cable and pieces of oily rope. He pulled out the longest length of

wire and looked across the bay estimatingly to a solid looking ring sunk in the concrete to the side of the door.

'If we could thread this cable through that ring and the grill, maybe we could pull the grill out,' he said.

I couldn't see how he was going to do that but a bit of action often gets you thinking. We were going to have to join at least four pieces of cable together to reach across. I picked out the best pieces and just knotted them. I had seen this done before, towing trucks out of mud and knew the knots would tighten under strain. Jim was tying pieces of rope together and I could see the idea was to weight the end of the rope, throw it through the grill and then use it to pull the wire cable up and through the grill. I had enough cable tied together now and Jim was throwing the weighted rope up at the grill.

Finally he got it through and by shaking the rope got the weighted end to drop within our reach. Quickly I hitched the rope to the cable and we pulled it up. But the knot wouldn't slide through the grill.

Blaspheming Jim pulled the rope whilst I pushed the cable. The knot just wouldn't go round the grill.

'Try poking it with this,' I said, handing him a one meter long piece of steel tubing I had found. We built our shaky scaffold again, he climbed up on it and I handed up the tube. I pulled on the rope with one hand and alternately held Jim up with the other or pushed up on the cable. I could have done with another hand. He fell down cursing twice but in the end managed to push the knot through the grill. I pulled the end of the cable down so I was holding both ends.

'Tie your end here,' he said pointing to the floor ring on the other side of the bay. I did so. He then pushed the other end through the floor ring too. I watched with interest - I couldn't see how he was going to tension the cable enough to pull the window frame off.

He pulled the cable as tight as he could and tied the end to the middle of the steel tubing we had just been using. He then jammed one end of the steel tube against the ground and pulled at the top. Good - the lever he had made tightened the knots but he had to release it if he wanted to take another pull. He tried to get me to wedge the cable as it went through the ring, to hold the tension in the cable whilst he moved his lever back for another pull. No good. We tried taking it twice and three times round the ring but if it gave enough friction to hold the cable tight while he moved his lever back, there was too much friction for him to pull against. We'd never build up enough tension this way. I sat back sweating and looked at my watch. We had been at this for a quarter of an hour now and the lane was due to take off in twenty-five minutes!

Moved by some vague idea, I pulled the cable as tight as I could and then took it round and round the bolt several times and knotted it. I had seen my father start to fell a tree like this once when I was a little boy, but I couldn't remember the next step except that he had had a rod like Jim. He had somehow twisted ...

'Twist the cable!' we both said together and grinned at each other. Jim pushed his steel rod between the two cables and started twisting. To start with it was easy and the cable tightened up impressively. Then it got harder and harder and I was helping him too. The cable was creaking and looked like a rigid bar of iron joining the ring to the grill. Round again slowly and some dust fell from the grill, a golden shower in the sunlight. I blinked the sweat out of my eyes and could see the grill was bending inwards. Another turn and there was a faint hissing sound from the grill. Round again, a bit easier this time...

`It's going to work,' gasped Jim. `Watch out for when it...'

There was a loud crash and the grill with some pieces of concrete still attached literally leapt out of the wall. In falling it spun as the tightly wound cable unwound. It clanged to the ground in front of us and spun off to the left. A small stone cut my cheek.

As the dust cleared we looked in awe at the jagged hole torn in the twenty centimeter thick concrete wall and shook hands.

`"Give me a lever and I'll move the world"' quoted Jim.

We weren't out yet but it was relatively easy to tie a piece of rope to a piece of packing case and throw it through the hole so the wood jammed across it. I went up first, Jim giving me a push. Then Jim, with me giving him a pull.

We were on a hot white flat roof and the edge was about thirty meters away. We walked across in the glaring sun-light, taking the rope with us but it wasn't necessary as we could easily drop to the ground.

`This way,' said Jim and we ran to the front of the building we had entered an hour ago. My watch said 12:20.

Inside everything looked as when we had left it except that there was a little group, including the brigadier, standing around the steel roller door we had first passed through. A man in blue overalls was kneeling in front of it and we could hear the whine of his saw as he cut through the lock. We walked up to them.

The Brigadier spun round in surprise.

`What are you doing there? I was told you had been locked up in here'.

`We were, but we broke out,' I said. `Where are the hostages?'

`There are no hostages,' he said. `We opened every ... (some guttural Arab word, but we got the meaning) case before it was allowed on the plane. The plane has now left. We found no hostages and no terrorists'.

There was not much more to say. I had misjudged him; he had done all he could. We thanked him and walked round to the front of the passenger terminal and got a taxi back to our hotel.

`Well, I guess we made sure they didn't put Sara and Max on that plane,' said Jim.

That was about all that could be said for it.

Chapter 15

Arriving back at our hotel we took the lift up and walked along the empty corridor to my room. The "Do not disturb" sign was still on the door but Jim covered me as I cautiously opened it. That terrible smell again!

Pistols ready we rushed in, but the room was as we had left it. A glance in the bathroom showed the two captive Arabs still out to the world.

Jim picked up the phone and got through to Chrondisp.

`We were at the airport,' he said `And a good thing too. Your message took two hours to get through.'

He listened.

`No. All we could do was stop them being put on the plane. They must have taken them back downtown some-place.'

He listened again impatiently.

`Look, we're damn lucky we were able to do what we did. I'll explain it all later. What's happening your end?'

He listened a while then put the phone down.

`Nothing new,' he said to me. There was supposed to be freight consignment for Libya, but it didn't show up and the plane left without it.'

`So what are they going to do now?' I asked.

`The original plan must have been to take Sara and Max ..'

`And you and me.'

`Yes ... all four of us were to be taken to Libya and then Chondisp was to be informed that they could have us back for a Memory Unit. Then ...'

`What is a Memory Unit?' I interrupted.

`It's the latest thing. The databank at Chondisp used to be on film but now we have changed to molecular memory. You can store a million books in a cubic centimeter. The Wipe still have film memories. If they could get hold of one of our units they could catch us up in a year. As it is, we think they'll need at least five years.'

`So Chondisp would have had to send a Memory Unit to Libya...'

`Where some Wipe, probably a Jap, would have checked it out, said it's OK, and the hostages can be released.'

`I can't see Chondisp handing anything over until they are sure of the hostages,' I said.

`Well, I suppose it was to have been done on the frontier like in those old spy movies. Some Wipe comes over, checks Unit and stays with it. Hostages arrive and simultaneous change-over made.'

`But that's how it was to be done.'

`Yes,' he said. `Now they're stuck in Agadir and now we're looking for them, so they'll be in a hurry. I think they'll try to get the Jap experts to come here to check out the Memory Unit and the hand-over will be done here also.'

`It's a solution,' I said `But after the handover the Arabs still have to get the Memory Unit out of Agadir. And themselves.'

`It's only about so big,' he made movements with his hands `Much easier to smuggle out than two Europeans.'

`And two unknown Arabs should be able to get out of Agadir without difficulty. There's half a million other Arabs here.' I added.

There was nothing to be done at the moment. We just had to wait until someone made a move.

Time 13:45.

At 13:56 the phone rang and Jim dived across the bed. He spoke a little but mostly listened.

`Yes.' He put the phone down.

`Chondisp have received a call from the "Muslim Brotherhood for the Remembrance of Black September". They want a Memory Unit to be delivered to the airport at Agadir. Further instructions to be given on arrival. And they also want those two back.' He nodded towards the bathroom. `Chondisp said they know nothing about them.'

The phone rang almost immediately again.

`Thanks,' he said.

`A fast private jet has just taken off from Hotan in Northern China and has filed a flight plan to Agadir. Pilot and two Asiablock passengers.'

He looked at his watch.

`So Chondisp with the Unit, and the Wipe to check it out, will both be here around 17.30.'

There was there nothing we could do but wait and speculate. Jim was pacing up and down nervously.

To pass the time I tore up some pieces of paper and wrote names on them. I arranged them on the bed and looked at them.

'We sure have a complicated situation,' I said. "Arabs, Asians and us. No one trusts the others.'

Jim stopped pacing and looked over my shoulder.

'Now here's Sara and Max in the town with Arab 3 and Arab 4,' I continued. 'Here's the airport - Chrodisp arrives with say three guys and the Memory Unit. And here's the Asians, say three also.' I thought a while then:

'The Asians send over a technician to check out the Unit. Three of our guys, one Asian, no danger. He checks it out and says it's OK. He calls the Arabs. The Arabs in the town tell him to stay with it in case we try to swap it for a dummy. Then the Arabs tell Chrodisp to bring the Unit, with the Asian, to make the swap - Memory Unit for Sara and Max - somewhere in the town I suppose, so they can get away easily afterwards.'

I moved the pieces of paper to follow the action.

'And here the swap is made. Arabs give the Unit to the Asians then go to ground. Sara and Max are released and go with the Chrodisp guys, and the Asian goes back to his mate at the airport with the Unit and flies back home to China.'

We looked at the bits of paper. Jim pulled out his pencil and tore off two extra pieces of paper and wrote our names on them. As an afterthought he tore off two more pieces of paper and wrote "Arab 1" and "Arab 2" on them. He put them all together away from the others.

'I'd like to see some more action over here, in this hotel,' he said.

We chatted and pushed the pieces of paper around for a while, but there didn't seem anything obvious that we could do. I opened my mouth to say something to Jim when ... If we could somehow persuade our two Arabs that ... I went over to the bathroom and looked in. The two Arabs were apparently asleep still, but just in case, I carefully closed the door. I quietly explained my idea to Jim, moving the papers around accordingly.

'Of course, if you want the Unit back you're going to have to be quick at the Airport or you'll have an International Incident on your hands.'

'Oh, don't worry about the Unit,' he said 'Our warning gave Chrodisp time to have it booby-trapped.'

I looked at him. 'Now he tells me,' I said. 'So Chrodisp don't mind handing it over as they can destroy it at any moment.'

'Well, of course my idea isn't so useful now if you aren't worried about losing the Unit,' I continued, rather disappointed. It had been a good idea.

'No, no. It's still a neat idea. Let me talk to the Doc. It's the sort of thing he likes.'

He called Chrodisp and after a few minutes conversation, raised his thumb to me.

'He says let's give it a whirl, what can we lose?'

Chapter 16

I went back into the bathroom to find the Arabs still out. I checked their bonds and added some more, tying them to the radiator, to make sure they couldn't crawl out into the main room.

We then left, carefully making sure the "Do not disturb" sign was still in place and went to the airport again, this time more decorously in a taxi. We arrived just in

time to meet the Chondisp plane. They had received instructions about Jim and we were welcomed as we climbed aboard the parked jet.

Apart from the pilot, there were two tough-looking men in civilian clothes and one technician in a white coat with the Memory Unit. I looked at it with interest. It was an aluminium machined box about 40x40x20mm with connectors on the side - about twice as big as Jim had described. Judging by the careful way everyone handled it, the extra volume must be explosive.

Jim was immediately in deep conversation with the technician over the Unit. The technician gave him his white smock, which he put on.

We waited, the radio tuned to the tower frequency, listening to various aircraft landing and taking off. Around 17.25 there was a sing-song voice in accented English, asking permission to land. The urbane voice in the control tower gave the Asian aircraft landing instructions and then directed it to taxi to the end of the field, where we were.

A few minutes later we heard it howl overhead on its approach. A pause and then we could see a small jet taxiing towards us, carrying the "yellow-sun" Federation markings. It stopped about eighty meters away, its jets whistling slowly down the scale.

Time 17:40. I descended the gangway with one of the Chondisp men - Clint was his name. There was a pause, then we could see the door of the Asiablock jet folding out until it touched the ground. Two Asians, one tall, the other short, climbed out and stood at the bottom.

A hard voice snapped out of Clint's hand-held radio.

`You have the Memory Unit?'

`Yes,' said Clint.

`Then you may now bring it over.'

`No,' said Clint `My instructions are that you will send your technician over here.' He had a slight Germanic accent under his American English.

The two Asians climbed back up the gangway, the door folded in and the engines started. The other Chondisp man and Jim came to the doorway.

We stood motionless waiting. After a short pause the engines revved up and the jet moved slowly away in a cloud of dust.

`Grosser Gott, they're leaving!' said Clint.

`Call them back!' said the other man. Clint lifted his radio up to his mouth, but I put out my hand.

`Hold it,' I said. I had had dealings with the YP before. They always try it on.

The engines cut off and while they were whining down the scale again, the door folded out and down.

Two men stepped out and walked towards us. As they neared we could see the smaller one, Malaysian, by the look of him, was wearing glasses. The other, a thick-set muscular Korean, a scowl. They made to climb up our gangway. Clint reached out and put his hand on the big man's chest.

`Only the technician,' he said.

I thought the Korean was going to hit him, but he looked at both of us and said something to his companion, who then made to climb the gangway.

`One moment,' I said. `Are you the engineer?'

He looked at the big man, squinted at me in the bright sunlight and nodded. He was about forty, slender, with big brown eyes behind his glasses. The wind scattered his scanty black hair.

`Then where is your test equipment?' I asked.

He held his hand up and turned again to the big one.

'He has come to collect the Unit, you fool. We test it in our plane.'

We stared at them motionlessly. They stared back.

After a full minute the big one spoke to his companion. They turned sharply and walked back to their plane. Again the door folded up.

I yawned and ostentatiously looked at my watch.

Ten minutes later the door to the Federation jet opened again and the same two men approached. This time the one in glasses was carrying a small suitcase.

Again they both tried to mount into our plane and again the big one was pushed back. The one with glasses mounted to the top of our gangway and turned to speak to his companion, but an arm pulled him inside. The big one looked as though he was going to charge us, but changed his mind. Clint silently pointed the way back to the Federation plane. He ignored Clint, put his hands behind his back and legs apart looked away into the distance.

I pulled the big silenced automatic from behind my back and fired once. The gun only made a cough but the howl of the ricochet was loud enough. He looked down in disbelief at the small crater in the tarmac between his feet.

Clint laughed and I twirled the automatic, clumsily because of the heavy silencer. He made to grab under his shoulder but Clint had his pistol out too now, holding it down by his side.

'I just wanted to see how nearly I could miss him,' I said in an Irish accent. I levelled the big clumsy pistol again, the muzzle wavering slightly. He backed away slowly.

'Beat it, terrorist,' said Clint. I fired again and he leapt back. Another shot and he was lumbering heavily back to his plane. We climbed back up the gangway and the door closed behind us.

The Malaysian engineer was standing motionless as Jim and the Chondisp technician were each running a small box over his clothing. A red light appeared on Jim's box and he turned back the Malay's lapel. With the aid of a small pair of tweezers he pulled off a black 1cm diameter self-adhesive disk and dropped it into a plastic box lined with foam to make it soundproof. They continued scanning and found another under the hem of his jacket. The Asian watched carefully and visibly relaxed when the second followed the first into the plastic box. Jim snapped the box closed.

I looked out of the window and could see the Korean Security man standing in the doorway of their plane, but no other sign of activity.

Jim and the Malay engineer were now in deep conversation over the Memory Unit. The engineer had connected it, via his suitcase, to our aircraft's satellite antenna and was typing in data. There was a short pause and then his screen flooded with pictograms. He looked at the small Memory Unit with awe and rested his hand gently on it. There was a sharp buzz from his suitcase computer and he went back to hastily type in more data.

I looked at Jim.

'He's got it connected to a big computer in Japan,' he said 'and they're just reading data in and out of it. That engineer is fascinated. Look at his eyes - like a kid in a candy store.'

Jim now turned and was talking to the Chondisp technician who was looking through a tool-box the pilot had produced. I could see Jim moving his hands and the technician nodding. He pulled a small vise out of the tool-box and screwed it to a bench in the back of the aircraft. Soon he was filing away at a small piece of metal tubing.

The Malay then had a request. He wanted to look over the aircraft, especially in the luggage compartment.

'What the hell does he want to do that for?' exclaimed one of the Chrondisp guards suspiciously.

Jim explained that the people on the other end of the satellite link probably didn't believe all the memory was in the little box but thought it was just a radio link to a conventional memory hidden in the aircraft somewhere.

So a hatch was opened in the aircraft floor. The Malaysian scrambled down, reappeared after a while then walked through the aircraft peering in everywhere from the cockpit to the toilets, but there was of course nothing to see.

'The equivalent in film memories would be about ten cylinders two meters long by thirty centimeters diameter,' said Jim. 'There's no way we could hide them here and he knows it.'

The Asian engineer reported back via his computer and for another quarter of an hour the tests continued.

In the meantime Jim, myself and Clint huddled together as Jim explained what we wanted to do.

'Why not the big guy as well?' asked Clint. 'That engineer may not be up to it by himself.'

'It's a weakness,' conceded Jim. 'But that guy's in the CERE, the Committee for Ethical Re-education. We could surely offer him more money than he gets now, but just look at him, we could never offer him what he's got already, and what he would never give up.'

'And what's that?' asked Clint, puzzled.

'P-O-W-E-R,' spelt out Jim.

Jim then moved over to the Malaysian engineer, still busy testing the Memory Unit.

'OK, that's enough. You've seen it work and you must have measured its capacity by now. Call your friends and tell them it's a real Memory Unit.'

But before he could do anything the intercom buzzed and the pilot said the Arabs had called Chrondisp and wanted to speak to the Malay. He was given a handset and we heard him saying in English that he was satisfied. Still holding the phone to his ear he asked for paper and pencil and wrote down something.

'The Arabs say you must be here,' he showed the piece of paper on which he had written the names of two roads. 'Now I must call my friends.'

'Later,' said Jim, and he was pushed down into a seat. He sat there with the Unit on his knees, looking round wide-eyed, perhaps wondering if he could somehow escape with the Unit, but I was sitting opposite with my pistol in my lap, watching him. One of the Chrondisp men was phoning for a car.

It could not have been waiting far away for we stood up almost immediately and the aircraft door swung open. The car drew up and Jim, myself, Clint and the Asian, still carefully carrying the Unit, scrambled quickly down the gangway and tumbled into the car which drove off. But not quickly enough for me not to notice that Clint and Jim had deftly replaced the two bugs on the Asian's clothes. Through the rear window I could see some movement in the door of the Federation plane.

I loudly gave the name of the cross-roads to our Arab driver, and silently motioned to him not to go too fast.

I was sitting beside the driver and the Asian was sitting between Clint and Jim in the back. As we drove slowly across the tarmac I leaned over the back of the seat and looked at the Asian.

`I don't think I've ever met a Asian technician before,' I said conversationally.
`Not a technician. I am an Engineer. Peking University,' he said, stiffly.
Both Clint and Jim made noises of admiration and Jim moved deferentially
aside.

`Wow! An Engineer!' said Jim.

I looked impressed too.

`We don't see many Engineers,' I said. I smiled sadly and rubbed my
fingertips together. `They all live in big houses in the mountains or by the seaside
and earn far more money than we do.'

`I suppose you travel all over the world to conferences and things and have a
wonderful collection of Ming vases,' said Jim.

The Asian's face twisted bitterly.

`No, I don't have a collection of Ming vases,' he said looking at the titanium
cased computer on my wrist.

`Still, it must be nice to be really wanted, to work on worthwhile jobs, to have
techs do all the dirty work. And then they give you a medal. I'm afraid our
engineers are not so public spirited,' I said. I turned aside to Jim `Did you see that
on the holo the other day where those NASA engineers wanted to be cut in on
the profits their satellites make? And I bet they'll get it too! I wish I was clever enough
to be an engineer.'

`I met an Engineer once,' volunteered Clint. `It was in Paris and they were
laying the new hydrogen pipe system. He came up with his staff to supervise the
digging. Of course, I didn't speak to him, but he smiled at me when he dropped a
pencil and I picked it up.'

`A Mechanical Engineer,' sneered the Malay.

`Gosh, yes, I'd forgotten!' I said `You must be an Electric
Engineer.'

`Electronic Engineer,' he corrected.

`Can I have your autograph?' asked Jim with wide open eyes.

I coughed. They were going over the top. Some people just don't know
when to stop.

`As an American Citizen,' said Jim, hand on heart, `I would like to take this
opportunity to invite you to visit our broad and pleasant land, to give us the benefit of
your....'

I waved my hand dismissively.

`He's ex-Commonwealth,' I said `He wants more than mere money. Now as
an Englishman I am convinced that the right country for you is Great Britain. King
William at the head of His Majesty's Government was saying only the other day
how much the country needs Engineers - especially Electronic Engineers...'

`He must choose for himself,' said Clint, who in spite of his name came from
Luxembourg and perhaps didn't feel like putting his own minute country forward.

`Choose what?' said the Asian, bewildered.

Jim leaned forward and placed his hand on the Memory Unit.

`You may not know it,' he said `But this Unit was developed by an Indian who
escaped from Japan and now lives in Southern California, working for us. We
don't want the Arabs to get it. If you could somehow escape from the Arabs after
they have returned their hostages to us, and bring this unit back with you, My
Country would be grateful. Very grateful.'

It made sense and I liked that bit about the Indian inventor.

He looked carefully at Jim.

'What you say is stupid!' he said. 'I will be outnumbered and they will be armed. There is not the slightest chance that I could deceive them in the way you say.'

'There will be two Arabs,' said Jim 'and they will not be expecting you to try and escape. As regards weapons ...' he motioned to Clint who pulled out one of the new Japanese Nambu pistols.

'You have probably seen one of these ...,' began Jim. Unfortunately I had to leave at this point and I couldn't hear the rest of the conversation. We had stopped outside our hotel. I opened the door, leapt out, and as the car pulled away Jim turned and through the rear window made a sign of telephoning. I nodded.

As I entered the hotel I turned round and saw our car was being followed by another car, about a fifty meters behind. I ran up the stairs to my floor and opening the door onto the corridor carefully looked out. No special activity, so I walked slowly and silently down to my room, unlocked the door and stepped in.

The same terrible smell as when I had left. Holding the Colt in front of me I looked round. No one in the main room, no one hiding in the cupboard. But there was some thumping in the bathroom. I looked in cautiously, but they were still there, still securely tied up, but now both wide awake. Their coal-black eyes followed me around unwinkingly.

I pulled out one of the knives I had taken from them, cut the pieces of sheet holding them to the radiator, and pulled them out into the main room, one at a time, kicking and struggling and left them on the carpet by the bathroom door.

'Not long to wait now, fellers,' I told them. 'Police will be coming soon.' I carefully wiped the Colt of fingerprints and dropped it on the bed.

Then I sat on the bed playing with the knife and looking worried. I kept looking at my watch.

The phone rang and I snatched it up.

'Yes?' I said impatiently 'Never mind that, are Sara and Max OK?'

'Good, very good,' I said in a heartfelt voice of relief. 'And what about the Memory Unit?'

'What?! Say that again.'

'You mean the Asians just stole it off the Arabs? But ...'

The telephone jabbered.

'The engineer who went with the Unit had a gun?! ... No, I thought you had searched him. And anyway who would think an engineer would have a gun? The crafty buggers! So they got the Memory Unit for nothing! You've really got to hand it to the Yellow People!'

I stabbed the knife upright into the bedside table, roaring with laughter.

'And where is it now? In the Asian aircraft, I suppose. What are you going to do? Try and get it back?'

'No, I suppose not... But hell, if the Asians have got engine trouble and are stuck at the airport you must be able to do some- thing... No, no, OK, I suppose not.' I listened a while. 'The two here? Blushing I guess, but you can never tell with their complexions,' I chuckled. 'Biggest con I ever heard of. Yes, they're tied up OK and the police will be picking them up soon anyway. No, I think I'll just fade, otherwise I'll be stuck here for a week answering questions. OK then, see you back at Chrondisp.'

I hung the phone up and turned to the Arabs.

'You stupid incompetent clowns,' I said and left the room.

Chapter 17

'What I don't understand is how they found we all came from Chrodisp in the first place.' Jim speaking.

I said nothing.

We were sitting in Dr Duluth's office. Sara and Max had been returned safely and had described how they had been pushed out of the back seat of a car in the middle of downtown Agadir at the same time as the Malay engineer, carrying the Memory Unit, had slipped into the car in their place. The car had then driven off and they had returned to the airport with Jim and Clint.

'As far as I can see the whole thing was a string of coincidences,' said Dr Duluth. 'Those Arabs just happened to be in Agadir and just happened to guess that one of you worked for Chrodisp. He was followed and when you were seen together they knew you all worked for Chrodisp. As soon they found that out, they must have called the Federation and said something like "What will you give us if deliver four Chrodisp employees to you?". The Asians would have said "Nothing, we are a Responsible World Power and don't operate by taking hostages".'

'... However, if you could persuade Chrodisp to give you one of their new molecular Memory Units in return for your hostages we could perhaps see our way to exchanging it for a consignment of...'

'The Arabs would then have said they didn't know a Memory Unit from a hole in the ground and would need the help of an expert to make sure Chrodisp wasn't cheating them,' added Pete.

'Sounds about right,' said Jim.

'I don't doubt the Federation would have publicly returned the Memory Unit to us some time afterwards, virtuously telling everyone they don't support International Terrorism and they only did it to secure the release of the hostages,' continued Dr Duluth.

'They'd have got away with it too if their engineer hadn't seen it as a chance to defect to the West - using the Unit as an entry visa.'

'Well, he won't do it again,' I said. 'But what actually happened at the airport?'

'We left before the action,' said Jim 'But before we took off we managed to jam some small pieces of steel tubing against the Federation jet's tires so they would be deflated as soon as they started to roll.'

'And the rest is surmise,' said Dr Duluth. 'After the exchange, the Asian technician apparently shot and killed one of the Arabs in the car, wounded the other and forced him out. Then he drove their car round to the American Consulate but his watch-dogs must have guessed he was going to try to do this and grabbed him there before he could enter. They all returned to their aircraft at the airport.'

'With the Memory Unit,' said Pete.

'Yes. The Asians must have thought it a wonderful opportunity to get their hands on a working Memory Unit without having to go through all the boring details of dealing with the Arabs.'

'They prepared to take-off, but there seemed to be something wrong with the wheels. They climbed down to see what it was, and there waiting for them were two wild-eyed Arabs, belonging to the same band, who they hadn't seen yet. These Arabs had apparently been tied up in a hotel room all day and had only just escaped. They had cut their bonds on a knife they had found in the hotel room.'

'Very negligent of their captors,' said Jim.

`Anyway," continued Dr Duluth, `there were some recriminations in the course of which the three Asians and one of the Arabs perished. The surviving Arab repossessed himself of the Memory Unit and sought sanctuary in the Libyan Consulate.'

`Which has just been burnt to the ground after a mysterious explosion,' said Pete, looking at some pictures on the back of the local Agadir paper.

`The charge in the Memory Unit was supposed to go off in the Federation jet as they were flying back to China, of course,' said Dr Duluth, looking into the distance, `but perhaps this other outcome is preferable.'

Pete slid the paper across to me.

The front page was covered with a big photo showing the Federation jet with extended gangway. There were four bodies lying at its foot. Ugh.

`What's this mean?' I asked. pointing to the beautiful Arabic script, traced across the top of the picture.

`"Thou shalt not steal",' said Dr Duluth. `It's a quotation from the Koran.'

For a further moment I looked in gruesome fascination at the three Asian corpses which had been neatly laid out with their severed hands on their chests.

Chapter 18

There now occurred a short period of boredom at Chondisp while I waited for someone to tell me what I was going to do during my Insertion. After all, notwithstanding the recent excitement, that was the reason I was here.

Judging by my last Mission, I would be informed well in advance of what it was all about, so I could read up on the background of the period. But this time no one seemed in a hurry to call on my services. Even Jim didn't seem to know what was happening, telling me my Mission had been changed.

After the recent capture of hostages, Chondisp had reluctantly cancelled the program of letting their personnel visit neighbouring towns, unless they had a heavy escort with them. This made them so obvious and the natives so unfriendly, that most people had resigned themselves to spending all their service time in the Chondisp compound.

Someone had cut out the famous "Thou shalt not steal" photograph from the Agadir paper and had fixed it to the door of the food stores, in the hope that it would help reduce pilfering. It did, immediately, but was later taken down as it was thought to be in bad taste.

Apparently another cause for the delay in my Mission was the work being done on the Inserter. The installation of the Phase Changer ring was apparently taking longer than expected and all Missions were being rescheduled.

So I played squash with Jim and tennis with Sara. In Munich I normally only play squash in winter and tennis in summer and it's a bit odd changing from one to the other when the seasons change. But I found that if you change back and forth often enough, you can adapt almost instantly.

Sara was a member of the team that was trying to "deprogram" the Observers that had "gone mystic". She said that now they knew what had caused it, they were having some success and were recalling them for treatment, those that would come.

`They've built themselves new lives - some of them even have a band of followers,' she said. `They don't want to change back. They don't even like to think that they can be changed back.'

`Tell them you're going to give them a short Insertion,' I advised. `That'll fetch them.'

`It doesn't sound very ethical,' she said doubtfully.

I don't know what happened next because at this point I received the long-awaited call to visit Dr Duluth.

Chapter 19

Strangely enough, he had arranged the meeting for late in the evening, eleven o'clock, in fact, a time when I would normally be thinking of bed.

I took the underground train, still doing its endless circuiting of Chrodisp. Because of the hour it was empty, as were all the stations it flashed through.

As I walked down the corridor leading to Dr Duluth's office I could see his light on at the far end. All the other offices were dark and empty.

He was alone in his room, sitting at his desk and looking at the screen when I entered. He waved me to the visitor's chair, touched his screen once more then looked up.

`Worked out very well, that hostage taking affair,' he conceded. `Hostages safe but most of the hostage-takers dead. And the world knows that in spite of all denials to the contrary there was some dastardly plot where the Arabs did the Asians' dirty work. But it all turned sour with the Asians appearing as scheming double-crossers, the Arabs as naive incompetents and we as innocent victims.'

He paused and gave me a rare smile.

`What I particularly liked is that the Federation just know we had something to do with the débâcle but can't put their finger on it. And that will make them think twice before they are tempted to do anything like this again. I imagine some heads will be rolling over there.'

He paused again.

`But to brass tacks. I want to show you something. Have you ever been up the reactor cooling tower?'

I looked at him amazed. The reactor cooling tower was a large structure far away in the north corner of the compound. There might be some point in climbing up it by day when I suppose you could see the whole of the Chrodisp complex. But by night all you would be able to see would be a few lights. Chrodisp was an underground city.

`No,' I replied.

`I thought not,' he said, standing up. He opened a wall cupboard and pulled out two parkas, one of which he handed to me.

`Freezing out there now,' he said.

Silently I followed him down the corridor, into the lift and onto the deserted train platform. We took the next train.

After a fifteen minute ride the train stopped between two stations, opposite a large door which turned out to be a freight lift. We climbed in and slid the door closed. The lift rose slowly and there was only one stop, at the top.

When the lift door opened, it was in front of a short flight of stone steps, leading to another door. There was some sand on the floor which grated under our feet and it was perceptibly colder. We paused to put on our parkas.

I then followed Dr Duluth up the steps to the door, which he opened with his card. We stepped out of a small low building and I found myself in the desert. The light from inside the building fanned across the sand and the cold air hit me. The door closed behind us with a sharp snap and instantly all was inky black. We waited a few

minutes until our eyes adapted. It was very dark, still and cold, with just a few dim perimeter lights in the far distance. Dr Duluth led the way off to the right and I just followed him, wondering what on earth he wanted to show me.

I could now see we were walking towards the reactor cooling tower, a vague shape away to the north, the sand hissing under our feet.

Either the tower was higher or further away than I had thought because it only approached slowly, its graceful curved shape swinging up and gradually blacking out the stars. When we were about a hundred meters away Dr Duluth pulled out his phone and spoke a few words into it. We both stood and motionlessly faced the tower.

'We don't want anyone to get trigger-happy' he said. 'There's a guard post at the top of the tower and it's looking at us through a night-sight.'

His phone beeped softly, he spoke into it again then snapped it shut:

'All clear.'

We covered the last hundred meters and stood by the side of the cooling tower. There were no lights and we were alone. Looking up at its enormous shape, quietly soaring towards the stars, it was easy to imagine we were looking at some Alien artefact.

I followed Dr Duluth under the bottom edge, about three meters above the ground and supported by a series of diagonal struts. Abruptly it became darker: we were inside the tower. Far above us was a small distant circle of sky studded with stars, one brighter than the others.

Mounted in the middle of the tower and disappearing upwards, we could see the massive fins of the radiator, gleaming faintly in the starlight. There was a noticeable breeze here as the still slightly warm air of the desert entered the base of the tower and was sucked upwards over the radiator fins.

'When it's in use, you can hardly stand here,' said Dr Duluth, his voice with a slight hollow echo.

We walked across the base of the tower, it must have been at least eighty meters, and around the fins to the other side where a very dim light glowed. This turned out to be over a grill, the entrance to a lift running up the inside wall of the tower. Dr Duluth pressed a switch and we waited in silence.

A faint humming sound and a shape loomed out of the darkness above us and stopped with a click. A small cage, smelling of machine oil. Dr Duluth slid aside a grill and we stepped into it. A rattle as he closed the grill, another click, and with a faint humming sound we were rising up the inside of the tower. Because of the convex inner surface of the tower we moved inwards as well as upwards, which gave the impression that we were floating upwards unsupported.

Gradually we rose, the massive radiator fins so close we could have touched them. Half way up the inside of the tower the breeze became considerably stronger, whistling over the fins and hissing through the open grill-work of the lift.

Now we were moving backwards, crawling up the flare of the tower, and the circle of starlight above us was slowly widening. Abruptly it expanded to fill the sky and the lift stopped with a jerk. The grill was slid aside at the back of the lift and we stepped out onto a wide ledge running around the rim of the tower.

I looked back down inside the tower and could now see its construction. It was really a massive system of cooling fins, carefully shaped to take advantage of the upward rushing air-stream that was guided over its fins by the enormous Venturi-tube of the tower. I knew the fins themselves were in direct thermal contact with the reactor, another thirty meters underground.

And apart from the faint sigh of the breeze up the tower, the utter silence of the desert.

I then turned, and holding the rail around the rim of the tower, looked upwards.

The desert sky at night!

We were on the side furthest from the Chrondisp installations, looking outwards. The dark tower seemed to be thrusting us into the immense vault of the heavens, the stars arching over us from one distant horizon to the other. Myriads and myriads of stars, the hard brilliant points of the constellations embedded in distant swirls of silvery dust, the endless depths of space.

So they had appeared before Man had first stood upright on the Planet and unchanged they would appear when Man had evolved into something else.

I looked upwards in what I suppose is the nearest I ever get to a religious feeling.

'How many, do you think?' asked Dr Duluth, quietly.

'God, I don't know,' I replied in the same tone. 'A million?' I hazarded.

'With the unaided eye about three thousand. But through even a small telescope that would jump to millions and with a large telescope and image intensifier, billions.'

I stood there awhile in silent awe, trying to identify some of the constellations, the Plough pointing to the North Star only just visible above the horizon at this latitude.

And inevitably I asked 'Is there anyone out there?'

'Yes, there must be,' said Dr Duluth.

'Then where are they? We've been searching the heavens with radio telescopes for eighty years or so now but no one has ever heard a signal that seemed to carry information.'

'Well, let's put things into perspective first,' he said, looking down at the ground over the edge of the two-hundred meter high cooling tower. 'This is a rather hackneyed analogy but nevertheless impressive,' he began. 'If the height of this tower represents the age of the earth then this...' he put his fingers about ten centimeters apart, '...- represents the whole time that man has existed on the planet. And this...', he felt in his pocket for a coin and held it edge-on to me '...represents all of recorded history - five thousand years - going back to the Egyptians. Modern history is just the layer of oxide on this coin.' He put the coin on the edge of the tower.

'It gives you an idea of how unlikely it is that we will find a civilisation anywhere at our level of development. They will either be millions of years behind us or millions of years ahead of us. More likely ahead, as our history has been so short.'

'You mean they're not beaming signals at us because they've already visited us and found there's not much they could profitably talk to us about.'

'That's one of a large number of possibilities,' he said.

We walked around the top of the tower until we came to the lift again. He stood with one hand on the rail, his face shadowy in the faint illumination.

'It is thought that Extra-terrestrials may be visiting us regularly. If they visit us now, they would be careful not to allow themselves to be detected by our present level of technology. But in the past they could have visited us with impunity, knowing their presence would be put down to magic, ghosts, devils etc.'

I was beginning to see the purpose of the conversation.

'So if we send someone back into the past who doesn't believe in magic, ghosts and devils, we may catch them off their guard and observe them.'

`Exactly.'

`Where and when?'

`London, Victorian England, 1852.'

We took the lift and sank into the windy darkness of the tower.

Chapter 20

The next morning I had another appointment with Dr Duluth and this time I had had time to think about my Mission.

`You told me last night I was going to be sent into the past to see if I can observe any Aliens. Would you care to elaborate on that?'

He smiled faintly.

`Yes, last night was a bit theatrical, of course, but I wanted to see what you thought about Aliens, their possible existence and so on. No use sending anyone to look for what may only be faint traces if he's sceptical to start with.'

Ah, Dr Duluth and his passion for little tests.

`Well, I'm not necessarily a fervent believer either, so let me ask some questions. Question number one: why am I being sent back into 1852? I would have thought there was more going on around 1952, when all those so-called Flying Saucers appeared.'

`A good question,' he said. `Because of the high cost of an Insertion we obviously only want to send you where and when you have the best chance of finding traces of Extra-terrestrial visits. And we do this by looking in our records for strange, unexplained events. Now there's no shortage of strange, unexplained events in human history so we have to be selective. Before about 1800 bad communications, gullible population and the general lack of trustworthy observers makes our data unreliable.

But after 1900 our data starts to get more and more reliable, and the more reliable it gets, the smaller the number of unexplained events. And since about 1960 there have been no unexplainable events. Now of course this can be interpreted as...'

`Now just a minute. Were all those Unidentified Flying Objects explainable?'

`The short answer is "almost certainly",' he replied. `You must remember the historical context. A war had just finished, a war where air-power was extensively used so everyone was in the habit of looking up at the sky. A lot of unfamiliar, but nevertheless man-made objects were to be seen such as rotary-wing aircraft, the newly-developed jets, weather balloons, and so on. Then the Space Age was just starting, which sensitised people to a lot of ideas about Extra-terrestrials which up to that point had been discarded as Science Fiction. Then lastly, and probably most important, science was finally beginning to discredit traditional religion in the popular mind. This left a vacuum which to this day has been filled by various odd religions and beliefs. The small section of the population that suffered from psychological or optical disorders was now seeing Extra-terrestrials instead of angels.'

`So there have been no unexplained events since 1900?' I asked incredulously.

`Plenty, in one sense. The gullible mind is still with us. But how do you explain a man talking apparently to himself in the middle of a field in front of witnesses and then informing them he had just seen a space ship and spoken to its pilot? I don't think we'll ever be able to completely explain the strange by-ways of the human mind.'

Yes, I saw what he meant. It was not a piece of information you could do anything with.

`And if we're going to talk about Extra-terrestrials I think we should try to define them a bit. "Extra-terrestrials are people a bit more advanced than us, but still people". We can understand Extra-terrestrials - they're like us, aggressive, curious and acquisitive. They've still got a touch of the Old Adam. But fortunately they're also stuck with the same physical laws as we are - of which the most important is the one that says the speed limit in the Universe is the speed of light.'

`But "a bit more advanced than us" just means another layer of dirt on your coin' I pointed out, `what about life forms further on than that?'

`Well, if they're developing at the same rate as us, and there's no reason to think we are unique, they're so far ahead of us we can't compare them to ourselves. We won't understand what, how or why they do anything so it's no use wasting time in useless speculation. They're not just Extra-terrestrials anymore - they're Gods.'

`OK, so we won't understand them until we become Gods too,' I said `But let's get back to these UFO's.'

`You're obsessed with them,' he said annoyed. `Do you really think that Extra-terrestrials would suddenly appear in droves all over the Earth's surface, allow themselves to be photographed, grant interviews (to people who subsequently wrote best-selling books) and then disappear? Not the sort of thing we would do, never mind the Extra-terrestrials who are presumably more intelligent than us. And another thing. Did you know that the UFO maximum in 1959 coincided with one of the 11 year sunspot minima, the so-called Year of the Quiet Sun, which meant that the sky was being swept over the whole of the electromagnetic spectrum as never before by professional and amateur astronomers by day and by night, and never a Flying Saucer was seen?'

Well, I was glad to hear it really. In fact I wished I had heard of some of those arguments before. My wife had been a member of the New Truth Movement and we used to have parties where everyone was into astrology, poltergeists, dowsing, flying saucers, ESP etc. etc. I used to argue with them to start with but they were quite irrational and it only annoyed my wife.

`So unusual events which might have been Extra-terrestrial visitations are scattered and unsupported before 1800 and after 1900 they were mostly explainable,' I summarised.

`Exactly. Between 1800 and 1900 there is a sort of grey area and that's one of the reasons we've chosen it. Other reasons are that technologically it's not far from your last Insertion in 1815 and also an Insertion there is not too expensive, energy-wise.'

`And have you decided on who the Host is to be, the person I am to be Inserted into?'

He looked down at his desk screen and touched it.

`Yes, it is a man named Alex Salisbury. He is thirty-two years old, same as you, and is a policeman... no, a detective, a private detective.'

`Living in Baker Street 221B, no doubt?'

`No, he lives in er..Ashland Place, that's in the City of Westminster. Why do you say .. ? Oh, I see. No, Sherlock Holmes didn't live until 1880 or so. Same period though, of course.'

`And what are the strange, unexplained events I am to look out for?'

`I haven't got all the details here. But you'll have a complete briefing before you leave. I suggest you use the next two days in the library, getting some feel for

the background. Also we have a vacancy in R & R, so you can spend the rest of your time there.'

That was good. Rest and Recuperation was a luxury hotel and several notches up on the rather Spartan Training Area. I handed over my card, he stuck it in a slot in his desk and reprogrammed it for me.

Chapter 21

For the next two days I didn't see much of anyone. I was in Victorian London. The library, which tapped into the main Data Bank, was able to supply me with an enormous amount of information. In the holo cabins I was able to walk around the London streets (the holos had been created from old photos, street plans, architects' drawings) listening to the simulated noise of street cries, the rattle of cabs, the distant music of a band leading a battalion of Guards off to the Palace. It was all there, the whole enthusiastic roar of a confident city which knew itself to be the centre of the biggest empire the world had ever known.

When I returned to my quiet room I could still see those forests of masts in the Thames, see ships being unloaded by thousands of workers, hear the cries of gulls. It was very well done and I knew the new molecular memories had made it possible. Every piece of available information had been fed into the computers and they had sorted it all out, looking for links between faces in the crowd watching a parade, school photos, records of births and deaths, army records, whole lives, whole family records had been rediscovered - whole Timelines, in the Chronosp jargon. It was a very impressive demonstration of Computer Correlation.

I had only one more hurried interview with Dr Duluth and that was on the morning of the day of my Insertion. He told me that the suspected Alien visitation had occurred during a series of "Seances" held at the home of a famous "Medium".

I just had a short time to dash down to the library and look up the meaning of these words:

"One of the occult beliefs of the age" I read, "was that when you died you went to another world, a 'Land of Shades', where life continued." (though at a reduced pace, I assumed). "'Spiritualism' it was called. The living could contact the dead through a 'Medium', a person who would go into a trance and then speak with the voice of the dead one. All this happened at a 'Séance' and usually in the dark. Occasionally the Medium was able to produce 'Ectoplasm' from his (or more usually, her) mouth. This was a white substance which would form itself into the shape of the dead one being contacted. Spiritualism had strong religious overtones and many famous people, including scientists, believed in it".

Especially if it allowed them to contact a recently dead loved one, I thought.

A few minutes later I was in the medical section, being prepared for my Insertion.

'Just a few days,' I was told comfortingly as they helped me out of my normal clothes and into a white coverall. I put on my personally adjusted Helmet and lay down on a stretcher. A technician plugged it into a box under the stretcher, made some tests and I was then wheeled out along the corridor.

I hate this way the medical staff slip automatically into the routine of treating you like a patient being taken to the operating theatre. I tried to

counteract it by sitting up on the stretcher, but the cable to the Helmet was too short. I knew it was all necessary and that in a few minutes, unconscious after my Insertion, I would be heaved out of the Cage and wheeled out on this very stretcher to spend the whole period of my Insertion flat on my back, being drip-fed. Still, there seemed no reason why I couldn't just walk into the Insertion complex.

A door was opened and a sudden impression of space as we entered the enormous underground main Insertion hall. Gloomy, lit only by a few distant lamps. There was a faint echo from the rattle of the stretcher wheels on the steel floor. It was cold and there was a slight smell of ozone.

I climbed off the stretcher and was helped up into the Cage. My Helmet cable was plugged in, the Cage grill was slammed down and I sat there shivering. With a sudden whine the Cage rose into the air. I watched the two medical orderlies pushing the stretcher across the floor ten below and disappearing through a door. The door closed behind them.

I looked down at the illuminated window of the Mission control room, but could see nobody. I looked at the viewing gallery but no one was there either. Not very friendly, I had expected at least Jim and Sara to be there to wave me off.

A faint voice in the earphones. I turned up the volume. An unknown voice, going through the usual pre-Insertion routine.

'Where's Pete?' I asked petulantly.

'He's sick today,' said the voice. 'Relax.'

What the hell. Pete had always supervised my Insertions so far and what was the bloody rush anyway? And no one to see me off. Was I starting to behave like a prima donna?

Another whine and the large discharge spheres took up position on each side of me, each about five meters away. I glanced nervously at the Cage door to make sure it was properly closed. Cage meant "Faraday Cage" and if it wasn't closed properly the simulated lightning flash between the two discharge spheres would leak in and fry me.

It seemed that for someone who was being sent off to make contact with Aliens, I had not been particularly well briefed. Is this the way the Ambassador, the Representative of the Whole Human Race, finally makes contact with an Extra-terrestrial Intelligence from Beyond the Stars? What the hell was I to say to them? And why had the Whole Human Race chosen me?

And another thing ... My thoughts were interrupted by the rapidly increasing drone of the electro-narcosis and then I had the familiar impression of moving fast. The white ten-year markers were going past in a blur, then a yellow Century Marker, more white blur but slowing down. Now another yellow Marker and the white markers just flipping past slower and slower. A feminine voice "prepare to turn", the green Marker, and there it was, a complex shape. I drifted up and "Merged".

*

My Host was standing under a tree looking at a distant view of rolling hills. It was a bright winter's day and there was snow on the ground. His eyes were just slowly moving around the landscape, looking down the valley to a little bridge crossing a frozen stream, then up the side of the hill to some small cottages with smoke coming from their chimneys.

I just passively followed his eyes, like looking at a holo. He was breathing regularly, seemed calm, and apparently not disturbed by my arrival.

He had good eyesight, the detail on those cottages was very sharp. I could see someone open a door and collect wood from a big pile outside - and the distance must be at least three hundred meters.

The data from his ears was difficult to judge as the frozen countryside was very quiet. All I could hear was the squeaking of the snow under his feet as he shifted his weight. And then the raucous caw of a rook down in the valley, echoing from the bare tree trunks - a desolate sound.

Stereo effect present so ears OK too.

I gradually started to sample the rest of the available data. Two arms, two legs but a finger missing on the left hand. He was warm, glowing in fact, so he must have just been doing some exercise. He seemed in good health; I could detect no pain signals from any part of his body.

He now slowly turned round and I was looking at the path he had taken to climb up here. He was at the top of a ridge about a hundred and fifty meters high and down in the valley behind him I could see a smoke plume that probably came from a steam train. He glanced at the ground and I could see the snow on gorse bushes and his footprints.

Now I tuned in to his thoughts.

Not much except a feeling of contentment at having reached the top of the ridge, at getting out of London for the weekend, of anticipation of what he was going to do tomorrow.

So far so good. The "Observer" had made a text-book "Merge" into the "Host".

But now I must find out if he actually was Alexander Salisbury. Mission Control place you as near as they can to your Host and ensure that he is alone when you arrive, but of course the actual final approach and Merge can only be done by the Observer himself. I thought back - there had been no one else in sight; it had to be him.

Well, now we had to see if I could Empathise with him. My score with other Subjects was so far two out of two, but no one knew if it was possible to Empathise with any Host. Common sense said "no". And even assuming I could Empathise with Alex, I was still going to have the job of finding these Aliens. It struck me once again that my briefing at Chrondisp had been rather off-hand. How should I go about it? It was a pity I couldn't just ask him directly, something like "I say Alex, I'm looking for some Visitors from the Stars, have you seen any recently?".

'That's a pretty fanciful idea,' he said.

Surprise!

'It's not a new idea of course,' he continued 'Jules Verne writes some fascinating stories on the subject. But he seems to think the planets are more likely as the stars are probably too far away.'

'How about the moon?' I suggested, recovering.

'Rather unlikely. There's no air there. They say it's dead.'

Excellent! I was able to Empathise with Alex and he was also interested in astronomy. The whole project began to look a little more feasible.

But now I would keep quiet. Empathising is like having a conversation with the Host and you can't have much of a conversation with anyone until you know them a bit. I decided to just watch for a while.

Reaching the top of the ridge appeared to be the object of the walk as he now turned and strode down the way he had come. The path opened out and became a narrow road covered with snow and marked with horses' hooves and the narrow tracks of cart-wheels. He was entering a small town, passing some rather poorly constructed houses on the outskirts. He looked at them with contempt.

'They shouldn't be allowed to desecrate the countryside with such rubbish. Speculative builders! In ten years it'll be a slum.'

There were hoardings carrying advertising, garish and unsophisticated to my 21st Century eyes "Warren's Shoe Blacking for a Smart Appearance", "Rowland's Macassar Oil makes your hair shine - buy it now!"

The quality of the houses increased as we entered the town, neat brownstone mansions or rows of solid-looking brick-built terraced houses. I looked in horror at the thick evil-smelling smoke from burning coal pouring out of their massed chimneys. Free burning in the atmosphere of anything, never mind coal, had been banned in Europe for more than fifty years in my time. But it didn't seem to bother my Host.

We passed a small church with the congregation just coming out, well wrapped up against the cold. Some of them looked disapprovingly at Alex but he ignored them.

'Superstitious peasants,' he said, entering the porch of a small near-by hotel and knocking the snow off his boots. He was a "free-thinker".

His key was handed to him by a small slim girl of about eighteen

'Mr. Salisbury,' she said with a slight smile. He took the key, grinning at her, climbed the stairs and entered his room.

'Pretty girl,' I remarked.

'Yes,' he said bitterly 'But to my family a "Commoner". I can have her as a mistress if she would accept it, but anything else is out.'

He packed his bag and descended the stairs looking at a watch attached to a chain which he pulled out of his pocket. His bill, which I could now see was for the weekend, was handed him by the girl. It was for two pounds four shillings and three pence and was written with ink.

After checking the addition carefully he calculated ten percent at four shillings and five pence and added it on. It came to two pounds, eight shillings and eight pence. I watched with admiration, remembering there were twelve pence in a shilling and twenty shillings in a pound. Not many people would be able to do that in my day without a pocket calculator.

He paid with some coins, and smiled goodbye.

'Is that expensive?,' I asked.

'Not for me,' he said shortly.

'But for a "Commoner"?' I asked. Was he some sort of aristocrat? Another item omitted from my Chronodisp briefing.

'Say three times the average day's salary of a working man. But it's a lot more expensive in London. Why, only the other day we had to take a client to lunch in a hotel and ...'

I tuned him out as I had only wanted to know if the Translator was working.

The Translator was a useful device that you got automatically when you were inserted into a Host. Basically, you understand his thoughts. In France everyone was speaking French or Breton but as my Host had understood them, I had understood too. But it had been frustrating when he was talking to Englishmen. He hadn't been able to understand what they were saying, so neither had I. Here the Translator was working in a different fashion by giving me a sum of money as something I could relate to, an average salary in this case.

Other units like furlongs and ounces, which had not been used for a long time, would be simply translated into meters and grams.

As he walked down to the station swinging his bag, it struck me as being strange that a Brit should need a Translator in England. But the weird system of weights, measures and currency that they used then ...er...that is, now, wouldn't

be understood by any Brit of the early 21st Century unless he had specially studied it.

And not only the weights and measures. I had tried to read some of the literature of the period and had found its heavy jokiness, love of double negatives ("she had a not unpleasing countenance") and just general out-of-datedness very heavy going.

And then I suppose the fact that there was no national holo service, or even radio, meant that the regional accents had been allowed to develop wildly, probably to such an extent that people from distant parts of the country couldn't understand each another. I imagined Alex Salisbury must have an accent too but it couldn't be very strong as the girl receptionist had understood him all right.

And here we were at the Railway Station. Several well-dressed people were standing around, the men quite often consulting watches like Alex's. I remembered that the building of the railways had made Europe suddenly very conscious of time. Before the arrival of the railways only rich time-freaks had watches. Sun time was good enough. But now you could miss the train if you didn't have the exact time. And it was no good going by the sun (if you could see it in England) as the sun time varies about twenty minutes across England. "Railway Time" it was called - a new concept for most people.

The train was now arriving, its smoke plume visible from far across the valley as it gradually approached. Finally it pulled into the station with an impressive squealing of brakes, hissing, and enormous clouds of steam due to the cold weather. Alex loved it and waited until the last moment before climbing aboard. As he climbed through the door I noticed he had to duck a little. Height about 1.80m, I estimated.

He looked out of the window as the guard, who after consulting a large watch, blew a whistle and waved a green flag. With more impressive chuffings, clouds of smoke and steam we pulled out of the station. The men in the carriage snapped their watches shut.

There were two couples in the coach with us, the men wearing top-hats which they had carefully put on racks above them. They spoke quietly to their companions but not amongst themselves, and Alex did not try to strike up a conversation. One of the women was knitting, the other reading a book. The woman knitting looked up at Alex once or twice under her eyelashes but he took no notice. One of the men dozed and the other had a railway timetable open on his knee and was checking the times as we went through the various stations.

I had noticed there were 1st, 2nd and 3rd class coaches on the train. We were in 1st class. It was quite elaborately furnished. Green velvet upholstery and green velvet curtains on the windows looped back and lined with little black bobbles which danced with the motion of the coach. There was a heavy cut-glass mirror mounted above one of the seats and some photographs of country scenes above the other. Hanging from the ceiling was an oil-lamp, its chimney fitted with a little green velvet shade. As the sun was shining into the carriage it was not needed.

We were rattling northwards towards London. Alex was just looking out of the window, not thinking of much and apparently familiar with the journey. I saw some of the station names, but they didn't mean anything to me, as I really didn't know the south of England very well. The countryside looked quite unspoilt, just farm after farm, empty fields under dazzling white snow, hedgerows and pollarded trees. Now and then a small hamlet, the smoke from its chimneys rising straight into the air.

Victorian England. Population 27 million. Economically booming. Textile manufacturers in the North making fortunes. Potato blight in Ireland had caused a million deaths and two million to emigrate, mostly to the US. Queen Victoria fifteen years on the throne. The amazing Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park just closed. Europe at peace since the Battle of Waterloo thirty-seven years ago and because of the terrible casualties would remain at peace for another eighteen. Science and technology advancing by leaps and bounds. Authors writing like crazy.

One couple got off and two men got on in their place. They just read newspapers.

The stations were getting more and more frequent now and the towns larger. Finally we pulled into a large glass-roofed railway station, the roof supported on high cast-iron pillars.

We had arrived in Waterloo railway station.

Chapter 22

Alex walked up to the head of the platform and hailed a cab. The cabby looked at him then with a respectful smile jumped down from his perch to open the door and help him in. He must be well dressed to make an impression like that.

It was a late Sunday afternoon and as we crossed over a river that must be the Thames, London looked pretty deserted. There were the dirty remains of snow and a cold wind was blowing a piece of newspaper along the pavement.

We rattled along the almost empty streets for about twenty minutes as I examined the interesting construction of the taxi-cab. The cabby sat on a high seat behind the coach, his reins passing over the roof of the coach. At his feet was a little flap which communicated with the passengers inside the coach.

Finally we drove across a square and arrived at a block of flats in Ashland Place. The cabby jumped down, opened the door and took his cloth cap off while Alex passed him some money. It must have been up to expectations, judging by his smile.

Alex athletically ran up the steps leading to one of the doors, opening it with a key. As he passed in he ran his hand caressingly over the well-polished brass sign which was fixed to the wall outside:

"Salisbury and Ferguson - Investigations".

'My own,' he said, contentedly.

He mounted to his rooms over the offices. I was right with him as he potted around his well-furnished but untidy rooms. Of course, I could only look where he looked but he did seem to have a lot of junk around - fencing foils, a pair of oars mounted on the wall, boxing gloves, a microscope and lots and lots of books. I liked it. It reminded me of my apartment in Munich.

He had some letters to write, one in particular to his father and he took a long time over it. It appeared his father was Lord Salisbury and he was the youngest son. All his brothers had made successful careers and "when was he going to stop fooling around and settle down?" There was some high-born Lady who would be a "perfect match" for him, but she couldn't wait for ever. It was a familiar theme and he sighed as he picked up his pen.

Chewing it the end of it, he looked into the distance and thought about his Detective Agency. He had met Ian Ferguson five years ago and they had formed an instant friendship, even though he was just a "Commoner" and an ex-policeman at that. They had started with some cases the Dundee police had been unable to

solve and then had moved to London where one of Alex's relations had put an interesting and very delicate case in their hands. Ian's solid industry and knowledge of police methods exactly complemented Alex's energetic, erratic brilliance. Ian had contacts with the police and Alex with the ruling classes. Between them they were getting quite a reputation for discrete investigations.

And not to forget Mrs Brown, or Ada. A well-off widow with two children, they had met her in connection with an early case where she had been able to help them with her word-perfect memory of a lost legal document. Her children were now grown up, and living alone in the country is not very amusing for an intelligent woman. She was more than willing to come and live in London again, working with Alex and Ian as a sort of combined secretary and living filing cabinet. She had only to look at a document once and it was memorised for ever. Her ability had more than once helped the pair to solve a difficult case.

Yes, it was great and for once something he had done himself, on his own merit. But the problem was, for how long? Every time he saw his mother he was reminded about his "family duties". "He had had his fun, and God knows it had been eccentric, but now was the time ..."

I left him puzzling over his letter, how to say again politely, and in some original way, that he wanted to stay as he was.

I Withdrew.

Chapter 23

When I entered Alex again it was morning and he had washed and dressed. The sun was shining through the windows onto a table where a servant was laying out his breakfast.

'Thank you, Barton,' he said and sat down to eat. By the side of the breakfast tray was a copy of the Times newspaper and he propped it up on the marmalade pot to read. He had skipped through the political section and was apparently much more interested in a technical article describing how someone in France had measured the speed of light. Alex had always thought that the speed of light was infinite (in a sense he is right, I thought cleverly, having had the advantage of a scientific education 170 years in the future).

He finished his breakfast; eggs, bacon, toast and marmalade - almost identical to the one I cooked myself every morning in Munich. It was comforting to see how long a good idea could last. The soft chimes of a clock in the corner of his room roused him from his contemplation of Monsieur Fizeau's mirrors and whirling disk.

He finished his dressing and descended the stairs to the suite of offices below. A woman smoothly well-dressed in black and violet was sitting at a desk and opening letters. "Widow's weeds" I knew these sombre clothes were called, and signified her mourning state.

She looked up as he opened the door, and smiled at him. He knew Ada Brown was forty-three, and not for the first time wondered why she had not remarried but elected to give up all the advantages she would have as an attractive bride, to work in what was essentially a man's world. One of the reasons was probably that when they were talking together over a case he would forget that she was a woman.

He wanted to ask her some questions about the incoming post but at that moment the front doorbell rang.

There were some steps outside as Barton mounted from the basement to open the front door and a few seconds later Ian Ferguson entered, the third member of the Bureau.

A typical tall, red-faced, raw-boned Scot. About 1.90m, broad shouldered, and still wearing the regulation-type boots on his large feet. He took off his top hat revealing himself as almost bald, and handed his top-coat and cane to Barton.

He greeted Ada courteously and Alex respectfully.

There was some small-talk about the week-end activities and the continuing cold weather. Ada picked up a pile of folders, bound with red-tape, and moved into the room next door. The others followed and I saw it had been fitted up as a sort of consulting room with red-brocade wall covering, heavy red velvet curtains, leather-bound chairs and a low table. She put the folders down on the table, and the other two sat down. There was a discreet tap on the door and a woman wearing a long dark-blue dress and a sort of small white hat entered with a tray holding a silver tea set. Presumably Mrs Barton. Ada thanked her and she put it down on the table. She left and Ada poured out tea for the two men and herself.

The Monday morning meeting had begun.

Ada had a book open in front of her and started talking, without looking at the book. Apparently reading out the minutes of the last meeting. There were references to various people and cases, to someone who had not paid for "services rendered" and someone else who was going to sue the Bureau if they didn't recant something.

This seemed to cause general amusement, even the impassive Ada smiling faintly.

Ian then described the progress on the two cases she was working on, a "lost person" and a blackmail attempt. In both cases the watchword was "discretion" which was why they hadn't gone to the police. Sipping his tea Alex watched Ian's animated face and his expressive hands as he described how he was going about getting hold, quite illegally, of the blackmail letters. The Scots accent was coming over strongly.

Alex was very pleased at the way things were going, they were the sort of black and white cases Ian was best at and he was glad to leave such routine work to him. I noted the crafty look in Ian's eyes as he described how he had blackmailed some old lag to do the break-in to steal the letters and thought, not for the first time, how fine the line is between the policeman and the criminal. Society fighting fire with fire.

Then we moved on to "new business" and Ada put her hand on the heap of opened letters.

'There are two possibilities,' she said. She selected one letter, pushed it forward and said:

'It's from Lady Bonnors. She says it's highly confidential and she requests an interview as soon as convenient.' She looked at the clock. 'I've arranged for her to come round this morning at eleven.'

Lady Bonnors! Alex was surprised. Lady Bonnors was a famous beauty, married to young and successful Lord Bonnors who had made an enormous fortune by buying up some mills in Birmingham and then combining them. Alex knew all about him as he had often been held up to him as an example of what he should be doing. It was hard to see what his wife could have on her mind.

Ian expressed satisfaction that the Bureau was attracting such distinguished custom, and Ada selected another letter.

`It's rather an odd one, and normally I would have refused it. But I haven't answered it yet as I know of your interest in scientific matters.' She was looking at Alex.

`It's from the brother of a man who died in an electrical accident. He says it wasn't an accident but his brother was murdered for the sake of his invention.'

She selected some newspaper cuttings.

`It was reported last week. The "Times" says the police found it was an unfortunate accident. The Clarion has a longer write-up about how the man was a strange secretive character who claimed to have made a world-shaking invention. There are stories of strange blue lights flickering in his windows at night and how no one would go near. The way it's written you would think he was concluding a pact with the Devil.'

She turned back to the letter.

`The brother wants to see you at your earliest convenience.'

`"World-shaking invention",' snorted Ian. `Another crank, more likely. The country is full of them these days.'

True, I suppose. The world was breaking into a new technological era where someone had just found that he could mix three well-known products together in his kitchen - sulphuric acid, nitric acid and glycerine - and produce one of the most powerful explosives known to man. Of course nitro-glycerine was also very sensitive and his neighbours might well have cause for complaint if he had an unsteady hand ...

Alex was reading the letter, dated the 27th of January,

`Dear Mr Salisbury and Mr Ferguson,

You will have read of the recent demise of my brother Joseph who was found electrocuted in his private workshop last week. My brother was an employee of the Hals and Jones Telegraph Wire Company and during his work there had discovered a method for making a telegraph without connecting wires. As the object of his research would be prejudicial to the economic future of his employer, he was obliged to continue his work secretly, in his lodgings. I have aided him on several occasions and am convinced that he was having success. I am also convinced that during the experiments we were observed by someone who guessed what we were doing and has foully murdered my brother and purloined the secret. I beg a few moments of your time during which I feel sure I will be able to convince you of the truth of my statements.

Your obt. servant,
Frederick Blum

He passed the letter to Ian who read it.

`It's well written,' he said grudgingly.

`I liked the bit about prejudicing the economic future of his employer. The invention of a wireless telegraph would put him instantly out of business,' said Alex.

I was disappointed. I expected that the two detectives would have scrutinised the writing, decided it had been written by a tall foreigner who was rather fond of himself but momentarily in poor financial straits. ("See this cross on the vertical of the figure 7, Watson, and the pressure at the top and bottom of the page is equal. A short man presses heavier at the bottom. And withall an educated hand, though florid, look at these tails on the letter y". "But the financial circumstances, Holmes?" Holmes held up the letter. "Observe this paper, the watermark betrays...")

And technically wrong. When wireless telegraphy, or radio, was finally invented (by Marconi in about 45 years time) it would be found that each radio set would require vast quantities of fine wire.

Alex turned to Ada.

`Yes, it looks interesting, but I would have to look into it myself. Let's first see what Lady Bonnors has to say.'

As if in reply to his remark, carriage wheels could be heard outside and the small clock in the corner started to chime the hour.

Ian rose hastily.

`Well I'll leave this one to you. I've work enough of my own.' He left.

Ada also rose to leave, but Alex motioned her to remain.

Chapter 24

The door to the consulting room opened and Barton showed in a fashionably-dressed and patrician-looking young lady of about twenty-five. She looked round with the arrogance of her beauty and Alex and Ada stood up.

While Barton took her coat and hung it in the corner, Alex introduced himself and Ada. Lady Bonnors looked coldly at Ada (I noticed Ada looked back equally coldly) and said:

`I understood this consultation was to be between us alone, without ...,' she moved her hand vaguely in the direction of Ada (the servant). `It is very confidential.'

`Mrs Brown is an active member of the Bureau and you can speak before her as you would with me,' said Alex.

Lady Bonnors sat down rather ungraciously. She smoothed her dress and fiddled with the clasp of her hand-bag.

`Our Bureau has had occasion to help many people in all walks of life,' began Alex, to help her. `And it is usually obvious that they need help. But you, Lady Bonnors, it is difficult for me to imagine how we could possibly be of assistance to you. Young, beautiful, married for ...' He looked across at Ada who held up three fingers, `... for three years to one of the richest men in the Kingdom for his age.'

Lady Bonnors took a deep breath and snapped her handbag shut.

`And that's it, Mr Salisbury. The world thinks we are the perfect pair, and so we were until a month ago. He returned one evening from a meeting withdrawn and preoccupied and has remained so since.'

`Can you tell us anything about this meeting?'

`Not really. He belongs to various clubs and he usually visits one of them at least once a week. I think he said that that night he was going out to hear some

new musician. He is very interested in music - we met the first time at the Opera, in fact.'

'And your personal relations with your husband?'

'I love him and I am convinced he loves me, but something has changed; he looks at me so strangely, some-times so despairingly, touching my cheek.' She put her hand up to her face.

'Is there anything else you can tell, any other way he has changed?'

'Yes. When first we married he was the most generous and open-hearted man you could imagine. Often he would bring me presents, for no reason, and the money set aside for running our house and my own personal dress-allowance was liberal in the extreme.'

'And since that fateful day he has become less "liberal"?' said Alex.

'Like the difference between night and day. We have got rid of five servants and two coaches. He scrutinises all the household accounts and has even made some oblique references to my own scale of expenditure.'

'But what of his affairs in Birmingham. Do they not bring in adequate funds?'

'He visits Birmingham no more. He has completely lost interest. I even saw papers on his desk the other day relating to the sale of part of the business.'

Alex stood up and walked slowly around the room. He had the same thoughts as I.

'Lady Bonnors,' he said gravely 'It needs no great imagination on my part to suspect that the cause of your husband's distress is blackmail.'

'Blackmail!' she gasped. 'But what can he have done?' 'He is the nicest and most open-hearted man you could hope to meet. He wouldn't hurt a fly!'

I could see Alex had some internal reservations here. Open-heartedness and kindness to flies doesn't get you to the top in business. He coughed.

'Ah, if this were a more conventional case I would suspect the hand of a woman,' he suggested.

'You mean an "old flame" blackmailing him, threatening to "tell all"?' said Lady Bonnors.

'Yes,' said Alex.

'It may well have happened. But it would never have succeeded. When Lord Bonnors proposed marriage he admitted that before he met me he had had several liaisons with young ladies of doubtful morals. He swore that they were all over and that I was the only one he loved.'

'I bet she didn't admit she had had any liaisons before she met him,' I said.

'I'm sure she didn't have any,' replied Alex, slightly shocked.

There was a short pause.

'Then if it isn't another woman, there is only one way to discover the cause of Lord Bonnor's discomfiture,' said Alex. He shrugged his shoulders apologetically. 'He must be put under surveillance.'

'You must spy on him, you mean.'

'For his own good, Lady Bonnors. Now I must ask you some more questions.'

Alex then found that Lord Bonnors was conventionally religious and his hobbies were music and the theatre. He belonged to various clubs and she gave Alex a list. Alex then asked her some questions about Lord Bonnor's routines and habits.

'Why ever do you want to know those?' she asked annoyed.

'So that we can better effect our surveillance,' replied Alex.

'I'm sure you know your own methods best,' she said distastefully. 'But on one thing I insist - he must never know that I am involved with this "surveillance".' She stood up abruptly.

'Shall we then order one week's provisional surveillance?' said Ada, looking in a book. She mentioned a daily rate, no doubt in guineas or something, but to me it came out as three times an average working man's pay.

Lady Bonnors opened her handbag and thrust some notes at Ada who carefully turned them all up the same way and then counted them. She picked up a pen and wrote a receipt which Lady Bonnors contemptuously pushed to one side.

'One other thing,' said Alex. 'We will need some method by which we can contact you, if for any reason we need further information.'

She thought a moment.

'Then send me a note signed "Mrs Bellamy". She is one of my dressmakers and I often visit her. We can meet at the Golden Lion Coffee House. It is off Leicester Square.'

Alex rang for Barton who helped Lady Bonnors into her top coat and then showed her out.

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Alex and Ada sat down and looked at each other.

'You don't like her,' he commented.

'I don't like anyone who wastes her advantages,' replied Ada. 'There's plenty of useful things to do in London Town without "visiting one of her dressmakers".'

'And what were you doing in London Town when you were a beautiful young gel of twenty-five?' smiled Alex tolerantly, 'And she is beautiful,' he added reminiscently.

I was rather hoping this conversation would continue so I could see how the Translator would handle it. I imagined Ada contemptuously referring to Alex as a typical male with his head turned by every ... what? Would she say "by every well-turned ankle?" or "by every well-filled pair of jeans"?

In the event she said nothing, but her look at Alex needed no Translator anyway.

'Well, there does seem to be something going on and we can't do anything without more information. Who shall we put on it?' he asked.

Ada looked into the distance.

'Mr Rogers is probably the best,' she said finally. 'He presents well and Mr Ferguson should have finished with him by tomorrow. I will arrange it.'

And he knew she would.

Alex then rang for Barton and ordered some food to be brought up.

'Well, there doesn't seem to be anything more we can usefully do on the Bonnors Case for the moment,' he said. He went over to the table and picked up the letter from Mr Blum.

'I must say this looks interesting,' he said, waving the letter 'but no useful purpose could be gained by inviting him here. I must visit him, and the workshop where his brother died. Could you please send him a letter suggesting I call on him tomorrow afternoon in ...' he looked at the letter.

'In Woking,' said Ada, pulling a piece of paper forwards. She quickly wrote a note, put it in an envelope and sealed it. When Barton arrived a few minutes later with some cold cuts for them, she gave it to him to post.

Alex looked at his watch.

'Barton should catch the next post at one pm and Mr Blum should receive it at four o'clock. We should have an answer by tomorrow morning.'

The Monday Morning meeting was over.
I was amazed at the speed of the post.

Chapter 25

Well, so far so good. It was interesting to dip into the Victorian Period and see how a detective bureau worked, but I hadn't seen any signs of Aliens masquerading as Mediums yet. The case that Alex had just started on didn't seem very promising Alien-wise either. I was a little impatient to see some action but I couldn't see where I could profitably push for the moment, so I decided to just carry on passively observing.

That afternoon Alex decided he would do a bit of reading up on telegraphy as background for the Case of the Electrocuted Electrician. It was a cold clear day but warm enough in the sun, so he decided to walk to a nearby library. He walked along briskly, south to a main street - Oxford Street I noticed, and then east. There were a lot of slow-moving shoppers and he cursed them internally as he had to walk round them.

The crowds got thicker and thicker and at one point he actually knocked into a large bearded man who, head down, had been deep in conversation with a smaller blond man and had suddenly pulled up for some reason. He tottered on the edge of the kerb, almost under a cab horse until he was pulled back by his companion. The cab driver reined his horse back and cursed at him. The bearded man cursed back energetically in some guttural foreign language.

Alex impatiently stepped around them and continued on his way, 'Bloody foreign ape,' he snarled striding along. 'Since the Queen took up with that German, the whole damned town's been filled with Huns. Why she couldn't have found an English Consort passes comprehension. Parliament should have passed a law ...'

I could see that it was going to be a while before Britain joined the European Common Market.

In the meantime I watched the animated street scene as it flowed past. This was the centre of the world, the centre of an enormous empire and all the products and profits flowed back to England, and mainly to London. Well-dressed people were coming out of the shops with trains of shop assistants behind them carrying their paper-wrapped purchases which were then stowed in the waiting cabs. The faces swam past. There were some very poorly dressed people, mostly men, and mostly at the street corners, selling newspapers or trying to sell trinkets from little trays around their necks. It was noisy, the shouts of the street sellers, the jerky tune of a nearby barrel organ, the clatter of horses hooves and the ever-present roar of conversation from the densely crowded, slowly moving pedestrians, their feet making a continuous scuffle on the pavements.

Now and then a large horse pulled omnibus would grind past, covered with gaudy advertising for a wide variety of objects - tea, false teeth, table-ware.

We turned abruptly north into a quieter street, leaving the shops behind us. In front was a large imposing Greek-style building and I was just able to note the words "British Museum" in gold-painted letters on a notice-board as we went through a gate in the tall iron railings that surrounded it. Alex walked up the steps past the big tall pillars and silence descended. He carried confidently on towards "Library". He passed through a revolving glass door and then had to show a

card to a man sitting in a little glass cage before he was allowed into the "Reading Room".

Some of my friends have books, I have a few, and when I was young I remember being taken once to see a book library. But they were minute compared to this! We were in a big lofty hall lined with books as far as the eye could see. There was a balcony halfway up the wall to give access to yet more books. Through archways could be seen more rooms and more books. Each book-case had a gold painted sign above it indicating the contents - "Literature", "Science", "History", etc. There were long rows of desks down the middle where people were reading books, taking notes, writing. About a million books here I estimated. In my time all this would take up one or two cylinders of film memory. And with the new molecular memories just a fraction of a cubic centimeter.

Alex walked on a long carpet between the tables up to a desk at the end, where he asked an assistant (a young man with a terrible complexion and some badly-made false teeth) where he could find information on "Telegraphy". The man directed him through another arch to a smaller room. Here another young man pulled out a drawer filled with cards and riffled through it. He scribbled the titles down on a piece of paper and slid it across to Alex.

'These books are standard works on electricity. For more up-to-date information I suggest some of the journals of the Society of Electricians which you will find over there. For the most recent information you could try the Patent Office.'

Alex thanked him, pulled out some big leather-bound books and started reading. They were very well printed, with excellent line drawings of hands holding ebonite rods to pith balls. He flipped forward to where the same hands were now pouring liquid into jars whose rims had been covered with melted wax. Getting nearer. Now the hand was closing a switch which allowed current to flow through a coil of wire which deflected a magnetised needle. Better and better. But he had seen all this before and when he turned the page the hand was pouring mercury into a barometer tube. A new section. He closed the book and tried another but the treatment was the same: the books were just too theoretical. He got up, left the books on the table as he had been instructed (only library assistants were allowed to put books back; the public would mix them all up) and picked up a few Journals.

These were really too technical, dealing with: "An improved method of applying gutta percha to telegraph wires" or "A comparison of the different soldering alloys".

But at least there were no hands.

Now I knew of course, that you could transmit signals without connecting wires, but I only knew how to do it with the Army Satellite Command Link Set Mk. 7, which wasn't going to help much here.

'How about getting someone to help you,' I suggested.

'Yes, that's what I'm going to have to do. His name is Dr Phillip Jones and he's just around the corner.' He stood up and made his way towards the exit.

He was about to push his way through the revolving exit door when the couple we had seen in Oxford Street approached the door from the other side. The bearded one was pushing his way in when his blond companion directed a startled glance at Alex through the glass and tried to get in the door first. They inevitably jammed and then the bearded one got his coat stuck under the edge of the door. Unheard through the glass, they seemed to be talking to each other

excitedly. Finally the blond one pushed through and stood carefully watching Alex as the other fought his way out. As soon as he exited he started to expostulate with his companion.

'Silence, please,' hissed the attendant.

Alex just watched, slightly shaking his head.

Chapter 26

We then walked out of the Museum building into what appeared to be a college, judging by the number of young student-type people going in and out. Alex seemed to know where he was going as he walked down long crowded corridors. Finally he stopped outside a lecture theatre and looked in.

It had just emptied and a tall stooped figure was packing some papers into an old leather bag. Dr Jones's face lit up with pleasure as he saw Alex. He looked about thirty-five but his hair was prematurely grey.

'So you've finally taken my advice and are giving up sleuthing and going back to school,' he said.

'Not really. But after seeing some of your young students, I'm beginning to have second thoughts.'

'Not my students,' said Dr Jones regretfully. 'Any young ladies you saw were probably doing Art Appreciation or Romance Languages.'

They chatted on in this vein as I looked around. Wooden demonstration bench, sink with curved-over tap, some electrical equipment made from a black wood and fitted with large brass terminals. A long wooden pointer and equations on the blackboard written with white chalk.

He washed the chalk off his hands under the tap and took off his black gown.

Alex broached the subject of telegraphy and Dr Jones looked at his watch.

'I must have a beer first. Let's discuss it around the corner.'

He hung up his gown, picked up his leather bag and they left. The corridors were almost empty now.

Sitting in the saloon bar of the nearby pub, they both clinked glasses and Dr Jones asked what exactly did he want to know. Alex told him about the electrician who was supposed to have invented a telegraph without wires.

'Well, I suppose you know how a normal telegraph works,' began Dr Jones. 'The usual analogy for an electric current is water in a pipe and a battery is like a pump.' He was drawing with a pencil on the table top.

'Here's the battery, joined by two long pieces of wire to this little coil. And here's a switch, just by the battery. Every-time you close it a current flows out to the little coil and back - like water. But the difference is that when electricity flows through this coil it makes it behave like a magnet, with the North pole at this end and the South pole at the other.'

'Only so long as the current is flowing,' said Alex.

'Quite. Now if I put a magnetic compass here, near the coil, it will normally point north of course, but as soon as the current flows, the north pole of the compass will be attracted to the south pole of this coil-that-has-become-a-magnet. In other words it behaves like an electric current detector. Each time current flows out of the battery, through the coil and back to the battery the compass needle twitches.'

'So you can send messages by interrupting the electric current using the Morse code,' finished Alex.

'I thought you didn't know anything about telegraphy,' said Dr Jones.

'I know the basics. What I want to know is how you can do it without all this wire.' He touched the drawing.

'I can go half way,' offered Phillip. 'You can remove one of the wires and connect the two loose ends to metal plates which you bury in the ground. The telegraph will still work because the earth is a conductor. Providing it's damp.'

'No problem in England,' said Alex.

'No. In the desert it wouldn't work and you'd have to go back to this two wire system.'

'OK. But what I'm after is a completely wireless system,' said Alex.

'Aren't we all,' said Dr Jones. 'But before we can do that there's at least two problems. These wires really do two things, if you think about it. First they make sure all the current from the battery goes through the detector coil and is not wasted. Second they make sure all the current goes through this coil and not some other coil, belonging to someone else's telegraph. If you are going to make a telegraph without wires, you've got to make sure it still does those things.'

'So wireless telegraphy is not on,' said Alex.

'I didn't say that,' said Dr Jones. 'But if there is one it must work in a completely different way to this.' He tapped his table-top and looked into the distance.

'Like sending messages by covering and uncovering a lantern. The Navy do that a lot, but of course it only works at night and there has to be a straight line between the sender and the receiver. It'll never replace the telegraph. But ..' he shrugged his shoulders '...there's a Scotsman, what's his name?, Maxwell, who has been playing around with the equations for electric and magnetic force and he figures they can be combined. He calls them electro-magnetic waves.'

'Well, assuming he's right, how are these "waves" going to help us? Are we going to switch them off and on in the Morse code?'

'That would be one way,' said Dr Jones, 'but that's not the interesting point. Maxwell figures that ordinary light is made of electro-magnetic waves.'

'Great. But you just said that light was no good because it only worked at night and...'

'Let me finish. When you talk of waves you are immediately into wavelength - the distance between one crest and the next. Now from the way it behaves we know that light has a pretty damn short wavelength. It only bends a little bit around a corner. But the longer the wavelength the more it will bend or diffract around a corner. What Maxwell is saying is that there is a whole range of electro-magnetic waves of which light is just one small part.'

Very good. Dr Jones was certainly up to date in his subject.

'Has anyone found these long ..er..electro-magnetic waves?' asked Alex.

'No. Not yet. But the first step to finding something is to know that it's there. Just think, waves a hundred times, a thousand times longer than light. They'll go round corners everywhere. You'll be able to shine it right through a town, it'll go round all the corners.'

Well, they could be a lot longer than that, but he was going to have to wait another thirty-five years before Hertz actually produced them and a further eight years before Marconi started using them.

'But isn't this ..er... long-wave light going to spread out all over the place? How are you going to concentrate it all into your little coil detector?'

'We're going have to find something more sensitive than the coil-and-compass detector. Something as sensitive as the eye. And maybe we can focus these waves in the same way we focus light.'

‘And how are we going to distinguish one telegraph sender from the other? Won't they all get mixed up?’ asked Alex.

‘Oh, I suppose they'll do it by each sender using a different wavelength. Like someone today using blue light and another red light. Wear red spectacles and you'd only see the red light.’

‘So wireless telegraphy may be possible using these long waves, but no one can do it yet,’ summed up Alex.

‘That's about it,’ admitted Dr Jones.

Considering the small amount of real information that Dr Philip Brown could have had, that had been an excellent run-down on what was going to be called radio.

By this time the pub was getting very noisy. Lots of people had come into the Saloon Bar and from the Public Bar next door was coming a roar of conversation with occasional singing to the music of a barrel organ.

They decided to go out and eat and Alex insisted on taking him to his club.

Chapter 27

The next morning Ada told him a reply had been received from Mr Blum and he would be available to see Alex that evening.

So in the late afternoon Alex took a cab to Waterloo railway station and was on the 6:32pm to Woking. The station was crowded with office workers returning to the suburbs. London already had a commuter problem.

It was dark and freezing cold when he arrived at Woking and he was the only one who got off the train. It was easy to locate Mr Frederick Blum as he was standing under the bright lights of the station. He was a medium-sized man about forty-five, dark hair and looked rather Jewish. They shook hands.

‘It's a terrible affair,’ he told Alex. ‘I'm convinced someone wished Joseph's death and has done it in some subtle way that the police cannot discover. They know nothing of electricity and would have to call in experts from London.’ He had a slight German accent.

‘I was even given the impression that it was my brother's fault as he should not be playing with such things,’ he continued. ‘He should leave them to scientists. English scientists.’ He smiled the Jew's bitter smile.

In reply to Alex's questions he revealed that he and his brother had only been over in England for five years, as life had become too difficult for them in Germany.

As the house where Joseph had lived was only a short distance away, Frederick suggested they walk.

They arrived in front of a small house and Frederick opened the door with a key. It was cold inside. We went straight through the house to a small shed in the back-garden.

‘This is where my brother Joseph met his death,’ he said, opening the door and lighting an oil lamp.

Through Alex's eyes I looked round interestedly. There was a rather ramshackle bench on which was mounted a well-made spark-coil. Capable of making five centimeter sparks if you could judge by the size of the spark gap. Under the bench were lots of jam-jars, filled with some liquid and each containing a white porcelain cylinder and a metal rod. Leclanché cells - the power supply for the spark-coil.

In response to Alex's questions Frederick said that they had been sending signals to Dingle Hill.

'It's about three kilometers away and you can just see it from this window.' He pointed to the hut's window. 'Joseph and I used to walk out to the hill during the late afternoon and he would set up what he called the "influence collector". It would be connected to a box he called the "sound converter". I would then wait on the hill with a lantern.'

'When it got dark Joseph would try to send me "influence signals". I would listen to the sound converter and if I heard anything I would flash the lamp in a code we used, to tell him how strong the sound was. My wife Marta would often help him and she would watch for my signals and signal back if necessary.'

'Well, on the night he died, it was working very well and I was thinking we would have to see if it would work over a longer distance, when suddenly the signals stopped. I flashed the lamp and waited, for it was not unusual. But there were no answering flashes to tell me to wait so after a while I packed everything up and returned.'

'On the way back I passed my own house and stopped to leave the rather heavy warm clothing which I had been wearing. That night my wife had had a lot of cooking to do and was not helping my brother. I told her of the success we were having and suggested she accompany me to Joseph's house. She put on her coat and we walked here. We live just around the corner.'

'We could see a light on in the garden shed so we went straight there, along the side of the house. I opened the shed door and saw my brother. I called to him but he didn't move. His hand was on the influence generator and his face was contorted. I knew he was dead.'

'I tried to prevent my wife from entering but she pushed passed me and screamed. This brought out the neighbours and the police were sent for.'

'Could you show me how you found your brother's body?' asked Alex. Frederick complied. He knelt at the bench, his head leaning against it and one hand on one side of the spark gap.

It didn't look like any one would do that on purpose, but it could still be an accident.

'Why do you think it was murder?' asked Alex.

'Because someone else came here. Someone who pulled down the influence spreader wire and also stole the other sound converter that was here.' He pointed to the bench.

Perhaps it was murder at that. But murder for what? I had heard that early radios used a spark-coil as a transmitter and there was a spark-coil here, but that wasn't proof that the Blums had invented radio.

'It would be nice to know what he actually heard from the sound converter when they were testing,' I suggested to Alex.

'It was a sort of buzzing sound. Like the noise this spark makes, only fainter,' replied Frederick to Alex's question.

Stap me! That sounded right. And over three kilometers! It looked like the Blum brothers really had invented radio. Maybe someone has seen them doing it and had determined to steal it.

'What would you do if you wanted to steal it?' I asked Alex.

'Right. Reconstruction of the Crime,' he said, taking the oil lamp and stepping out of the hut. He imagined himself creeping up to the hut at night, looking into the window to see if Joseph was there. He glanced down at the hard-frozen ground beneath the window and had a thought.

`Has it been freezing for long?' Alex asked Frederick, who said that it had started to freeze the night of Joseph's death.

`So all these footprints were made just before the discovery of the body,' I said. `The police may have trampled all over but they haven't disturbed them.'

He waved the lamp around.

`Yes. Two footprints, and together. And deep, as though he had been standing there for some time.'

He turned to Frederick and asked him if he had any plaster of Paris so he could make a cast of the footprints. Frederick said "yes" and disappeared into the house.

`And now you creep up to the door,' I prompted.

He opened the door to the hut and brought his hand back to strike an imaginary Joseph, bending over the bench.

`There's not much room to take a swing here,' I observed.

`Unless I'm left-handed,' he said.

Good. He was right. A left-hander would have no trouble.

`And then I put his hand on the spark-coil and press on the key here to give him a good shot of electricity to kill him. Pick up the sound converter thing and scarper,' he finished.

He thought a moment.

`I don't see why he didn't take the spark-coil too. It's no good stealing the receiver unless you have the transmitter too.'

`Too heavy, perhaps,' I suggested `And after all, any spark coil will work as a transmitter.'

And now I understood why the thief had pulled down the transmitter antenna wire - he had wanted to see where it went to and how long it was.

Frederick had returned with some white powder and some water. They mixed the two together into a paste and poured it into the footprints under the window and into samples of other prints seen on the path. While waiting for the casts to set they returned to the hut and Alex continued his examination.

He shone his lantern down on the floor. It was wooden but there was a white rimed patch where Joseph's feet would have been. Spill from the Leclanché cells which had since dried up.

The casts had now set. Alex carefully lifted them out and wrapped them up in newspaper.

`And what happened to the sound converter you were using on the hill?' asked Alex.

`Oh, I've still got that at home.'

Alex looked at his watch. It was 9:30pm.

`I suggest you hide that away carefully. I must think about this and visit the police too. I will contact you again later.'

He bade Frederick goodbye.

He decided to stay the night in Woking and remembered there was a hotel near the station. On the way back I thought it a good idea to do a little resumé.

`First,' I began `Dr Jones thinks wireless telegraphy may be possible. Second, I think these Blum brothers have discovered it. And third, for my money. Joseph was knocked off for the secret, and his death made to look like an accident. Although we've got to check up with the police on that.'

`How can we be so sure they have discovered wireless telegraphy?' said Alex.

This was a difficult question to answer without revealing special knowledge. The business-like way they were testing it perhaps.

'Well, all that stuff with lights. It would be a good practical and cheap way to test it. And they'd been doing it on a routine basis. Calmly, you know, no one shouting "Eureka", 'I said. 'And if it is possible, someone's got to discover it sometime.'

'Hm, pretty amazing if they have, working in a back-yard like that,' he said doubtfully.

Pause.

He continued.

'And why does he think Joseph was murdered? All that high voltage around and his brother telling him it's working well. He could easily have got excited and kicked over one of those batteries and stuck his foot in the liquid and his hand on the spark-gap. In the dark, too.'

'Working better,' I suggested. 'He'd already got over the excitement of it working at all. Remember they were working out to three kilometers already, which was pretty fantastic. And what about that sound converter thing that Frederick reckons was missing? And last, when you kick over a battery the liquid would tend to spill away from your foot, not towards it.'

'Depends how full it was,' he said. 'But maybe you've got a point. It would be interesting to see if we could repeat his work. If Frederick will show/help us.'

'We'll have another look round tomorrow when it's light, and we've got to see the cops anyway.'

By this time he had reached the Station Hotel. He booked a room, had some food sent up and turned in.

Chapter 28

The next day Alex went round to the local police station and asked to see the detective in charge of the Blum case. He gave the sergeant at the desk his card and the sergeant knocked on a door and entered an office with "Chief Inspector" painted on it.

A few minutes later a large red-faced man looking like a prosperous farmer appeared, holding Alex's card.

'Chief Inspector Dowly,' he said 'What can interest a London detective bureau in this part of the country. We need no one here creeping around hotel bedrooms.'

Alex patiently explained that their Bureau did not handle divorce cases and quoted a few of the cases they had been involved in. The Inspector looked at the card again.

'This "I. Ferguson", was he in the police?' he asked.

'Yes, he was for a long time with the Dundee police. He is a very competent man and ...'

The Inspector's expression cleared.

'I have heard of him. He wrote a series of very interesting articles on the criminal mind. I'd like to meet him if he ever has occasion to come this way.'

He lifted up the flap of the desk and invited Alex into his office. A constable brought in two mugs of tea.

'Now Mr Salisbury... Mr Salisbury?...are you by any chance related to Lord ...?'

'He's my father,' said Alex, annoyed at the Inspector's perspicacity. 'But he has absolutely nothing to do with the Bureau. In fact...'

The Inspector looked at him understandingly. Perhaps he also was the youngest of a big family and had felt the need to do something on his own. He put the card to one side.

'How can I help you?' he asked.

Alex then showed the letter he had received from Frederick Blum and explained that he had already talked with him.

'Yes,' said the Inspector, 'it was an odd case, and I know the brother was dissatisfied with our findings. But we couldn't find any motive for the crime, if crime it was. By all accounts Joseph, the one who died, was a rather eccentric character, but his late employer said he knew his job - if he would only keep at it. Apparently he was always day-dreaming.'

'Frederick says he was murdered for his invention.'

'What invention?' said the Inspector sceptically. 'Everyone is trying to make a telegraph without wires. Do you think that Joseph Blum in his garden shed has succeeded where our most famous scientists in their well-equipped laboratories have failed?'

(Ah, the number of things that could have been invented or discovered centuries ago, if only someone had looked in the right direction. Flying, or a least gliding, for instance. Stretch a piece of cloth over some pieces of wood and you have a hang-glider. Put a keel on a sailing boat and you can sail almost against the wind. Opens new worlds. And here radio - it had been within the technology for fifty years at least. What was waiting just around the corner in my time? Something so obvious and astonishing that everyone in our future would wonder why we hadn't discovered it long ago).

'And if he had invented one, why didn't he patent it?' continued the Inspector 'We've searched the patent-office files, and he hasn't.'

That was a good point, I thought. This Inspector has imagination.

'But his brother says he took part in tests where it worked up to three kilometers,' said Alex.

'You must remember that Frederick has none of the technical knowledge of his brother. He and his wife run a small draper's shop here. They are both decent respectable people, and I'm sure he thinks that what he tells you is the truth...' he left the sentence unfinished.

'So you have no objection to my poking around a bit?' said Alex.

'None at all,' said the Inspector. He reached out to a bookcase and selected a file.

'Here, you can see the medical report. "Death through Electrification".' He looked a little apologetic. 'I don't think our Dr Soames had ever seen anyone who had died that way before.'

But he had nevertheless been thorough. Alex read the report through carefully. It was as Frederick had described, except for one curious point - a wet patch on the back of the collar of the corpse.

'This wet patch,' said Alex, looking up from the report.

'It had been raining before the temperature dropped that night. We have to note everything.'

Alex thanked him and promised to keep him informed if he discovered anything new.

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He left the police station and returned to his hotel.

`Not much help there,' I said.

`No, but I had to see them. And if I do find out anything I'm sure they'll support me. That wet patch, though. He could have been knocked out with a sock filled with wet sand ...' he said pensively.

`Lucky he knew of Mr Ferguson,' I said.

`Yes. "The Criminal Mind" has been widely read in police circles. It is held to be very perceptive.'

No doubt because it was written by someone with a criminal mind, I thought sourly. It was one of my theories that the law breaker and the law enforcer are but two sides of the same coin.

`Well, I think his brother was right and that Joseph was murdered,' said Alex. `We have the foot prints of his murderer and know he was left-handed. And I suppose the motive was to steal the wireless telegraph,' he said. `Although I'm far from convinced that that works,' he added.

`It's still a motive, provided that the murderer thought it worked at the time he killed Joseph,' I pointed out.

`True. But I'm damned if I know what to do about it. There's not much mileage in finding the murderer of a Jewish immigrant. It's going to cost an arm and a leg and who's going to pay? Not Frederick ...'

Muttering to himself he was changing for dinner and I was watching with amazement the number of buttons he had to fasten and unfasten. His boots were the worst. They were high and had about ten buttons down the side. To help him he had a little tool, a button-hook, which he used to pull the buttons through their eyelets. Then a stiff shirt to be pulled on and buttoned. And finally a cravat to be tied. He performed these operations himself quite competently even though his

servant Barton usually did them for him. But it still took the best part of an hour. He thought nothing of it - a gentleman had to dress for dinner in this way.

He then went down to the hotel dining room. As he walked along the thickly carpeted corridor he could hear the faint strains of music and smell food. The dining room itself was very elaborately furnished with chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling, potted palms between the tables and a four-piece string orchestra playing on a small dais.

To me all the diners looked very correctly dressed in dark suits with white collars but it was very interesting the way Alex's eyes moved around noticing and usually condemning slight variations - a cravat that looked unusually neat meant it had just been clipped on and not tied by hand. A shiny white shirt front in particular excited his contempt.

`Looks OK to me,' I observed mildly.

`It's celluloid,' he said. `Look how it shines. If he lets it near a candle flame he'll go up like a firework.'

I thought it rather practical - much easier to keep clean than Alex's starched and ironed shirt which could only be worn once.

He sat down as far as he could from the celluloid shirt, perhaps thinking of the fire hazard.

The waiter service was very similar to that I had seen in my last Insertion in 19th Century France - very elaborate. Three waiters to serve each course. One to place the plate and service before him, another to push the little trolley carrying the food and another to actually transfer the food from the trolley to his plate. Not forgetting the fourth waiter who had a chain round his neck with a big key on it, and served the wine. A lot different from my time where you just touched a screen

set in the table and the food arrived through a serving hatch. I would have been embarrassed with so many people around me, but Alex took it all calmly, absently sipping his wine as the waiters reached deftly around him.

He was quite hungry and ate rapidly, glancing at a newspaper open on the table beside him. Waiters appeared regularly, changing the plates and topping up his wine glass. One or two couples were decorously dancing and there was a general clatter of eating and the buzz of conversation. He waved away the menu for a dessert, feeling tired, and called for his bill which he signed without looking at. He rose from his chair and made for the staircase to his room.

'God, I'm tired,' he said. 'Must have been all that cold air.'

The trout, pheasant, omelette and pork chops may have had to something to do with it too, I thought. As well as two bottles of wine.

'Did I have two bottles of wine?' he asked sleepily. He thought. 'I suppose so, though I don't remember ordering two. Ah, what the hell.'

He opened the door to his room and pushed it open, standing to one side. Then he entered, after looking up and down the corridor self-consciously.

'Why the devil did I do that?' he asked himself.

He turned up the gas lights and opened the window to breathe in the cold night air, but it didn't make him any less sleepy. He tugged off his cravat then closed the window and drew the heavy red velvet curtains across. He then sleepily tore off the rest of his clothes and let them drop on the floor, looking at them with surprise.

'God, I'm tired,' he said again, and flopped down on the bed in his underclothes, ignoring his purple silk pyjamas that the maid had laid out.

I Withdrew.

Chapter 29

I was puzzling over the non-appearance of Mediums and the consequent lack of leads to Aliens when I sensed that something was wrong with Alex.

He was lying on his back, mouth open and snoring loudly. But his pulse was all wrong. It was racing. His limbs were twitching and he was bathed in sweat. The reason seemed to be that he was having an odd sort of nightmare where a man in evening dress was putting a bottle on a table.

In the dream Alex's eyes were focussed on the man's boots which were brown. Then the man placed a bottle in the wine bucket and Alex stiffened hearing the sudden clatter of alarm bells. It seemed to be a replay of a scene in the dining room downstairs - a waiter bringing a new bottle of wine. I couldn't see anything strange about that but thought it would be a good idea to try and wake Alex.

I forced his eyes to open but could see nothing; the room was in complete darkness. He was breathing shallowly and that dream sequence was still running.

'Wake up!' I said. The dream faded but he was still asleep.

'Wake up!' I said again and made him move his hand so it struck his face. He groaned and swallowed.

Again and again I made him hit himself but he was reacting very slowly. What the hell was wrong with him? He seemed to have no energy, he was completely flaccid. I checked over his sensors. Nothing from his eyes, just the sound of his own stertorous breathing from his ears. From his nose ... that was it! A strong smell of coal gas! The room was full of coal gas!

I felt around his body. He had been breathing it for some time now and was very weak. He had very little energy left. He needed fresh air urgently.

Door or window? I searched back in his memory and found he had locked the door. There was very little feeling from his fingers; he would never be able to turn the key even if he got to the door.

So it had to be the window. He was awake now and groaning.

'God, what's the matter?' he said weakly 'I've got a filthy headache.'

'You've got to get to the window,' I said urgently 'Slide off the bed and crawl towards it.' Coal gas was slightly lighter than air.

Sluggishly he slid off the bed and collapsed onto the floor. Which direction to the window? The room was inky black.

'Crawl away from the bed,' I said.

'God, I feel terrible. I just want to lie down.'

'Move! You've got to get to the window. The room is full of gas - you must get to the fresh air!'

'Gas!' he said, and finally started crawling slowly away from the bed. But he had very little energy and it was fast leaving him.

'Faster!' I said, his legs were beginning to fail him, but we must be almost there.

'Reach out your hand.' He did so and to my relief I felt something as he touched the bottom of the heavy velvet curtain. Now this was it. He would only have one try. There was a catch on the window which had to be lifted. And then the window opened inwards, but not very much unless the curtains were drawn back.

'This is it,' I said. 'You must pull yourself up with the curtain and then push the window catch up. Ready?'

His head was swimming and I don't think he really understood me. I stood ready to take over as much as I could.

'Right - go!' He bent his knees under him and his other hand grasped the curtain, pulling on it. The curtain took the strain and he gradually rose. The movement of the curtain had now allowed a little illumination from the street light outside to seep into the room. He could see the window catch.

'Grab the catch!' I said. 'Now!' He made a sudden grasp and held it, his other hand on the curtain. But his eyes were dimming now and there was a roaring thumping sound in his ears.

This was it. He was hanging from the catch with one hand and the curtain with the other. He could feel nothing from his knees.

'You must make one last effort! Push with your knees and pull with your left hand when I say. Keep your right arm stiff to push the catch up.'

I checked around his body. His head was drooping forwards, he was sinking fast.

'Now!' I shouted and he pulled and pushed. Suddenly his left arm went slack as the curtain pulled loose but just before it fell his right wrist lifted the window catch and the window swung open. He fell forward and banged his head against the sill. The last thing he felt was the cold air against his face.

There was nothing more I could do.

Chapter 30

After a while he began to slowly recover. I knew from elementary chemistry at school that his problem was lack of useful blood. The carbon monoxide in coal gas combines with the oxygen-carrying part of blood, the haemoglobin, and stops it doing its job. Alex was suffering from anaemia.

As soon as he began to breathe again I started to think over what had happened but couldn't think how the room had become filled with gas. Obviously from the gas-lights: now Alex was breathing more quietly I could hear them hissing. But how had someone got in the room and extinguished the flame?

Alex woke up and convulsively vomited. He groggily got to his feet and leant out of the window breathing in deeply. He pulled the other curtain aside and in the pale street light crossed the room and turned off the two hissing gas-jets. He leaned against the window for a while then shivering drank some water. Finally he checked that the door was still locked, lay on the bed, wrapped himself up in the bed clothes and fell asleep.

I Withdrew again.

Alex was awoken late the next day by someone tapping softly on the door. He climbed out of the bed, tugged on a terrible pink dressing gown and went to the door. With a rattle of the guard chain he opened it and allowed in a servant holding a breakfast tray. The servant must have noticed the icy cold room and the smell of vomit by the open windows, but he said nothing, just discretely laying out the meal on a table. Alex nodded and he left.

Alex then closed the windows and sat down to his breakfast. He ate silently and grimly.

Finally he put his knife and fork down. I was glad he was eating - best way to replace red corpuscles.

'Nasty accident last night,' I offered. In the 21st Century we had unlimited electricity from fusion and although a power station had blown up once and vaporised the off-shore island it was built on, individual users of electricity were generally safe.

'Accident be buggered,' he said, coarsely for him.

'But the door was locked - you can see no one could have turned the gas-taps on while you were sleeping.'

'I turned them on. The lights were burning when I went to bed. If I hadn't been so sleepy I would have put them off before I turned in. Which brings me to another point. That second bottle of wine I drank last night, the one I didn't order, was spiked.'

'How do you know that?'

'Because it wasn't served by a waiter. The man who served it was wearing brown boots. I've just remembered it. And he was left-handed too.'

I thought back to Alex's dream. He was right - the man had opened the bottle left-handed.

But the gas in the room. That must have been an accident. Perhaps the gas was impure and an air bubble has caused the jet to pop out. I said this to Alex.

'Balls,' he said. 'One of the advantages of gas mantles is that they stay hot and if there is an air bubble in the line they relight the gas.'

He went out into the corridor and looked up and down. A young cleaning girl seeing him giggled and was sternly reproved by an elder woman. But Alex had found what he wanted - a cupboard set in the wall. He stuck his nail in the door and it swung open. Inside were a number of thin pipes, each provided with a screw-down valve. They were all numbered. He pointed to number 6; his room number.

'All that was needed was to turn this off for a minute or so and then turn it on again,' he said. 'And another thing. I hardly need to ask, but I will.' He motioned to the young cleaning girl and asked her to have the parcel sent up that he had deposited in the hotel safe last night.

He returned to his room and was lathering his face preparatory to shaving when there was a tap on the door and the manager himself was there with one of the porters. He had a piece of paper in his hand.

'Mr Salisbury,' he began 'we cannot return your packet to you because it has already been collected. Here is the note bearing your signature which the man showed.' He looked nervous, as though expecting a torrent of rage.

But Alex had been expecting this. He questioned them but the porter said it was a small messenger-boy who had collected it. He glanced at the paper - it seemed to be a very good forgery. He dismissed them saying he must have made a mistake.

They retired, looking baffled.

'So someone is trying to confuse the Case of the Dead electrician by stealing the evidence,' I said.

'And to take out the detective looking into it,' he added. '"To encourage the others",' he quoted.

Chapter 31

The rest of the day he spent in his room, reading and resting. He let someone come in who cleared up the mess by the window and rehung the curtain, but otherwise kept the door closed.

I had to let him recover but I also had to move on. Neither of us could decide on the next step. He had been warned off the Blum Case (to say the least) which seemed to confirm that Joseph had been killed for the wireless telegraph.

'Bit of a waste of time really,' he was saying. 'Of course I've learnt something about telegraphy and wireless telegraphy should be possible one day. Perhaps one day, when I've got more time I'll...'

I'd got to think fast. If I did nothing he'd be on his way back to London. Did I want him to stick to this case? Was he wasting his time when he should be looking for Mediums? No, probably not. His efficient secretary would keep him posted if anything new came up. I had an idea.

'What do you think of Spiritualism,' I asked casually.

'Spiritualism?' he said startled. He looked around, but it was a sunny day in a quiet room. You mean all that about Mediums putting you in contact with Spirits of the Dead who have Passed Over?' He chuckled. 'Load of cods-wallop, but very much in fashion at the moment. I was persuaded to go to one once. Gave me quite a scare, but I was young at the time.'

Good, that meant he was not in contact with any Spiritualist Mediums at the moment. So while I was waiting for these Mediums to appear on Alex's Timeline, I might as well look into this wireless telegraphy. There was an incentive clause in my contract saying I would be paid extra for any pieces of information picked up which had nothing to do with my Mission, but were nevertheless deemed interesting.

'Might be something in this radi...er, wireless telegraphy,' I suggested. 'After all, you're here and Frederick Blum has all the equipment down the road. And.' I added cunningly 'If Joseph was really murdered for his secret and the murderer sees someone else using the equipment, he is bound to reveal himself.'

'You mean, try to murder me again.'

'"Forewarned is forearmed",' I quoted.

'Very well,' he said tiredly. He wrote out a short note to Frederick Blum, asking him if he could come round to the hotel the next day, Saturday, at three pm.

He was about to ring for someone to deliver it when there was a tap on the door. He opened it and was handed a buff envelope. He took it then handed his letter to the porter.

He closed the door, slit open the telegram and read:

“Rogers reports that Bonnors visits the Medium Madame Odette Vautour for consultation at least once a week. Address 16, Royal Row, Woking. Coincidence.

Ada.”

A Medium - at last!

‘Gives us something to think about,’ I said. ‘How do you feel? I think we should go for a walk. Get some fresh air.’

Looking out of the window he saw that it was getting dark, with the possibility of a mist.

He said nothing but got out of bed and started to dress himself rapidly. As an afterthought he opened his case and pulled out a swagger stick about fifty centimeters long. It seemed a bit dandified for a stroll in the dark but he pulled it apart and I saw it concealed a thirty centimeter blade. A sword-stick! I hadn't seen one before.

We stepped out of the hotel, its lights fanning out in the gathering mist.

‘Let's think about Lord Bonnors problem,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ he said reluctantly. ‘I don't like this occult stuff, and Mediums in particular give me the creeps. I went to one once for a laugh but she seemed to know all sorts of things about me I hardly knew myself. I'm going to wire Ada and tell her to tell Lady Bonnors what the problem is and then we'll pull out. I don't want to have anything to do with them.’ He shuddered in recollection.

Well, this was great. I'd found someone in the right position in Victorian society, he was interested in science and he was a detective. The perfect vehicle to help me in my search for Extra-terrestrials who were supposed to be associated with a Medium. And at the first whiff of the occult he was going limp on me.

‘The Bureau can't just say he's been seeing a Medium and duck out,’ I said. ‘You've got to at least find out what the Medium's doing with him.’

‘Rogers can find that out,’ he said.

‘You know he can't. He's a good chap for routine leg-work, but when it comes to finding what's bugging a Lord - you're on the line.’

Reluctant acquiescence.

‘And now we're here,’ I said, pushing my advantage, ‘I think we should take a look at 16, Royal Row.’

‘What, now?!’ he said. He had forgotten that the Medium was in Woking. He looked nervously at the name of the road we were on and was disturbed to see it was Royal Row.

It did look a bit spooky. There was a thick fog now and the nearest street light made a dim circle of radiance, just enough to read the street name. The other street lights were ghostly blobs in the distance. It was absolutely quiet, as only the fog-blanketed suburbs of a small town can be. We seemed to be in an affluent part of the town, the road mostly lined with laurels and interrupted only by the occasional wide driveway. At the end of some of the driveways could be seen faint misty lights and there was the smell of burning coal fires.

'I can look into it tomorrow,' he said. 'I should get back, I could get lost in this fog.'

'You've got a compass,' I pointed out 'and you know we have been walking north. All you have to do is to ...' I was struck with a thought. 'I think we've already walked past number 16. We could just have another look at it on the way back,' I said carelessly.

He looked longingly northwards, but then caught in his own logic (helped by me), reluctantly turned south.

'This is an age of rational thought,' I began. 'Man is discovering all the secrets of nature, even today we were talking about strange waves that we cannot see and yet will one day enable nature to talk unto nature. We will push back the frontiers of superstition that have so long held mankind enthralled. One day ...'

'Yes, yes,' he said. Dammit, he wasn't listening to me, he was looking nervously at the house numbers.

'Ah, that must be number 16,' I said. It was a corner house and the only house that was on the road that crossed Royal Row. It was a large house, well set back and there seemed to be a lot of marble statuary in the garden, faintly illuminated by the corner street lamp.

'I'd like to burn the bloody place down,' he said. His solution had a pleasing simplicity and would no doubt have put a brake on the Medium's activities, (as well as giving rise to such questions as "If you are in such close contact with the forces on the Other Side, how come you didn't know your house was going to be burnt down?"). No, no. I was not interested in bruising the Medium's credibility; this Medium was supposed to be mixed up with beings from a quite prosaic Astral Body. I wondered which one it would be. Alpha Centauri was the closest of course, at 4.3 light years. Then came Sirius at 8.7, followed by Procyon at 11 light years. After that there was a bit of a jump to 27 light years for Vega. One of the first three, I guessed.

I was wondering how I could persuade Alex to take a look at the house. It seemed a golden opportunity. He was quite unsuspected and it was a foggy night (he could always say he had got lost). The problem was solved for me by the distant muffled clatter of horses' hooves and the twin lanterns of an approaching coach.

'Quick!' I said. 'You don't want to be seen loafing outside their house on a dark foggy night. Nip through the gate and hide in the shrubbery!'

And just in time. The coach was in fact for Number 16. It turned into the gate and disappeared up the drive, the horses' hooves muted on the soft leaves. Alex was crouched behind a statue. As the carriage disappeared he stood up and immediately banged his head on a projecting portion of its anatomy. He rubbed his head, fiercely blaspheming. To find what it was, he put up his hand and felt strangely guilty when he found it was an angel's wing.

But the noisy arrival of the coach had broken the silent ghostly spell that had lain over the house. There was some activity at the top of the drive. The front door of the mansion had opened and dark silhouettes against two lanterns were unloading something heavy out of the coach and placing it on the ground. Driven by his own curiosity, Alex crept forward through the statues and shrubs.

Now four people were crossing in and out of the illumination fanning out from the front door of the mansion. A woman's voice was issuing sharp commands, but Alex was too far away to hear what she was saying. The objects on the ground were picked up and carried into the house. Someone took the horse's bridle and the coach disappeared round the back of the house, presumably to the stables.

I thought that was all we were going to see, but the house door had only been partially closed. Its narrow slit was the only light visible; the windows must have all been heavily curtained.

As no one was visible, Alex took the opportunity to creep closer. He was now behind a tree about five meters from the door. There was still some activity, but inside the house, with shadows moving across the slit.

The door was thrust open wide and two men came out, one with a lantern; the other carrying a big round object. They moved away from us, around the side of the house. When they were about twenty meters away, the one with the lantern put it on the ground and stood near the other. They started to wave their hands around.

'What the hell are they doing?' said Alex, 'Are they having a fight?'

It was odd. They weren't fighting - it looked rather as though they were practising semaphore.

'Let's get closer,' I said.

Alex backed away, keeping in the shadow of the tree until he had reached the grass verge again. He then walked slowly forward, eyes on the gesticulating pair. Another step forward and there was a loud crash. He had knocked over a pair of buckets!

The semaphoring pair froze for an instant and then shouted. Alex needed no prompting from me to retreat. He turned and ran silently along a grassy space suddenly stopping and advancing slowly when he realised he couldn't see his hand in front of his face. If there was any pursuit, it couldn't be heard. We seemed to be on the edge of a wood, judging by the dark loom of the trees. He looked back the way he had come, but there was absolutely nothing to see.

He felt in his pocket and pulled out his compass. Fortunately it was one of the new ones with a spot of phosphorus on the needle. It was very faint but he could just see that he had been running in a south east direction away from the house. The railway station lay to the south, but this wood lay in the way.

'You'll never get through the wood in this fog,' I said. 'Keep going east. We must go round it.'

Keeping his eye on his compass he carried on east, taking careful steps and keeping one hand out in front of him. Once he fell over a fallen log, but fortunately didn't let go of the compass. More ferocious blasphemy, this time with no angel to restrain him. The trees seemed to be getting thinner on the right, but just as he noticed this, so did he hear the heart-stopping deep baying of a dog behind him, muffled by the fog.

'Carry on a bit, then turn south,' I said calmly.

Now we had passed the last tree and he turned right, following the edge of the wood as it led south. After about twenty meters a solid object loomed out of the darkness. It was a wall, probably the boundary wall of the estate. Alex ran his hands over it urgently and to his relief found it was made of a soft stone and there were plenty of uneven ledges. He reached up, found some places for his fingers, and was able to scabble fairly easily over the wall. He paused a moment on the top of the wall, looking back, but there was nothing to hear. He then lowered himself cautiously down on the outside of the wall and found himself in what must be a country lane.

A quick glance at the compass and he started off to the right, west, parallel to the wall. From the other side of the wall he could hear the deep bark of the dog and a two men's voices, a lot nearer now.

'That dog is going to find where you climbed the wall and they're going to follow you over it. In this lane they'll catch you easily enough,' I said.

`I'm not afraid of them. I've done nothing. At the worst I can say I got lost in the fog.'

Wrong attitude. If he got caught, they would at least get to know his face, which was going to give him problems when he tried to investigate them later.

`Explain that to the dog, which doesn't sound like a French-poodle, by the way. We need a diversion. Can you find any stones on the ground?.'

`I'll soon fix up the dog,' he said loosening the blade in his sword stick. But he started to feel around on the ground. Nothing.

`Closer to the wall,' I suggested. He crawled forward, hands outstretched.

`Ah,' he said as his hands scraped over a small pile of cobblestones, no doubt used for road repair. He picked up three.

`Right, now down the road a bit - until we have that wood between us and them.'

He moved cautiously down the lane, holding the stones and listening. The deep bark of the dog sounded again, this time over the other side of the wall.

`OK, fire one here.'

He heaved one stone and we heard it crash in the trees over the other side of the wall. There was a startled shout.

`Fire two.'

Another crash and the strangled yelp of the dog. The dog wisely wanted to follow the scent around the wood but the man thought Alex was in the wood and wanted to go straight for him.

`Fire three.' This time there was the smash of broken glass. A glasshouse perhaps.

`There he is!' said a distant voice. Fog is very deceptive - no one could see Alex through the wall.

He listened to the crashes, curses and more yelps as the two men tried to force their way through a thick wood in a dense fog, dragging a big reluctant dog with them. He wanted to get some more stones, but enough was enough. We had got away from them - we now had to complete our escape.

So keeping an eye on his compass and one hand out-stretched in front of him, he carried on down the country lane. Occasionally the fog cleared completely and it was possible to see the stars. Then it rolled in back again. Finally the street lamp outside Number 16 loomed whitely through the fog. He cautiously turned round the corner into Royal Row, keeping on the side furthest from Number 16, but the house was quiet. With a sigh of relief he started off south down Royal Row. The fog was a little thinner now and he was able to find his hotel without difficulty.

`What a bloody waste of time that was,' he said to himself, parting his hair in front of his hotel-room mirror to see if the bump had cut his scalp. It had, slightly. He put some iodine on it which stung.

He turned in in a bad temper after carefully turning off the gaslights and leaving the window slightly open.

*

While he was sleeping I took the opportunity to think over the situation. It had been a full day. I mentally pulled forward a piece of paper and a pencil:

1. If Chrondisp was right the Extra-terrestrials were associated with the Mediums, so I had to make contact with them, and the best way to do that was by pushing Alex hard on the job he had from Lady Bonnors. The adventure that night hadn't advanced us at all in the Bonnors' Case except to show that the Medium Gang didn't

like people walking around their grounds at night. But there was nothing special about that.

2. The Case of the Electrocuted Electrician was a waste of time for me. Whether he had or had not been murdered and if so by whom, wasn't going to help me in my Mission. It was all minor time-line stuff.

3. It would nevertheless be interesting to find if Joseph had actually invented radio. I would try to find out more technical details tomorrow when Frederick came round.

I didn't know what the attack on Alex had been all about. Someone was really trying to stop investigation of the Blum case.

Chapter 32

Alex spent the most of the next day writing up his notes and sending out letters. Until three pm, when there was a tap on his hotel room door.

It was Frederick Blum. He had apparently arrived directly from his shop as there were a few pieces of linen on his trousers. He self-consciously picked them off as he listened to Alex.

'I've been to see the police and they say they are satisfied it was an accident,' said Alex. 'Probably for two reasons. The first one is that they aren't convinced he had a secret to steal, so there was no motive to kill him. The second is that they find no evidence of foul play in the shed - he could have slipped.'

Alex said nothing about the attack on him.

'I tell you he had invented a system. We were out most nights testing it - my wife and I,' said Frederick.

'Then why didn't he patent it? That's one of the things that is worrying the police.'

Frederick sighed with exasperation.

'Ach, that's the way he was. I was always at him. I even brought him some forms and tried to get him to make drawings and descriptions. But in the middle of writing he would suddenly jump up and think of some improvement. Another thing was that his written English was not very good, and I couldn't help him much with all those technical words.'

'Well, this Case is going to stay where it is unless some new evidence appears,' said Alex. 'And one way to get the police to move is to convince them that the wireless telegraph really works.'

'But how am I going to do that? I saw what Joseph did, but I didn't know what he was doing or why.'

'Perhaps I could help you there,' said Alex diffidently. 'I know a little about ordinary telegraphy, and with what you remember and the apparatus, which you say worked once, it should be possible to duplicate your brother's work.'

'And then you go off and patent Joseph's idea for yourself?' said Frederick slyly.

'Our Bureau is required under law not to divulge information acquired during the course of investigations,' said Alex coldly. 'If you don't trust me, then you must find someone else.'

Frederick looked into the distance. Finally he shrugged.

'Very well,' he said, 'I suppose I do trust you. All I really want to do is clear up Joseph's death. When do you wish to start?'

Alex went to the window. A cold clear day, probably going to turn into a cold clear night. Ideal.

‘After what happened last time, I want another of my men here.’ He pulled out his watch - 3:30pm. ‘Perhaps we can start this evening if I can get hold of someone,’ he said to Frederick.

‘Ian?’ I said.

‘Yes, we need a strong right arm.’

He wrote out a note and rang for the page. When he arrived he gave it to him to wire off at the post office.

They also ordered tea and sat silently drinking it for about half an hour until the hotel room door opened again and the page handed Alex a buff-coloured envelope. He slit it open and read it with satisfaction.

‘Good. One of my men will be here at six. I suggest we come round for you and your wife around seven.’

‘My wife?’ said Frederick doubtfully.

‘I think it would be better. That way we can have someone who knows something about the device at each end, as it were - the sender and the receiver.’

Frederick then left and Alex started to think about the forthcoming test.

Chapter 33

It would be best to have Ian and Mrs Blum together at the sender end.

That's where the attack had been last time. It was also where the "fixed" part of the system was - it hadn't been moved and would just need switching on, or whatever. Alex was a bit vague.

The tricky part would be the receiver end. This had always been set up by Joseph first.

‘Might be an idea just to try the thing over a short distance first,’ I suggested. ‘You can move away later once you've got it working.’

‘Good idea. I must get some warmer clothing too. Maybe Frederick can lend me something.’

He then sent down for a meal and had just finished eating when there was a knock on the door and the tall figure of Ian entered.

Alex offered him a glass of wine and he sat there drinking it as Alex explained.

‘So you want me to protect the woman,’ he said a bit disappointed. Then he brightened. ‘Perhaps if I concealed myself nearby, I could apprehend anyone who attempted to attack her.’

‘Good idea,’ said Alex absently. He looked at his watch and indicated it was time to go.

They walked in step down the road and into the small terraced house owned by Frederick Blum. The door was opened by a girl and Alex only just prevented himself from asking if her father was in. This was Mrs Blum. She could not be more than twenty, so Frederick must be at least twenty-five years her senior. She was a pretty but rather sullen-looking dark-haired girl. As Frederick came to the door she turned away sourly. Frederick looked after her.

‘I'm afraid my wife is not convinced of your good intentions,’ he said apologetically. They had obviously been having an argument.

‘She has spoken to friends and has found that the invention of a wireless telegraph is worth hundreds of pounds,’ he continued.

‘And you're just giving it away,’ said his wife. She had a pronounced foreign accent. ‘You will give it to these fine gentlemen from London and never see them again. And it won't bring Sephie back either.’

"Sephie" I thought, the affectionate diminutive of "Joseph". Joseph had been a lot younger than Frederick, and much nearer her own age. H'm.

Alex and Ian looked at each other embarrassed. The wives of their friends would never argue with their husbands in public, especially not before strangers. It wasn't done. English wives ... ah, that was the reason, she wasn't English. But why did he allow such foolishness from his wife? Was he not master in his own house? An argument had broken out again, in some foreign tongue.

But they couldn't stand on the step all night. Alex took his hat off and said:

'Madam, I can assure you that if the slightest breath of dishonesty touched the reputation of our Investigation Bureau, no one would ever trust us again: we would be ruined. We are only here to observe, to witness that your husband's brother's invention really works and then the police will take over. And I'm sure that if you tell people that "Salisbury and Ferguson" have witnessed the invention, you will have no problem in finding a purchaser.'

She turned round and looked at them.

'You will sign a paper saying it works?' she demanded.

'If it does, yes,' said Alex and Ian nodded. Alex pulled out his watch. 'And now may I suggest that we start work? Mr Ferguson here came down from London especially to help us and he must get back there as soon as possible.'

For answer she turned away and reappeared with her hat and coat. She handed them to her husband who helped her on with them. Frederick disappeared for a moment, returning with a wicker basket containing a wooden box and a spool of bare copper wire. He put on his coat and the four of us walked the short distance to the house where Joseph had lived. Frederick opened the door and we all entered.

We went straight through the house to the small shed in the garden. The oil-lamp was lit and without a word Alex took it and went round the side of the shed. As he had expected, the footprints under the window had been thoroughly obliterated by scraping, as had most of the prints around the door to the shed. He re-entered the shed and hung up the lamp on a convenient hook.

I now noticed that there were two wires going to a telegraph key which had been in a drawer. Frederick looked at us nervously and asked us to stand back. He pressed the key. Nothing happened. His wife laughed derisively.

Alex unhooked the oil-lamp and looked under the bench.

'The battery that was knocked over is empty and not giving any juice,' I said. 'Disconnect the lead from the white rod and connect it to the white rod of the next cell.' He did so then looked at Frederick who pressed the key again. There was a loud buzz and a crackling blue spark jumped across the induction-coil gap.

'Very good!' said Ian admiringly. 'I didn't think you knew anything about electricity.'

Alex didn't reply. He was puzzling over how he had known what to do. I must be more careful.

Frederick was now making sure another wire was going from the spark gap to a wooden box on the floor and thence out of the window.

'It's a long wire going up to the roof of the house,' he explained. 'Joseph called it the "influence spreader".' He looked around. 'Everything seems to be in order here.'

'I think the first test should just be a short distance to see that nothing has been damaged,' said Alex. 'I would like Mr Ferguson to stay here with you, Mrs Blum, and I will go with you,' he said, looking at Frederick. 'Is there a small park nearby?'

`Yes, Queens Park is just round the corner, but it's surrounded by trees, it won't be possible to see the light signals,' said Frederick.

`We'll dispense with light signals this time round,' said Alex. He pulled out his watch, and tapped it. `You can send to us for five minutes, then a pause for ten minutes, then again for five minutes,' he added.

`You're all wasting your time' said Mrs Blum. "How do you expect Joseph's signal to get to you through all those trees and houses?"

`If it doesn't, then his invention is no good anyway,' said Ian. Mrs Blum opened her mouth. `He's right, dear,' said her husband hastily. `If the receiver has to see the sender, then you might as well use lamp signals, which would be much simpler too. But don't worry, Joseph and I have done this test before, when he was starting his experiments.'

`And how would you use a lamp in the day-time?' said Mrs Blum triumphantly. We seemed to have lost her in the argument somewhere.

Ian cleared his throat.

`Right then,' said Alex, `Now what signal did Joseph usually send?' he asked Frederick.

`He always sent "dit, dah, dah, dah". It's the letter "J" in the telegraph code,' he explained, picking up his basket to take with them into the park. They made for the door of the shed.

Mrs Blum realised what was happening.

`Are you going to leave me alone with a stranger?' she said angrily. `What sort of husband are you to leave me alone with another man?'

The husband said nothing but looked at her.

`Tell her you'll leave her alone if she wants,' I said to Alex, impatiently.

He did so, callously adding that the last person who was alone in that shed had been murdered.

He closed the door on a muffled cry.

`We'll have to find someone else,' he said.

We walked quickly through the house, along a few gas-lit streets and finally turned into the gates of a park. It was not too dark as the night was clear and the yellow street lights not far, visible through the trees. Frederick made for a park bench.

`This is where we first made it work,' he said, putting down his basket. He lifted out the coil of wire and I saw a weight had been tied to one end. He walked under a nearby tree and threw the weight over a branch, bringing the other end of the wire back to the park bench.

`He called that the "influence collector",' he said.

He pulled out the wooden box which I now saw was fitted with two big brass terminals. He carefully screwed the antenna, sorry "influence collector" wire, to one and to the other another a piece of wire connected to a metal rod which he rammed into the damp ground. He then rummaged some more in the basket and finally pulled out a piece of rubber tubing about sixty centimeters long. One end he pushed into a hole in the side of the wooden box and the other he held in his hand.

`You put this in your ear. It's like a doctor's stethoscope,' he said.

Alex held his watch up to the distant street lights. One minute to go. He took the rubber tube and pushed it into his ear.

Radio! Perhaps the first time man had opened his "radio eyes". In the future radio waves were going to be used to link up everyone on the planet, they just had to pull a small box out of their pocket and speak into it. Three-dimensional holo pictures in every home, relayed by satellite from the farthest corner of the world. And

enormous radio telescopes probing deep into space, discovering the ultimate secrets of the Universe. And it all started from this little wooden box in this dark leafy park!

I expected to hear the rush of static noise, like in that science fiction story when the man returns to Earth after some self-destroying nuclear war and tunes over all the bands, just hearing an empty hissing. But of course he would not hear any hiss: the sensitivity of this device would be nothing like the sensitivity of a modern...What was that?! Faint in the distance could be heard "dit, dit, dit" - pause - "dit, dit, dit". A long pause then much louder "dit, dah, dah, dah" - pause - "dit, dah, dah, dah," - pause- " ...

Frederick was also holding up his watch to the distant street lights.

`They should be sending now,' he said.

`They are,' said Alex, listening fascinated. And I was fascinated too. What had that first signal been? Static from some nearby electrical machinery? There was no electrical machinery. Some natural phenomenon like lightning? Not likely - much too regular.

Alex handed the rubber tube to Frederick who listened a moment.

`Yes, that's it. Do you believe me now?'

`It works over this short distance,' said Alex cautiously. He too looked at his watch. It was five past the hour.

`Let me listen again,' he said.

`But we arranged they would stop at five past,' protested Frederick.

Alex said nothing but just listened. There was nothing. He remained with it in his ear until quarter past when the "J" signal reappeared. He removed the tube.

`Let's get back. I must speak with Mr Ferguson,' he said.

He watched Frederick as he pulled the antenna wire down and wrapped it round his arm with big circular movements which seemed somehow familiar. The rest of the device was dismantled and they walked back to the house where Joseph had lived. Alex was in a thoughtful mood.

And what was I thinking? Well, sure, it was fascinating to hear the first radio. And the second radio too, if that's what those first three pips had been. Presumably from the people who had stolen Joseph's receiver and were testing it out themselves. The key to radio was not the transmitter - spark-coils were relatively easy to make - the problem was to know how to make a sensitive receiver (and to know that you needed an antenna at each end). They must have been testing their system and then suddenly heard us testing ours. They would have then realised that if they could hear us, we could hear them, so they had hastily shut down. But we had gone on transmitting, so they thought we had not heard them. They knew we were here, and now we knew they knew it. On the other hand they didn't know that we knew they were there ... I was beginning to feel the giddiness that used to assail me during the recent War in Pakistan when our Battalion Signals Officer gave us a run-down on the local Intelligence situation. But Alex was thinking that if he could catch the operator of the other transmitter, he would catch the murderer of Joseph Blum.

Chapter 34

Walking back to Joseph's house we heard distant shouting and ran the rest of the way. We ran down the path to the shed where we interrupted some fine drama. Mrs Blum was having a fit, Ian holding both her wrists in one hand and trying to avoid her kicking feet.

`Get her out of the shed,' Alex said urgently. `She's going to break something if she hasn't already'

Between the three of them, they got her out of the shed and into the house. Outside she had fortunately limited herself to gasps and curses in some foreign language, but in the house she gave herself over completely to hysterics.

The men had their heads urgently together as Ian explained rapidly that during the sending, he had gone outside the shed to see if anyone was watching them. He had glanced once through the window of the shed, to see what could be seen from outside, and she had seen his face looking in. It seemed a pretty thin excuse to start a fit.

She had started grabbing at the wiring and was pulling at it, so Ian had opened the door and seized her. We had seen the rest.

She was red-faced, screaming open-mouthed, banging her hands on the table, her hair standing out and working up to a tremendous crescendo.

The two men looked at Frederick. She was his wife.

`For Christ's sake tell him to smack her face,' I said to Alex. I had a younger cousin who used to have these temper-tantrums with his mother until an old-fashioned doctor had told her what to do.

He said this to Frederick, adding she would hurt herself if he didn't. He was sweating, but didn't move. He looked at the two men then stepped forward and gave her two sharp smacks. Instantaneous results. She threw her arms around him and collapsed sobbing into his arms.

`You'd better leave,' he said over her shoulder.

Alex and Ian picked up their coats and left.

`And what was all that about?' asked Alex. Ian was married and supposed to know all about women. Ian shrugged.

`I think she had been having it off with the younger brother, and resuming the tests brought it all back. You know, working together in the dark, keeping everything secret - women like that sort of thing.'

They walked along in silence for a while. A mist was coming down and it was getting difficult to see.

`I nearly got married once,' said Alex, reflectively.

Arriving at the hotel they sat in the bar and ordered whisky. As they were sipping it, Alex related what had happened in the park.

`So Joseph really has invented wireless telegraphy and someone has stolen it,' said Ian.

`Someone round here,' said Alex. `And if we can find that person we have Joseph's murderer.'

He looked at Ian.

`You're the expert on the criminal mind,' he smiled `what would you do now if you were in the position of the murderer?'

Ian sat back in his chair, looking into his whisky and absently swirling it round.

`He can't patent it yet, because he doesn't know enough about it. He has to test it a lot more. And as quickly as possible, as he will fear that Frederick is about to patent it himself. Whether he does his tests here in Woking depends on how clever he is. He heard us testing our wireless telegraph so he must know that sooner or later we are going to hear him testing the one he has stolen. I would move and do the tests somewhere far away from Woking.'

`But unless he starts sending again in Woking we will never find him,' protested Alex.

`Can we not identify him when he tries to patent it?' asked Ian.

`The Police Inspector said there are patents on wireless telegraphy being filed by cranks every day. We can't check them all out. He would do it by proxy anyway.'

He paused. Then he continued:

`The only thing we can do is to assume he is not very clever and will start sending again. I think we should not send ourselves anymore, in fact dismantle the sender completely, and just keep a listening watch.'

`So what will you do if you hear him sending?' I asked `you will know he's in Woking somewhere but not where.'

`I hadn't thought of that,' admitted Alex, `Is there no way of telling where the signals are coming from?'

Well, I knew there were things called directional antennas, but not how to build them.

`Couldn't you put the sound converter thing on a coach and drive around with it? The signals must get stronger when you get closer.'

He repeated the idea to Ian.

`Aye,' he said interested. `We could try that tomorrow.' He pulled out his watch. `But I'm afraid I've got to get back to Town tonight on the Smith Case. If you like I could be back here tomorrow afternoon and we could set something up. We could put the converter in a coach and take turns listening. As soon as we hear something we could start driving around.'

He drank up his whisky and left.

Alex sat there slowly finishing his whisky and thinking of the possibilities radio would have if it really existed and what a fascinating world they lived in. Man really seemed to be able to do anything he set his hand to.

Chapter 35

The next morning, as promised, Ian returned from London and Alex met him at the station. They had a discussion with a cab driver and arranged to hire his coach from him for the day. Surprised and rather unwillingly he agreed.

Ian took the reins and they drove round to Frederick's house where they were shown in by a subdued Mrs Blum.

Frederick looked a lot more energetic today and had the sound converter and a roll of wire in the corridor, ready to go.

Alex and Ian helped him to load it into the coach and then they set off. As they drove down the road Alex explained to Frederick.

`We think the murderer is going to try and send out a signal again and we want to be ready for him. As soon as we hear anything we will drive in such a direction as to make it louder.' Frederick nodded.

`We want to go now to some place which is high, central and hidden, as we don't want to attract attention. Do you have any suggestions?'

Frederick thought.

`The top of Butterworth Hill is best,' he said. `It's in the Park and quite high. It's not hidden but coaches often go up there to admire the view. You wouldn't be noticed.'

`What about the "Influence collector"?' said Alex, `wouldn't that attract attention?'

'We can park under a tree and the wire will go straight up into it. No one will notice.'

Alex then leaned out to ask Ian to stop for a moment so Frederick could tell him how to reach the Park.

Off they set again, through the Park gates and after a short climb along a steep ornamental drive, found themselves on a small heavily-wooded plateau. Alex looked round and selected a point with a good view and under an old oak tree. They parked, backing the coach under the overhanging branches. The horse was unhitched and allowed to graze.

It was a cold sunny day and they were alone. Frederick pulled out the coil of wire and looked considerably up at the tree.

'It's no good putting the influence collector up a tree.' I said to Alex. 'We need it with us if we're going to drive around listening. We must put it on the coach somehow.'

'Er, yes, of course,' he said, feeling foolish.

He repeated this to the others and was pleased to see that they looked similarly abashed.

'Joseph said the collector must be as high as possible,' said Frederick. 'The highest point on the coach is the cabby's whip.'

So they led the wire out of the window to the top of the whip, which they placed as high as possible. The connection to the ground was solved by finding a piece of chain in the boot. It was arranged behind the coach so it would drag along on the ground. As soon as all was ready Alex eagerly stuck the rubber tube coming out of the converter into his ear. The other two looked at him, but he shook his head. There was nothing to hear.

They all shuffled their feet, feeling a little let down.

'It would have been surprising if they were sending just now,' said Ian, but nobody answered.

'Yes,' said Alex. 'This could take a long time, of course. We'd better put the converter in the coach and someone is going to have to keep watch all the time. At least he can sit in comfort.'

He thought.

'We're going to need at least a Listener and a Driver here all the time. The Listener can pretend to be asleep if anyone comes and the Driver can chase any kids away.'

'And we'd better start to think what we're going to do if we hear anything,' said Ian. 'It would be a good idea to get a local map and plan which way to go. They might not send for very long.'

'Of course,' said Alex who hadn't thought of that.

'And food,' went on Ian remorselessly. It was apparent the expedition had started off a bit light-heartedly. 'For us and the horse,' he went on.

Before he could go on about warm clothing, drink, oil lamps and reading matter, Alex turned to Frederick who was about to leave for his shop and asked him to wait a minute as he wrote a telegram back to Ada asking for reinforcements. Frederick left.

Ian and Alex then settled down to a rather boring vigil, listening to the converter turn and turn about. It did however give Alex time to realise that this was going to be very similar to a normal long-term surveillance with the need for at least two teams, another horse for a messenger, and a base. It also gave me time to think that I was wasting my time here, interesting though it was to see what must be the first radio surveillance in history.

The reinforcements sent by Ada arrived towards night-fall and both Alex and Ian were not in a very good temper. Nothing had been heard and they were cold and hungry. Their tempers were not improved by the necessity of explaining to the two new arrivals what their duties were.

'You mean I put this little tube in my ear and when I hear a buzzing sound I drive around until it gets louder,' summarised one of them. Alex looked at the two unbelieving faces.

'And then you tell us where it was loudest' he said, restraining his temper.

Alex told them to use the cab to return to the railway station at 11pm after which it would no longer be worth-while listening. He told them he had reserved rooms for them at the Station Hotel where he was staying and would hear their report when they returned.

He heard them laughing together as he and Ian drove off in the cab the two newcomers had arrived in.

Back at the hotel they had a short discussion where it was decided that Ian would return on Monday morning with some more help and really take charge of the surveillance operation. He left for the train.

Alex changed, went down to the restaurant and ordered a large meal. No waiters with brown boots were visible. At 11:30 the surveillance returned with nothing to report. Alex went to bed and I Withdrew.

Chapter 36

The next day was a Sunday, a day Alex had hated since his youth when he had not been allowed to go out but had to stay at home reading the bible and other "improving" texts. Dressed in his "Sunday best" he had had to sit unspeaking and unmoving at interminable Sunday dinners with the rest of his family. Long prayers and then lots of exactly the sort of food he hated most - boiled potatoes, boiled cabbage, boiled turnips, boiled carrots and large slices of greasy mutton. As if in revenge, he had a light lunch, completed some case notes and then went for a walk in the almost deserted country south of Woking.

Everything, including crime, apparently stopped on Sunday. Alex didn't see the men on surveillance duty. Perhaps they were at church.

Chapter 37

I rejoined Alex next morning in the hotel breakfast room while he was eating bacon and sausages.

I waited until the last piece of butter and the last blob of marmalade had been spread on the last piece of toast and the last cup of tea had been drained.

'When the rest of the troops arrive this is going to be a pretty standard surveillance,' I began. He agreed. 'As soon as they locate the sender you get the cops to raid them and that's it. Possession of the transmitter and receiver ..er.. sender and converter will be proof enough of guilt.'

'I guess so.'

'So we should start doing something about the Bonnors Case. The way I see it', I continued unasked 'is that you must try to make contact with these Mediums. And who is the one type of person who Mediums are always eager to meet?'

'Customers,' he replied, wiping his chin.

`Right. Now who is the best person we can use as a decoy customer?'

`Well, I suppose I could get Ada to find someone. We often use out-of-work actors. I'm sure she will be able to find ...'

`Wrong. You'd never know what was going on. You must be the decoy.'

`What!' he said aloud, jerking a knife off the table onto the floor. `I hate Mediums, I don't want to have anything to do with them!' A guest at a nearby table looked at him curiously.

`Oh, come on. You know they're just conjurers. You don't think the woman who was shouting outside that house in Royal Row could have had anything to do with Spirits? Did she look "ethereal"?

`She looked fairly aggressive to me,' he admitted.

`And the others, did they look as if they were connected with the "Other World"?'`

`Perhaps not.'

`Exactly. You're a "free-thinker", you're not superstitious. Now you have to find some character which would attract them. Could you pretend to be some titled member of your family?'

He gasped. `Christ no! Anything but that.' He thought. `How about someone from the Colonies? An Australian .. no, an American. They're usually rich and I knew one once. I could do the accent all right.'

Yes, that was a good idea. But how could I push him under the nose of the Medium gang? He would need a cover story.

Well, once the decision had been made he was full of ideas. He sent a wire to Ada telling her to reserve a room at the Victoria Hotel in Woking in the name of Clyde Davis, saying he would arrive on the 3:10pm train. He said he was going to take over the Bonnors Case personally and wanted Ian to supervise the team doing the surveillance with the converter. He then met the two men who had been doing the surveillance last night, got them moving and told them Mr Ian Ferguson was in charge of them now.

He wrote a long note and left it for Ian for when he arrived, asking him to take over everything in the Blum case and then went out and bought himself a complete new set of clothes. He tried them on and grinned at himself in the shopkeeper's mirror - "gaudier than my usual style" - and then had them wrapped up.

He then left the Station Hotel, took the London train but got out at some small station after Woking and waited for the 3.10 from London. He had an empty carriage and was able to change into his new gear.

He arrived at Woking, looking as though he had just come from London, and took a cab to the Victoria Hotel. I was quite embarrassed with his performance as an American at the hotel reception. It seemed wildly over the top to me, but the hotel staff, apart from a few secret smirks amongst themselves, accepted him with aplomb.

Once he was installed in his room, he lit up a large cigar and went down to the reception again and started asking about Madame Vautour.

`Well, I've heard she has her Temple hereabouts ,' said the pretty receptionist, `but I'm not sure where.' She called over the doorkeeper and asked him.

The doorkeeper was a small smarmy looking man wearing the uniform of a Spanish General. But he was quite helpful as he looked up the address and wrote it slowly on a piece of paper, with much licking of the pencil point.

`You are thinking of visiting her, Sir?' he asked.

`Sure am. I've heard a whole lot about her and I can't wait to make her acquaintance.' He passed over a coin. `How'd you like to call me a cab, Mac?'

The doorkeeper looked at him blankly.

`How would I like to...?'

`He wants you to call a taxi-cab for him,' said the receptionist. She paused tactfully, then said:

`If you are thinking of visiting her it would be more usual to request an appointment first, Sir.'

`What?! I write a letter asking if I can see her and then she writes a letter saying "yes" and then I drive round? Boy, you English really do things the hard way! I guess I'll jest mosey round and if she can see me; if not we'll make a date.' He looked round for an ashtray and tapped his cigar on it. Then he turned to the doorkeeper who shrugged, stepped outside and whistled piercingly between his fingers.

The cab clopped up to the door and he climbed in, giving the driver the piece of paper on which was written "16, Royal Row".

`And make it snappy.'

`Waal, I guess she won't lay on an instant séance but we gotta get this show on the road. Screw writing letters, that's what's wrong with this goddam country,' he said to himself. I wondered briefly what the input to the Translator must be.

`No siree. No drive, that's what's wrong. Too god-damn' polite,' he continued.

Encouraged perhaps by the American accent, the cab driver galloped through the town, past the suburbs and into the driveway of the large ornate house we had already visited by night. We swung round in front of the door with a flourish, scattering the white marble chips which covered the driveway.

Alex stepped down and looked round, puffing his cigar. There was what looked like an elaborate cemetery in front of the house but closer inspection showed it to be a garden filled with cemetery-type statues. Sorrowful looking statues with down-cast eyes, urns and miniature temples, all in white marble. It was surrounded and shaded by tall cypress trees. In the distance he could see a white angel with outspread wings and he rubbed his head in recollection.

The door was opened by a tall man with a beard and wearing a black suit who looked down disapprovingly at the marble chips thrown onto the steps. Alex stepped forward.

`Hi. My name is Clyde G. Davis and I wondered if I could have a word with Madame Vautour.'

The butler, for that is who it must be, looked Alex up and down appraisingly.

`I am afraid Madame is at present indisposed. If perhaps you could state your business.'

`Jest tell your mistress that Clyde G. Davis of Noo Jersey wants to avail himself of her services, and she'll know.'

Some quick calculations were going on: the natural desire to chase off this bum, balanced by the fact that Americans were notoriously rich. He seemed to have reached a decision.

`It is quite impossible to see Madame at the moment,' he said definitely `but The Circle meets this afternoon at four pm and if Monsieur could return at that hour it may be possible to arrange a short interview. Monsieur is staying locally?'

`Tell him the name of the hotel,' I said.

`At the Victoria Hotel,' he said to the butler.

He allowed himself to look disappointed. `Well, OK, if that's the way it's gotta be. See you then.' He climbed back into the cab and returned to his hotel.

`Why tell him about the hotel?' he asked.

`I have a feeling they will want to check through your room to see if they can find something about you that can be revealed in a seance.'

`Good thinking. I'd better prepare it then.'

He went out and bought himself two different types of writing paper and spent the next hour writing an imaginary letter to himself from Pittsville, Ohio and a half-finished letter back to Mamie. This he partially hid under the blotter in his hotel room. I also suggested he run his hand over the carpet pile by his desk, to rub it all in one direction.

Then he took a cab up to the surveillance party in the park, where there was nothing to report but they seemed to be conscientiously at work. He then went to a tea room, read some papers and finally returned to the Victoria Hotel, carefully opening the door to his room. By squatting down and looking at the carpet pile against the light he could see two clear footprints.

`Fantastic' he said. `Where do I get such good ideas from?'

I could have told him that that particular one came from the "Army Intelligence Handbook Vol. II – Room Sensitising".

He was also pleased to see that the letter under the blotter had been minutely moved.

Chapter 38

After a light tea at the hotel he took a cab to 16, Royal Row again. We drove up the cedar lined drive, the white marble statues gleaming in the late afternoon sunlight, and pulled up in front of the house. Alex had been expecting a crowd and was rather surprised to see only two private coaches outside; one quite old but well-cared for; the other spanking new with a crest on the door.

`That's Lord Bonnors's coach!' he said. `What the hell's he doing here?'

`Have you ever met him?' I asked. This could screw things up if he recognised Alex. But no, they had never met.

We pulled up at the door which was opened by the butler we had seen before. Another man, also dressed in a sober black suit and wearing spectacles stepped out and opened our carriage door. The butler greeted Alex gravely. Inside the house, standing back from the door, Alex noted a small man in a grey suit watching him intently.

Alex entered the house and was silently shown into a black-and-white marbled hall. As his coat and hat were taken he noticed a small gold-painted sign standing by the door: "Occult circle `The Way Beyond'". Then he entered another room to one side. It was dimly lit, carpeted and very quiet. The centre piece was a large dark-wood table surrounded by hard-back seats, all facing the head where a large deep leather chair was placed.

Three of the chairs were already occupied. There was an elderly couple, the woman heavily veiled and wearing black lace gloves. The man was silver haired and holding a bible. The other chair was occupied by a young man of about 28 dressed in black. They hardly looked up when they were introduced by the butler as Mr and Mrs Faldor and Lord Bonnors.

Alex took his place with the others and looked around. There were some pictures of unknown personages on the walls, each with a diagonal black band of crepe across the bottom corner. By the door was a marble urn filled with lilies and behind us marble statue of a draped figure holding another urn. The atmosphere was close and oppressive, the smell of the lilies sweet and heavy.

After a while the spectacled man entered and ceremoniously placed a piece of thick green baize on the table in front of us. The letters of the alphabet were marked round its edge and at one end was the word "yes" and at the other the word "no". Finally a small circular polished wooden platter was placed in the middle of the piece of baize.

The "Ouija" board.

Another long pause and then the far door was opened by the spectacled man and with a rustle of black taffeta the Medium, Madame Vautour, entered and stood in front of the leather chair. We all stood up respectfully. The spectacled man pushed the chair forward and she sat down. She made a slight regal gesture and we all resumed our seats.

Madame Vautour began to speak. She had a fine deep contralto voice and a strong accent.

`First we would like to welcome to our gathering this evening a new member; Mr Davis from far over the seas. Like us he has come to find ..."The Way Beyond".'

Everyone in the room except Alex put their hand over their heart and muttered something.

Madame Vautour was dark with a prominent nose. Although not tall she had an overpowering personality and I could feel Alex becoming a little nervous and deferential. Good manners, mixed up with respect for the feelings of the others, the religious atmosphere and the impression that we were in the presence of the unknown were inhibiting him. I did nothing - it would be best just to observe for the moment.

She spoke to the spectacled man in French; I caught the name "Claude", and he came and sat at the table with us. He looked round at us then reached out and put the fingertips of his left hand on the board. The others followed suit; it seemed to be an expected routine. After a slight hesitation, Alex did the same.

There was a deep silence. Then Madame Vautour said softly:

`Are you present?'

The board moved under Alex's fingers towards the "yes". He looked carefully at the other persons' fingers to see if any hand was pushing, but everyone just seemed to be resting their fingers lightly on the board.

`Will you speak to us?'

Slowly and hesitantly the board moved again towards the "yes".

`She is shy,' said the Medium with a trace of amusement.

`Why are you shy tonight?' she continued.

The board slowly moved round the letters spelling out the word "new". All eyes turned towards Alex.

`You mustn't be shy,' scolded the Medium, as though to a child. `Only silly girls are shy with strangers. Mr Davis believes in you and means well.' She looked up at him with deep eyes.

`Er, yes Ma'am. Sure,' said Alex embarrassed.

`Can you see anyone dear to Mr Davis?'

Pause, then the board slowly spelt out "sister Margaret sends love".

Alex simulated amazement and shock.

`Dear Maggie!' he gasped. `She died last...how did you know... Maggie, Maggie, is it you really?'

The others at the table looked across kindly. It helped confirm their own beliefs, too.

`The bitch,' he thought, stunned like most people in the presence of a bare-faced fraud. It had all been in the letter he had written himself and left in his hotel room.

"Yes", pause, "now tired" spelt out the board.

`We mustn't ask her to do too much' said the Medium `She is only a little girl. Perhaps we can try with someone she knows better.'

Alex sat apparently dazed while the elderly couple received some messages from their long dead son Julian. The woman sobbed behind her veil and the man patted her on the shoulder comfortingly.

The ouija board was moving rapidly and confidently from letter to letter now, so the Medium asked a question herself:

`Alina, do you think you feel strong enough to help us to talk to Joanna?'

Consternation at the table and Lord Bonnors leant forward eagerly, his eyes devouring the board. But the board didn't move. Instead two loud raps sounded in the room. There was a hiss of indrawn breath from the audience. The Medium looked pleased and spoke to Claude who went round the room turning down the lights.

`Hey,' said Alex, alarmed. `What's going on? Can't we do this with the lights on?'

`The Shades cannot support the light of the Living,' said the Medium. `Do not be afraid, they are more afraid of you than you of them.'

She leant back in her chair, the leather creaking, and there was long pause. Finally the Medium began to speak. Her voice was deeper, slower.

`Now let us join hands and make the Circle of Reception.'

There was a rustle of clothing and Alex found himself holding the large hand of Lord Bonnors on his left and the cold dry hand of the Medium on his right.

`And now together: "As we open our Circle, let us open our minds and souls. Oh come to us, dead Spirits from beyond the grave. Come to us and give us tidings of our loved ones who must wait until we too cross over the Dark River, who must wait until that happy day when we will be joined with them again.'

`Amen,' whispered everyone.

`Our arms and minds are open, we are ready, we...' In the gloom Alex saw her head had fallen back against the head-rest of the chair. Claude moved quietly across the room and turned down the last light until it was just a very faint glimmer behind us. Two more loud raps.

There was a silence. Then in her normal voice:

`Alina! There you are. No, you mustn't go away.'

Alex felt Lord Bonnor's hand tighten.

`You promised you would bring Joanna to see us, to see her father.

There was a choking sob from Lord Bonnors.

The Medium's voice changed and became that of a little girl, but a little girl speaking with a strange hard accent.

`And I will too. But she is so happy here, she is playing with her little dog Fido. She has tied a pink ribbon round his neck. Oh, here she comes. Joanna! Your Daddy wants to see you.'

The voice changed again, now faint and muffled.

`Daddy! Where are you? I can't see you!'

`Joanna! Oh, God!' It was Lord Bonnors. His hand was trembling.

And now something had changed. Over the dim shadow that was the Medium had appeared a faint glowing nimbus.

The other couple gasped and with a rustle of clothing the woman crossed herself. The shape of the glow slowly changed.

'Just look at that!' said Alex, internally. 'It's Claude - he's kneeling behind her holding up a piece of white cloth. I'm going to grab it and turn the lights up!'

'No! No!' I said urgently. 'Let it ride this time. We've got to check this with Lady Bonnors first.'

The voice continued:

'Daddy! I see you! Oh Daddy, it's so nice to see you. I feel so happy as I know I will one day see you again and we will play by the lake in the sunlight. But Daddy, you must help the lady to build her church. Promise, Daddy, then I can come more. Daddy, I love you. I must go now, come and see me again soon, goodbye Daddy.'

The voice was almost inaudible. The glow gradually collapsed and disappeared.

There was a silence broken by the dry sobs of Lord Bonnors.

'Oh, God! It was her! Joanna - I saw her!'

There was a creaking of leather and the lights were slowly turned up. The Medium looked up from her chair, her face strained and exhausted. We all let go hands and sat back.

'How was it?' she said 'Did she speak to you?.'

'Oh, yes,' said Lord Bonnors. His face was streaked with tears. He pulled out a handkerchief. 'It was wonderful. It is so comforting to know she is happy. Her death was so painful.'

The Medium was helped out of her chair by Claude and then leaning on him slowly left the room.

After a while Claude returned and opened the other door. We stood up and slowly made our way out into the black-and-white hall. Our coats and hats were brought by two serving maids.

I could feel Alex was consumed with rage and did not trust himself to say anything on leaving. He just put his coat on and nodded curtly to the butler as he stepped out into the cold evening.

Chapter 39

'A stroke of luck that,' I said. 'Sews up the Bonnors Case. He's seeing a Medium about his daughter called Joanna. I didn't think he had any children, by the way.'

'It must have been with an old flame,' he replied, after a pause. 'God, I had never realised what bloodsuckers these Mediums are. She is just feeding off their love of dead relatives; she's bleeding him dry. For a Temple, she says. Did you see that "Manifestation"? Even I could see Claude was doing it. The sooner they're exposed, the better. I wonder how many other victims they have.'

He returned to the Station Hotel, intending to tell Ian about the Bonnors case.

He had been quietly drinking in the bar for about half an hour when Ian entered with a crash. Ignoring Alex, he went straight to the bar, ordered a bottle of whisky and paid for it immediately.

'We'll go up to my room,' he said abruptly.

Followed by the startled Alex, he mounted the hotel stairs with a savage energy, bottle in one hand and glass in the other.

As soon as the door had closed he tore off his coat, threw it on the floor and kicked it. He filled his glass, emptied it and burst into a stream of obscenities. Another glass.

Alex sat on the bed and watched him. He had never seen Ian in such a fury. He sipped his drink.

More obscenities - something to do with the police. He kicked his coat again.

By filtering out the foul and blasphemous, words could be heard which indicated displeasure with the local constabulary. They had done something, something quite simple and ... no, they had done badly, very badly, something which should have been quite simple. He had almost knocked down one of them. One that in the Dundee police would have been charged with criminal negligence.

It was the police force that Chief Inspector Dowly had lent Ian to make the arrest of the person operating the wireless telegraph sender.

'You found him!?' said Alex jumping to his feet.

'Aye, he started up and we traced him as you said. Then we went to get the police and when we returned he had stopped sending. Dowly said they needed a warrant so we sent for a magistrate. This old fool arrived and there we were all arguing in the street. He wouldn't believe us and finally a constable tripped over the wire and wrecked the sound converter.' He went into another fit of rage.

He took a hasty pull at his glass.

'And finally, in the middle of all this, a constable walks round from the back of the house to tell us that a heavily-laden coach had left about an hour ago. He hadn't told us before because he was waiting for his relief. I almost knocked him down.' He looked round for a chair and sat on it.

'There were ten of us. They couldn't have avoided hearing and seeing us and must have guessed the police were on to them somehow,' he continued. 'So they loaded up the incriminating wireless telegraph stuff and scarpered.'

Yes, that was bad news for Alex. His spirits sank. It meant the end of the Blum case unless he could again trace where they had taken the transmitter.

'And where did all this happen?' asked Alex, tensely.

Ian looked up blinking. The whisky was helping to numb his rage.

'Er... Regal Row. No, Royal Row. It was a corner house. I don't know what the number was but it had a cemetery in its front garden. Bloody great marble statues everywhere.'

Brandy slopped out of Alex's glass.

'What?! A big house, set back, with white gables?'

'Aye. That's it. Do you know it?'

'It's the Medium's house,' said Alex.

Chapter 40

'Holy Mother of God!' said Ian. 'The Medium. The Medium stole it!'

There was a long silence while they tried to work out the implications. Alex paced feverishly up and down the room.

'Why the hell did she do that?' asked Ian, bemused.

I was wondering about it too. They probably wouldn't appreciate its real value, it not being in their line. Probably thought of it just as a trick to improve their act. It would do that all right.

This was an interesting development. How could I use it to get back in contact with the Medium again?

'How would the Medium use the stolen sender and converter to improve their act?' I asked.

He hadn't thought of it, but did now.

'Sending a message over a long distance,' he said shortly. 'Sending a message in such a way that no one can see how it was done. By thought transference - Telepathy. Lots of Mediums say they can do it, but no one's done it regularly and convincingly yet. If they could do that, everyone would believe the rest of their mumbo-jumbo.'

I had a sudden idea.

'How about forcing them to make a telepathy demo. They'd be bound to use the sender and converter and then we'd grab them.'

'How the hell can I do that?' I didn't know either but I was beginning to have a faint idea.

Alex tried to comfort Ian, but Ian was beyond hearing. I had a feeling that Ian was not too proud of his own part in this affair and that some of his emotion was self-reproach.

Alex looked at him sympathetically and lifted him on to the bed and tugged his shoes off. Then looking round he found a piece of paper and scratched a short note, saying he was going to try and make an appointment with the Medium for the next day and could they meet in the Bureau the day after.

He left the room, closed the door quietly and returned to his own hotel, a few minutes walk away. Here he spent some time carefully composing a note to Madame Vautour, requesting an interview in the morning. He gave it to a bell-boy and turned in.

Chapter 41

The next morning he rose late and had a leisurely breakfast, thinking over the plan I had helped him to cook up. The reply from Madame Vautour arrived at 11am.

At a quarter to two he took a cab to 16, Royal Row and was shown into the black-and-white hall by the butler. His hat and coat were taken by a housemaid. After a few minutes Claude entered.

'That was real fantastic yesterday,' said Alex. 'How did she know about my sister? I've never seen anything like it. She is incredible.'

'Madame has the Second Sight' said Claude reverently. 'It has always been in her family.'

'I'd like to see her again. I have a proposition that I'm sure she will find very interesting. And remunerative, too.'

'Madame has agreed to see you, but only for a moment. Madame is always completely prostrated after a séance and must rest for several days.'

'I sure appreciate that,' said Alex.

They went up a big staircase and turned into a bedroom. The Medium, Madame Vautour, was lying in a big bed looking exhausted. Sitting in a corner was the small man in the grey suit who Alex had seen for a moment when he arrived for the séance yesterday. He was briefly introduced as Monsieur Scarron.

'You must excuse me for receiving you like this,' she said, smiling wanly 'but Claude tells me you must absolutely speak to me.'

'It's sure good of you to see me Ma'am and don't think I don't appreciate it.'

He glanced around the room looking uncomfortable.

'Waal, Ma'am, I have a confession to make,' he said finally. I am a member of the American Psychic Research Society and I visited you here yesterday,

convinced you were a phoney and to uncover you.' Madame Vautour looked at him uncomprehendingly but there was a sharp hiss from Claude who understood American. He translated quickly.

Madame Vautour's features darkened and she struggled to sit up in the bed. There was a sharp movement from the man in the corner. Alex held up his hand.

'But after your fine performance yesterday I am convinced you are the genuine article,' he said. 'There are so few,' he added.

The tension in the room relaxed.

'And so the reason for my wishing to see you again is that I would like to bring your attention to the Pfister Prize.'

He cocked his eye at her, but she looked back blankly.

'Waal, I guess he isn't known over this side of the pond. Hiram Pfister is our President and he has offered a prize of ten times the yearly wage of an average working man if you can pass a certain test.'

(Of course he didn't say "ten times the ..."; that was the work of the Translator)

'That's a lot of money,' said Claude 'but Madame uses her gift for the good of humanity; Madame is not accustomed to "pass tests".'

'Believe me Ma'am, there is nothing degrading about the Pfister Test.' He paused. 'How shall I start? We scientists are very interested in the occult abilities of people like you, Ma'am, people who are sensitive to influences that normal people like myself just can't feel. Now I have just recently had proof of your remarkable power, where you were able to contact my dear ...' He blew into his handkerchief. 'Excuse me Ma'am, but we were very close...' He blew again. Then collecting himself said:

'But such revelations, miraculous as they are, don't help us scientists to understand these forces any better.'

'Why do you need to "understand"? How can Man "understand" them anyway? Why don't you just accept?' asked Madame Vautour softly.

'Now that's a very interesting philosophical question, and I'm not sure I have an answer. But we just have to try, I guess. But if you find the idea of a test distasteful, I'll talk no more about it and...'

'I don't think Madame can make up her mind until you describe this Pfister Test,' interrupted Claude.

'It's real simple and I'm sure you would have no trouble with it at all, Ma'am,' said Alex. He then repeated that in Psychic Research it was very difficult to work with startling disclosures like they had had yesterday.

'We scientists like to work with numbers,' he said apologetically and explained that the Pfister Test was to measure Telepathy.

'We give the name Telepathy to the phenomenon of thought transference. It often occurs in Nature but its quality is very difficult to measure. And we scientists have to measure everything,' he smiled.

'I understand that. Now what exactly do you wish me to do?'

'For Telepathy we need two people; a sender and a receiver of the Telepathic signals. The receiver, who will be you, will be sitting at a table with paper and pen in a closed room. The other person, the sender, will be at some distance, placed so that there is no possibility of normal communication with you. I will be with you and an independent witness will be sitting in with the sender.'

'And you wish me to read the thoughts of the sender?'

'That is so. But as I said, I want to be able to measure the quality of the contact between sender and receiver so I will give the sender a list of numbers or

letters which he will look at. You will then write down what you think he is looking at, letter by letter and number by number.'

'It sounds very simple. Like the guessing games we used to play as children. And what do you do when I've guessed them all?'

'Waal, Ma'am,' said Alex smiling 'It sure would be great if you guessed them all. I've conducted a lot of these tests and the best I've seen so far is 72%. And he couldn't keep it up,' he added sadly.

Madame Vautour glanced across to Scarron sitting silently in the corner. She looked back to Alex and seemed to be considering.

'It is a very unusual request and as I have never tried to do this Telepathy before, I must ask you to let me reflect. You will be informed of my decision by Claude. And now I must ask you to let me rest.'

On the way out Alex told Claude he was returning to London and would be staying at the Hotel de Charles.

He then took the next train back to London

Chapter 42

First thing the next day was an extraordinary meeting at the house in Ashland Place. The only real subject on the agenda was the complicated tangle the Bonnors Case and the Blum Case had become.

Alex started:

'In a sense both cases have been solved. Lord Bonnors is under the influence of a Medium. Blum's brother has invented wireless telegraphy and it was stolen from him by a member of what we can call the Medium Gang. His death may have been accident or murder. Probably murder.'

'I'm not sure what we should do on the Bonnors Case...,' he continued.

'Why don't we just tell him she's a fake?' asked Ian. 'Now we know she is, it should be easy enough to find proof to convince him.'

But Ada shook her head.

'He is dependant on the Medium now. She is the only way he can meet his dead daughter. We don't know what the effect on him will be if we show him it was all trickery.'

'Exactly,' said Alex. 'We might have another murder on our hands...'

'And no a bad thing either,' said Ian 'I never realised what a disgusting trade these mediums ply. If I had my way...'

'Yes, I agree,' said Alex. 'But our job finishes when we tell Lady Bonnors the cause of her husband's behaviour.'

'Of course, but if they get exposed because they have conspired to commit a murder ...' said Ian.

'Quite a different kettle of fish,' said Alex. 'Naturally I would be sorry for Lord Bonnors, but we must also think of other potential victims.'

'They've been married three years. They should have some children of their own. It would solve all their problems,' said Ian. 'Do they not know how it's done?' There was an embarrassed silence and Alex coughed.

'Catching this Medium would also be a warning to other Mediums,' said Ada, blushing slightly at Ian's coarseness.

I thought about Spiritualism for a moment. Yes, it was a fraud and yes it earned lots of money for the Mediums. And no, it didn't attempt to elevate the morals of its devotees. But it very effectively solaced a lot of bereaved people by telling them their loved ones had not ceased to exist but were waiting for them.

People who would be very unhappy to be shown the whole thing was a fraud. How rarely were things black and white.

Ian said that Chief Inspector Dowly of the Woking police had been very apologetic about the performance of the force he had sent to arrest the Medium. He had promised to make all efforts to trace the coach that had escaped, but at the moment all he could say was that it had last been seen driving south.

Alex then told them about his idea for keeping in contact with the Medium Gang and tempting them to use the wireless telegraph again. He recounted his last meeting with the Medium where he had told her of the telepathy test he wanted to perform.

'It's a gift for the wireless telegraph they have stolen. If anything will get them to use it, that's it,' he said.

'And then we'll trap them in *flagrente delicto* said Ian with satisfaction.

'Well, they haven't bitten yet. They will contact me at the Hotel de Charles if they are interested. We just have to wait.'

'And what are you going to do with all this?' asked Ada, pointing to a mess of splintered wood and tangled fine wire that was spread out on one of the clean tables. It was all that was left of the sound converter.

Another problem. Alex wandered over and picked up some contraption that looked like a small piece of coke fixed in a brass collar. There was a big blob of candle-wax on the coke and out of the middle came a fine wire. He put it down and sighed.

'Yes, I must see Frederick Blum and tell him about this. I can put him in contact with a friend of mine who knows something about telegraphy. Perhaps they can work out something between them. Leave it as it is for the moment.' They went on to talk about other cases, but I was beginning to feel dizzy. Too many Timelines. What should I be doing?

The Aliens were supposed to be connected with the Medium. We had found a Medium but not the Aliens. Alex seemed to have done all he could to keep contact with the Medium with his telepathy prize bait and I couldn't think of anything else to add.

Rather impatiently I would just have to wait, too.

Chapter 43

That evening Alex went round to the Hotel de Charles, to see if any message had arrived for Mr Clyde. Nothing. He debated with himself what to do then started off walking south.

'Where are you off to now?' I asked.

He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket to refresh his memory.

'Great Windmill Street. Number 20. I have been told there is a group of Frenchmen living there and they are giving French lessons.'

'And why do you want to learn French?'

'Well, practise it really. I already speak a bit. There are a lot of French nobles in London these days and we had to turn down two cases the other day just because no one in the Bureau spoke French well enough.'

French lessons. Why not. I confined myself to watching the street scene as we walked briskly down what I recognised as Oxford Street, right into Regent Street and after a few minutes, left. This was a different part of the world. Small food stalls illuminated with oil-lamps, strange exotic smells and a dozen loud foreign languages being shouted down from open windows.

`Soho' he said. `It's filled with foreigners.'

I looked at some of the lower windows which were well illuminated and could be seen filled with dark-haired young girls wearing low-cut dresses.

`It's an interesting part of London,' he said.

I bet.

Here we were. Great Windmill Street. A tall building. He entered the rather flashy entrance hall and looked at a number of signs fixed to the wall near the staircase. Nothing about French lessons. He mounted the stairs and found the first floor was a long corridor with side rooms, some of them looking like lecture rooms but they were all empty except one where about twenty people were sitting on wooden chairs listening to a man out of sight. They seemed to be mostly working class. A man sitting at a small table near the door was about to say something to Alex but Alex withdrew.

He was annoyed. `It's got to be here somewhere,' he grunted. But the floor above was disused and downstairs was the ground-floor, shops and things, all closed now. He looked at his watch, 7:35pm.

`Maybe they use the same class-room but at 8 o'clock,' I suggested, bored. `You could sit in until they finish.'

He turned the handle and opened the door again. The man sitting by the door thrust a piece of paper at him and whispered:

`That'll be sixpence. Please take your seat quietly. You're very late.'

Alex closed the door gently and tip-toed across the creaking wooden floor to take a vacant chair at the rear. Two or three people turned and looked at him but most were concentrating on the speaker who was talking to them from a low rostrum.

Alex sat down on the rickety chair and looked round. His first impression had been wrong. They were a mixed bag. Some were obviously workers but there were also two gentlemen soberly dressed sitting in the front row. The man sitting at the table by the door was still watching him speculatively.

He shifted his weight and stretched out his legs.

He now glanced up at the stage and with a slight shock recognised the bearded man he had bumped into the other day. The man was gesticulating and turning to frequently stab a finger at the blackboard behind him on which were sketched some diagrams in thick powerful strokes. He had a deep voice and a harsh foreign accent.

`... and so the material has its valued increased by the work done on it by the worker. And now this product is distributed and finally sold at an exorbitant profit. And where does this profit go? Into the pocket of the capitalist, the man who has never done a stroke of honest work in his life, a man who inherited his money. The only answer is to change Society. The means of production and distribution must belong to the State, no one must be allowed to accumulate so much wealth. Wealth is power and as you English so rightly say "Power corrupts".'

Alex was looking round and everyone was nodding in agreement. He looked down at the paper he was holding. It was badly printed and smudged but in the middle, in a box, was printed "Contribute to Society what you can - take out what you need".

`Hey, that's a neat idea,' said Alex intrigued.

`No it isn't,' I said, waking up. I had heard those fool arguments at High School. `It's a lot of garbage. OK, it might work if everyone was a saint, but they're not. Just one guy has to put in less than he can, and take out more than he needs

and the system folds. To make it "work" someone has to decide what everyone puts in and what everyone takes out.'

I knew. The idea had been tried out and dropped in many countries over the last hundred years. In Russia, the country that had really tried it, it had become so wildly unpopular that their leaders had finally had to build a wall around the country to keep their citizens in. I thought of passing this on to Alex, but it wasn't allowed and in any case he would never believe that human beings could be so daft.

But then I thought of all the strife we had had in the 20th Century and were still having in the 21st because this idealistic tomfoolery was still living on - now as part of the Yellow People's religion. Maybe I could still do something.

'You tell them what I just told you,' I said.

'But it's just an interesting theory,' he protested 'It's not important. No one's going to listen to this lot.'

'Oh yes they are. Stand up.' He unwillingly climbed to his feet and the loud scraping of his chair made the speaker stop and everyone turn round.

'I am amazed that intelligent people ..' I started him off.

'I am amazed that intelligent people,' he began slowly. 'People with knowledge of the world and how variable people are, can take this twaddle seriously.'

He read out from the piece of paper. '"Contribute to Society what you can - take out what you need".'

'For this system to work everyone must be kind-hearted, tolerant, altruistic and honest. They must regulate themselves and their needs. Greed, jealousy, love of power is out. Go outside in the street and look around, look at human history. You're all naïve simpletons if you think it can work.'

He was doing fine. They were all watching him open mouthed and two of them were making convulsive gestures. The bearded guy on the podium was looking at him frozen. I guess he wasn't used to his audience talking back.

'But it can be made to work,' I prompted.

'But it can be made to work,' he said. 'Oh, yes, It can be **made** to work, after a fashion. As unfortunately not everyone can be trusted to "put in what they can and take out what they need", we're going to require something not mentioned here.'

He waved the piece of paper.

'We're going to need a person who decides how much you put in and how much you take out. And to stop cheating, you're going to need a lot of people deciding. Policemen. That's what you're going to need - lots of policemen. And someone has to be in charge of the policemen. Someone who's going to have a fantastic amount of power, because there's no one to balance him. And as we so rightly say in England,' he gestured at the platform, '"Power corrupts". And to complete the quotation, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely".'

He waved the paper again.

'What you're looking at here is a blueprint for a Police State.'

'Great,' I applauded. I couldn't have said it better myself.

But the audience seemed to be over-reacting a bit. Instead of listening to this as an interesting new viewpoint, to be debated in a civilised manner, they were standing up and shouting. Some of them were waving their hands around. The man on the podium had stepped down and was trying to fight his way through the crowd, roaring angrily. Of the two convulsives, one was now lying on the floor and apparently in a fit, while the other was trying to pull something out of his pocket. But

his hand was shaking so much he couldn't seem to co-ordinate. Christ! It was a pistol!

'There's a guy over there with a pistol. I think we'd better get out of here,' I said.

He looked round to find that the man who had been sitting at the table by the door had half risen but was frozen. Saliva was slowly dripping down his chin. Alex cautiously stepped round him, as his eyes wildly rolled.

'Place is full of weirdo's,' said Alex taking a last look round before stepping out into the corridor. As he walked down the corridor we heard a pistol shot.

'Foreigners, you see. Excitable. No sense of humour,' he explained.

He looked at the signs again as we left.

'Pity about the French lessons, though. I suppose they must be on another day.'

He spent the rest of the evening drinking and singing in the back of a music hall. It reminded me of a beer-hall in Munich.

Chapter 44

Early next morning he went round to the Hotel de Charles and found a letter awaiting him. It was from Woking. Madame Vautour agreed to his request but stipulated the test would have to take place at a residence she had in the town of Ventnor, Isle of Wight. It could not take place at the Temple in Woking as that "was associated with her Contacts in the Other World, who would regard the Telepathy Test as frivolous". A date was proposed two days hence.

'She's bitten!' he thought jubilantly.

Alex sent a telegram agreeing and hurried back to the Bureau, stopping only to buy a large-scale map of the Isle of Wight. Here he brought Ada and Ian up to date and they had a hasty council of war, gathered round the map.

Ada told them that Ventnor was a very nice but rather expensive holiday resort on the Isle of Wight, an island off the south coast of England.

'Madame Vautour and the sound converter will presumably be in her house in Ventnor, here,' began Alex pointing on the map. 'The sender will be within three kilometers.' He drew a circle with a pair of compasses. They all looked at the map thoughtfully. 'Ian, I want you first to go and see Dowly again and get him to put in a word for us with the Isle of Wight police, based at ..' he looked at the map, '..Newport seems to be the main town. After the recent foul-up he should be more than willing to help us. Tell him we'll do our best for him before the Press.'

He continued looking at Ian.

'We've really got to catch them this time - we're not going to get another chance. There must be no fumbling with search warrants. It's going to require split-second timing. As soon as I give the sign they must come straight in: next time the Gang are just going to destroy the evidence.'

Ian made a note on his pad.

'And then we must go to Ventnor as soon as possible and spy out the land. Madame Vautour is going to put the person she chooses as "sender" in some hut or house in this circle,' he pointed to the map, 'and the wireless telegraph sender is going to be there too.'

'Yes,' said Ian 'If we could find where they were going to send from, we could have the police waiting at the sender end and the receiver end and catch the whole gang at the same time.' He brought his two hands together in a cup.

`Right', said Alex. `And this brings me to the next point. I will be with Madame Vautour, the receiver, and I want you to go with the sender. You can be my sceptical witness representing the British Society for Psychical Research. I will give you a sealed envelope containing the messages to be sent and when everything is ready you open it and show it to the sender person. We can work out the details later.'

`You could make the last message into some sort of accusation,' suggested Ada.

`Aye,' said Ian, interested. `That would shake them up just before we struck.' Alex turned to Ada.

`We're also going to need some help and it's no good using London men, they'd stick out like a sore thumb. See if we have any contacts on the Isle of Wight and can hire a couple of men. They should look like farmers. Or fishermen,' he added, remembering Ventnor was on the coast.

There was some further discussion of train and ferry times, hotel reservations etc. and then Ada picked up a piece of paper.

`Lady Bonnors has sent a rather impatient note requesting a report on progress, if any,' said Ada. `How shall I reply?'

Alex looked at her.

`Her Case is finished, of course. But we don't want to disturb the Medium Gang until the telepathy test trap has been sprung. Tell her we're making satisfactory progress and hope in a short while to be able to reveal ... you know the sort of thing,' he said.

Ventnor. The name rang a bell. My great uncle had been there in WWII on a radar station and had always gone on about how he had saved England in the Battle of Britain. The radar station had been bombed and its antenna wrecked, leaving a big hole in radar cover over southern England. But he had insisted that the transmitter stay on the air with what was left of the antenna. Useless for locating German bombers, but the Germans heard the transmitter pulses and thinking the station was still in operation, thought the radar cover was still intact and kept away. At least that was his story.

I remembered him with affection.

Chapter 45

Alex and Ian then left to make their various preparations, Alex up to his rooms above the Bureau. He opened a small cupboard I hadn't seen before and lifted out two "pin-fire" revolvers, ammunition for them, a night compass, a dark-lantern, two pairs of handcuffs, a rope, a telescope, a sword-stick and a nasty-looking cosh.

`What's all this?' I asked. `Are you thinking of starting a war?'

`You never know,' he said, packing everything carefully into his bags and then rubbing his hands. He was enjoying himself.

A cab took us to Waterloo railway station and we pulled out of the station in clouds of steam. Apart from a group of sailors rejoining their ships at Portsmouth, the train was almost empty.

At Woking Alex and Ian got off the train and, leaving their luggage at the station, walked round to Frederick Blum's drapery shop. They found the front being boarded up and a "Business Sold" notice outside.

A pretty young lady, whom Alex hardly recognised as Mrs Blum, called to the back of the shop to her husband. Frederick Blum, looking about ten years

younger, came forward between the empty counters. In reply to Alex's surprised observations he said they were selling up and moving.

'Marta's never been very happy here. We're making a new start near some of her relatives in London. They're in Soho; it's quite near your Bureau, I think.'

He sat down and listened carefully as Alex told him about the accident and he noted down the address of Dr Phillip Jones who would help him to find out how the wireless telegraph worked and how to patent it. Alex told him that they had a good lead on who had murdered his brother and the police were expecting to make an arrest in a few days. He should stay in touch as he would be required to identify his brother's stolen equipment.

They then left and walked back to the station to take the next Portsmouth train.

'Got a bun in the oven, or I'm a Dutchman,' said Ian. 'A child would be the best thing that could happen to them after all this.'

The train took them right up to the ferry station where after a short delay they caught a steamer to take them the seven kilometers across the Solent to the Isle of Wight. It was a cold blustery day and they both stayed in the cabin.

The ferry pulled into a small port and they disembarked at a small quay with the sign "Ryde".

There was a short railway line along the coast to Ventnor but as it was closed at this time of the year, they found a cab and were soon trotting around the coast towards Ventnor. We arrived in about half an hour.

It was dark, windy and cold and there wasn't much to see. They would have the whole of the next day to plan the trap so as soon as they had installed themselves in the hotel, they both turned in early.

Chapter 46

The next day, after breakfast, they both dressed inconspicuously and set out to "scout around a bit". Madame Vautour's house, the house where the test was to take place, was found to be situated on a headland about two kilometers from the hotel. It had a two meter high stone wall around it and lots of high chimneys several of which were smoking. They lay in the long grass examining it with a telescope.

'It's pretty isolated. The police won't be able to approach it without being seen,' said Ian.

'Let's look round the other side,' said Alex.

Here it was better. The house could be seen fronting onto a long lawn stretching along the cliff-top towards the sea. The tide was in and the sea was crashing against the rocks at the foot of the cliffs but half way up the cliff face there was a narrow footpath - part of a footpath going round the whole coast probably.

'They'll have to climb up that way and hide outside the house somewhere. Can you see any cover?' said Alex.

'Yes. There's a lot of shrubbery just to the side of the main windows. Room for about ten men I'd say,' said Ian, slowly moving the telescope.

Alex looked at his watch. 2pm. He was supposed to visit the house the afternoon of the next day and the test would take place in the evening.

'I don't see how you're going to signal to the police,' said Ian, telescope still up to his eye.

'I'll think of something,' said Alex. 'Can you see any wires?'

`Maybe. I can't be sure. Do ye see anything hanging from that middle chimney?' He handed the telescope over.

`Yes, that's it!' said Alex immediately. `It runs down into a small window by the side of house. So that's where the action is going to be.'

`Have you thought about the test?' asked Ian. `Where is the sender going to be?'

`I don't know. They may want to have him on a boat and send him out to sea. That would be a convincing test and it would be easy to hide the sender on the boat somewhere. But I don't know if the thing works over water, or if it does, for how far. All we know is that it works to at least three kilometers over land.'

`If the weather's like this they'll be sending no boats out,' said Ian, `They'll probably have some small house lined up, somewhere inland. They'd need another room for the sender - that wee spark makes a lot of noise and if I was able to hear it I would be able to guess that something funny was going on. If I didn't know it already.'

`We want to catch them at the sender end as well as at the sound converter end,' said Alex `So we must try to find out where they are going to take you. Some small house within three kilometers. Let's split up at the cliff top and each search in a different direction.'

They climbed back to the top of the cliffs and parted, arranging to meet in the hotel at five o'clock.

Completely muffled up against the wind and rain Alex walked about eight kilometers along the cliff-tops to the next headland and then returned to Ventnor by an inland path. It was pouring with rain and he saw nothing that could be used as sender station.

Back at the hotel, two men looking like fishermen had appeared at the desk asking for Alex. They had come from a Private Detective Agency in Newport, in reply to Ada's telegram. Alex interviewed them briefly and they were installed in a double room.

It was a while before Ian returned. He had been around the headland to a little port called Sandown, also about eight kilometers away, but in the other direction.

`There's several good possibilities,' he said, shaking the water from his oilskins. `Some are small houses and others are small wooden beach huts. All deserted at this time of the year. I had a look at them but none of them seem to have been broken into yet.'

`They may have the keys for the one they intend to use,' said Alex. `We'll just have to keep an eye on their house and if anyone leaves to go along the cliff path, we must follow to see which way they go.'

The two "fishermen" were immediately sent to keep an eye on the Madame Vautours's house. If anyone left one of them was to follow and the other was to return to tell us. Alex and Ian then sat down to a hot meal.

They were sitting round the crackling log-fire, drinking hot toddy and talking about old cases, when one of the watchers entered. Three people with a loaded horse and two lanterns had left the house about ten minutes ago!

They dashed up to their room and started pulling on their oilskins. Alex loaded himself up with his armoury and then asked Ian if he wanted his spare revolver.

`No, I'll stick to my old faithful,' he said, displaying a heavy-looking "pepper-box" revolver. `I don't trust those new-fangled guns.'

I looked at it with interest. It had six twenty centimeter barrels each separately loaded with powder and bullet. Each barrel had a small nipple in the breach over which was placed a copper fulminate capsule. The barrels were fired by a hammer moving round and striking the copper capsules one at a time, each time the trigger was pulled. Reliable perhaps, but it must have weighed a ton and each barrel had to be loaded individually.

Alex's pistol was very close to a modern revolver. Just one barrel and six breeches which were turned round to line up with the barrel, one at a time. And he had cartridges, which meant he could reload quickly. They were odd, those pin-fire cartridges. They looked just like modern cartridges but a little pin stuck out of the side, at an angle. The hammer had to strike this pin to fire the cartridge.

They left the hotel and hastened along the cliff top towards the Madame Vautour's house. It had stopped raining and the wind had dropped. There was a small crescent moon, sliding in and out of the clouds and just bright enough to show the path.

The path climbed a little as they left Ventnor and near the top they overtook two men, one wheezing and coughing. Thinking they might have seen the horse, Ian stopped and started to ask the smaller one, when the moon slid from behind a cloud. Immediately the smaller one uttered a curse and like lightning dug his hand into his pocket. Out it came with something gleaming and Alex heard a click.

'Duck!' I shouted, and in the nick of time, for there was a red flash and a loud bang. He felt the wind of the bullet over his head. Ian shouted and there was another loud bang. Then the sound of running feet and the gunman could be seen holding the coughing one by the arm and urging him down the path. A few meters down he stopped and turned round. His hand came up.

'Watch out!' shouted Ian. But this time Alex had his pistol out too and he fired at the same time as the other. He was blinded by the flash and the clouds of smoke that now hung over the path.

The moon had disappeared and so had the pair.

'What the devils was that?!' said Alex outraged. 'The fool nearly shot me! Let's get after them!'

I was as amazed as Alex. I hadn't thought of cliff-top shoot-outs as part of Victorian England.

'They've gone,' said Ian, putting his pistol away. 'Guilty conscience, if I've ever seen it. They must be fleeing the scene of a crime. That big bearded one looked a typical criminal to me.'

The Medium's butler was bearded! Alex asked Ian to describe him but from the description he appeared too big for the butler.

They both looked irresolutely down the path and then decided their mission was more important. So with one last look back, they turned and hastened up the hill.

Arriving at the top they could now see over the headland and down into the next bay. Ian pointed out the lights of Shanklin below and Sandown, about four kilometers further on.

'The houses I saw are on the cliff edge just this side of Shanklin,' said Ian.

'And there they are,' said Alex, pointing to a slowly moving light beneath us.

We cautiously descended the path behind them and could soon hear the sound of a horse's hooves striking the rocky path as we got nearer. We kept well back until the sound stopped and we saw a group of four men turning into the garden of a small house with some trees growing against it.

We left the path and crept along the cliff-top up to the garden wall. Peering over we saw one was opening the house door with a key; the other three were

unloading the horse and carrying heavy objects into the house. The batteries and the spark coil!

Another light was lit in the house and now one figure was clumsily climbing up a tree. Putting up the antenna!

A long pause and then Alex and Ian gasped together as they saw blue flashes reflected from the ceiling of the room where the light was, then nothing.

'That's it!' said Ian, 'final proof.'

Alex held his watch up to the moonlight. 9:46pm.

'I bet they're waiting until 10 o'clock to make a test.'

And sure enough at ten o'clock exactly the inside of the small house was illuminated with the flickering blue glow from the spark. It continued for about five minutes and then ceased. The house door opened and everyone came out, the door being locked behind them. The horse was untied and the whole party disappeared back up the cliff path in the direction of Ventnor.

Alex and Ian then carefully walked round the house, noting where the wire entered. They decided the raiding party could approach from the Shanklin side and hide behind the garden wall.

They returned to their hotel.

Chapter 47

After breakfast Ian drove over to the main town, Newport, to make contact with the police but Alex stayed in the hotel, going over again with the two helpers what was required.

Ian returned just before lunch with the news that the police would be very pleased to back us up and would have men on the spot as required. Ian had assured them that all the credit for any arrests would go to them.

Alex and Ian then dressed very carefully and had the hotel coach take them the two kilometer along the coast road to Madame Vautour's house. They pulled into the driveway and the door was opened by a stocky bearded man in servant's livery who Alex had not seen before. They were expected and were immediately shown in.

A housemaid took their hats, coats and canes.

It was pleasantly warm, even by the entrance, and Alex noted that the house had the new steam heating. (New since the Romans left 1500 years ago, that is) This house had none of the "Temple" air about it. A typical middle-class house, rather over-furnished. They found Madame Vautour in the drawing-room. The bearded servant was standing behind her chair.

Alex introduced Ian as Mr Ferguson "my very good friend from north of the border". In the corner sat the sharp-eyed Mr Scarron who just nodded.

Alex then explained what he wanted to do.

'It's really very simple. Your chosen sender will leave here, in the coach we have outside, so as to arrive at the sending end at, let us call it time "t". Mr Ferguson will go with him and will have in his pocket a sealed envelope.'

He looked at Ian who reached into an inside pocket and handed Alex a heavily sealed buff-coloured envelope. He held it up.

'In this envelope is a piece of paper covered with groups of letters and divided into twelve sections. Mr Ferguson has prepared another sealed envelope, containing an identical piece of paper, which he has deposited in the vault of the Newport Bank. At time "t + 5" minutes, Mr Ferguson will open the envelope and show the first part of the piece of paper to your sender who will sit down and

concentrate on it for five minutes. During that time, I want you to sit down and write down what you think your sender is seeing. Is that clear so far, Ma'am?

'Yes,' said Madame Vautour. Did I detect some relief in her voice?

'Good. Then for the next five minutes the next part of the paper will be exposed and your sender will look at that and you will write it down. There are twelve parts so the whole test will last one hour.'

Perhaps a triumphant glance from Madame Vautour to Scarron? So their batteries would last an hour.

'At the end of that time,' continued Alex 'you will give me your piece of paper and I will put it in another envelope and seal it. Mr Ferguson will return and add his seal. We will then both go to the Newport Bank where all envelopes will be opened and compared.' He handed the envelope back to Ian who carefully replaced in an inside pocket.

'It seems simple enough,' said Madame Vautour.

'And now Madame,' said Ian, speaking for the first time, 'I must ask you to show me where you intend to place your sender. I will sign nothing if there's the slightest sign of trickery,' he added to Alex. 'I made that quite clear when you first approached me.'

'Of course, if you want any of the details to be changed, I am sure Madame Vautour will be more than willing to accommodate you,' said Alex. Madame Vautour appeared about to say something but then changed her mind.

'I am sure you will find everything in order,' she said stiffly to Ian.

Alex looked at his watch.

'Perhaps we can go and inspect the arrangements now?' he said.

The manservant, who it appeared was called Felix, left the room and returned with Claude, who nodded in recognition. Alex, Ian and Claude then climbed into the coach and drove inland. I was beginning to think they had chosen another sending site and Alex looked out of the coach windows anxiously, wondering if there were time to warn the police if that were so. But it turned out to be an inland road which went past the entrance to a short path leading to the house we had seen. We turned into it and pulled up in front of the house and everyone climbed out. Ian pulled out a telescope made great play of scanning the land in all directions and also out to sea.

'What are you looking for?' asked Alex loudly.

'I want to avoid the possibility of light signals,' said Ian.

'But light signals would never get through that hill,' said Alex.

'Easy enough to have a man on top to relay them down the other side,' said Ian severely. 'Or a man on a boat,' he added, looking out to sea.

Alex looked on, feigning amusement.

'A bit far fetched, isn't it?' he asked.

'Not as far fetched as telepathy,' answered Ian grimly. 'It's a rule in science that you always look for a natural explanation, however complicated, before you start inventing new phenomena.'

Very good, I thought admiringly. Ian would fit into the 21st Century with very little culture shock.

Ian then started looking around the house to see if any wires led along the cliff top. He carefully avoided the antenna wire disappearing up the tree.

Claude had been listening to all this and opened the front door of the bungalow when Ian had finished his inspection. We entered the small front room. It was rather barely furnished with a wooden table and chairs. Claude crouched over the fireplace and put a match to a fire already prepared. Ian walked round opening

all the doors which led to sleeping rooms and a small combined bathroom toilet. There was a small trap door with scuff marks around it, leading up to the loft. Ian ignored it.

I looked round and wondered how they were going to do it. The spark coil was in the loft of course, but the person who had to switch it off and on in the Morse code was going to have to look over the "sender's" shoulder somehow. A hole in the ceiling perhaps?

'We'll find out when the police raid,' thought Alex.

'Seems all right,' said Ian finally, in a reluctant voice.

The house was then carefully locked up and we all climbed into the coach and returned in the gloom of the early evening to Madame Vautour's house.

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Back in the warm sitting room the Medium, Felix the servant and the enigmatic Scarron were still placed where we had seen them last. Claude and Madame Vautour exchanged some words in French.

Alex pulled out his watch and compared it with Ian's.

'Well, Ma'am, with your permission, I think we should start,' he said. He looked at her expectantly.

'Very well. You have seen all the arrangements now and convinced yourself that there can be no trickery. But now I have a condition of my own. I have attempted to do Telepathy and I find I need what you call the "sender" to be mesmerised.'

Consternation! A new card! Alex and Ian consulted together in whispers.

'What's she up to? It must be a trick,' said Ian.

'What's mesmerism?' I asked.

'It's a way of sort of putting someone to sleep by animal magnetism,' said Alex. 'I've seen it on the stage. The mesmerise waves his hands in front of the person to be mesmerised and takes control of his mind. He can make the subject do anything, raise blisters on his arm by just touching him there and telling him it's a red-hot poker.' He shuddered. 'I'd never let anyone mesmerise me.'

Hypnotism! Yes, I'd recently seen the effect of that. I was annoyed to find that my knowledge from the 21st Century had a big hole in it as far as hypnotism was concerned. But at least I knew it couldn't make people telepathic - I knew telepathy hadn't been proved.

Ian was looking at Alex, who had been looking into the distance as he talked with me - thinking he was talking to himself, of course. He recovered himself sharply.

'Sure it's a trick,' he said 'It must be some way of getting the sender to read out the letters aloud so the person upstairs on the Morse key knows what to send.'

They stepped apart.

'Very well, Ma'am,' said Alex. 'It's rather irregular to spring it on us at the last moment, but I guess it makes no difference. Will you also be mesmerised?'

'For me it will not be necessary.' She motioned to Felix who stepped out of the room and returned with a slight figure in a heavy travelling cloak. The figure turned round and for Alex the world stopped.

She was about eighteen, with dark heavy hair framing a perfect oval face. She had enormous velvet brown eyes and full red lips which were slightly parted revealing pearly white teeth.

She blushed and Alex dropped his bag. Clumsily he pushed the papers back and she stooped down to help him. She had long slender fingers and wore no ring.

`That's all right, Giselle,' said Madame Vautour irritably. `Mademoiselle Dupont is my niece and will be the sender. Mr Clyde Davis. Mr Ferguson.'

She gave him her hand. It lay smooth and soft in his and she looked up at him with her wide-spaced dark eyes. Some-where a choir was singing.

`Meester Davees,' she whispered and his heart melted.

`I'm delighted to meet you,' he said.

`Don't forget the American accent, you fool,' I said. `Let's get on with this test. You can see her afterwards.'

`And now,' said Madame Vautour, placing a chair at a small table and adjusting an oil lamp which was on it. The young girl seemed to look round despairingly but then sat down obediently. Felix then placed another chair at the table, facing Giselle.

There was a movement from the corner and Mr Scarron stood up and walked across the room. Now Alex could see him better. He was about forty, dark, with a brown pock-marked face and intensely blue eyes. He was only a small man but he was well-built and radiated confidence. The other three moved deferentially aside as he took the chair opposite the young girl.

He moved the light fractionally and then said something shortly to Giselle in French. She reluctantly put one small hand on the table and he covered it with his. It was a large hand for such a small man, the fingers stubby and the back covered with black hair, like an ape. His other hand pulled the watch fob from his waistcoat pocket and he started to swing it in front of him, glittering brightly in the lamp light. The other three turned their faces away from the table.

There was dead silence in the room and Alex felt a sick revulsion as he looked at the two hands.

Scarron was now saying something to her and she was repeating it in a toneless voice, her hand imprisoned under his.

Finally he said something sharply and removed his hand. She stayed there a moment not moving and then slowly stood up, her eyes looking ahead unseeingly. Claude took her arm and gently led her to the door.

Mr Scarron then rose and went to the other door, quickly opened by Felix. As he left he looked back at Alex with a peculiar look of triumph. Alex was a turmoil of emotions, mostly not understood.

Chapter 48

`For Christ's sake, snap out of it!' I said.

`But she was beautiful. I've never seen any one so beautiful. I'm going to marry her.'

`She's a Commoner,' I reminded him. `Your Mum will do her nut if you marry her. She'll cut you off with a farthing.'

`When she sees her she must change her mind.'

`The test,' I said. The Victorian ethic of keeping men and women apart until marriage was OK work-wise but it could give the endocrine system a nasty jar when they finally did meet.

`Anyway, she seems to belong to Scarron,' I said unwisely.

There was a sudden hot red glow, quickly suppressed.

`Yes,' he said matter-of-factly, I'm going to have to kill him.'

I couldn't think of anything to say.

He took a deep breath and reluctantly transferred his attention to Madame Vautour.

Madame Vautour sat down at a small ornate table by the side of the door. There was silence as she arranged pen, ink and paper. Felix sat with his back to the wall and Alex sat near the heavily curtained window observing, his watch in his hand. His nerves were still jangling.

'I can't believe she is a member of the Gang,' he said.

'She probably isn't. She's just a relation who's over for a holiday, to learn English or something.'

'But what will happen to her when the police raid?'

'Nothing much. She's just an unwitting tool of her wicked aunt. With her looks no one would dream of convicting her of anything. Wasn't the test supposed to start soon?'

He sighed, pulled himself together and glanced down at his watch.

Madame Vautour sat frozen, her left hand stretched out in front of her, the wrist almost touching the wall. Her eyes were closed.

'Now,' said Alex.

After a moment she picked up the pen and dipped it in the inkwell. She waited immobile.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed softly and a moment later she started to write. Alex watched in complete silence as the pen slowly and scratchily moved over the white paper. She was writing one letter after another. After four minutes she put the pen down. The finger on Alex's watch moved up to five minutes past eight.

'Now,' he said again.

'How's she doing it, do you think?' I asked.

'She's got a piece of rubber tube up her left arm going under her hair into her ear. They must have the sound converter on the other side of the wall, connected to a piece of metal tubing going through the wall. And when she sat down she slipped her bit of rubber tubing over the end of it,' he said.

I looked carefully and could now see the tube partially hidden by her left wrist. Clever.

The test continued in a silence broken only by the scratching of the pen and the occasional rattle as it was dipped in the inkwell. She was doing it very well, sitting loosely at the table, hand moving slowly and rhythmically across the paper, the letters flowing effortlessly from the nib. She was looking into the distance, paying little attention to her writing and the lines of letters were spreading unevenly across the page as though she was focussing all her attention on the internal signals she was receiving from her niece. Which was no more than the truth.

The mantelpiece clock chimed the quarter hour.

Felix by the door looked bored. Scratch, scratch - the letters flowed out regularly. Then there was a pause. Abruptly the Medium stiffened and her eyes came down to focus intently at the paper she was writing on. The letters became firmer and the lines of print straightened out. Holding the pen poised her eyes went back over what she had written and Alex heard her indrawn breath. She snapped something at Felix in French who froze and looked at her incredulously. All Alex understood were the words "vite! vite!". Felix swung his eyes round to Alex sitting in the corner of the room and his hand dived into his pocket pulling out a pistol. At the same time the Medium half rose, grabbed the heavy inkwell and threw it at Alex. Something had gone wrong!

`Get your pistol out!' I said. The inkwell flew over his shoulder and crashed into the window behind him.

`Off the chair and crouch down!' I said. He had his pistol in his hand now but Felix was aiming. A loud bang as Felix fired and the room was engulfed in thick smoke. The Medium was standing up and screaming, scrabbling over her desk for something else to throw.

Ears ringing, Alex was crouching down, pistol out in front of him. Another bang as Felix fired again, the red flash visible through the smoke.

`Aim at the last flash,' I said. `And hold your pistol with both hands.'

The pistol jumped in Alex's hands and there was a thump from the other side of the room. The Medium, mouth open and screaming wildly ran towards Alex, hands outstretched and fingers clawed to tear his eyes out. But Alex had rapidly crawled forward under cover of the thick powder smoke and she tripped over him with a shriek, falling with a crash against a small table. Some china smashed.

`Outside, quickly! You've got to find that sound converter - it's the proof that they murdered Blum.'

He got to his feet, stepped over Felix who was lying on the ground groaning, his pistol by his side.

`Pick that up,' I said.

He tore open the door and found himself in a long empty corridor. A wire was hanging down from the ceiling and a small piece of metal tube was sticking out of the wall.

`That's where it must have been,' he said.

He listened. In the far distance he heard the sound of police whistles and the thump of many heavy feet. He started running along the corridor, his feet muffled in the thick carpet until he was stopped by a green-baize door.

`One of them has taken the converter. He'll try to escape with it, but he'll destroy it if necessary as it's proof of murder,' I said.

Alex crashed back the green door and suddenly we were in a much more austere furnished part of the house. Rush matting and old-fashioned oil-lamps hanging at intervals along the walls. The servants' quarters.

A housemaid looked at Alex with frozen horror as he dashed past. He stopped and listened. A door banged at the end of the corridor. He ran down it, his feet rustling on the rush matting. At the end he flattened himself against the wall and kicked the door open. A yellow flash from the inside of a room off to the right and a bullet raised splinters from the door and ricocheted from the wall.

Behind us the maid was screaming hysterically.

Alex raised his pistol to fire.

`No,' I said `You're just wasting shots you might need later. Keep after him.'

I knew that in the 21st Century a pistol in the hands of the average soldier gave an accuracy of about 40mils (4m at 100m) which meant the man shooting at Alex had only about one chance in three of hitting him at ten meters. With all this running it was probably much less.

Alex was frozen immobile, listening. There was a squeaking sound from the side room, a thump and then silence.

`Get in quickly but keep crouched down,' I said.

He rushed into the room and then crouched against the wall panting, his pistol searching out the corners. Filled with gunsmoke but there was no one there. He uncocked his pistol and looked round. It was night outside the window now and the only light in the room was that coming from the oil-lamps hanging in the corridor outside. He went out into the corridor and unhooked one of them and took it into

the room. We were in an old part of the house, the walls thickly limed and the ground, where it was not covered with matting, was bare rock. There was some simple furniture, but we seemed to be in a disused store-room.

`A squeak and then a thump,' said Alex holding up the lamp.

But there were no other doors except the one he had come in by. Ah, there it was. A trap-door set flush in the rock, with a rusty ring. There was a sliding bolt too, but it was pulled back.

Now this next bit was going to be tricky. Chase after someone too impetuously and he can stop and ambush you. Go too slowly; you lose contact and he escapes. But the next bit was safe enough. Alex was tugging at the trap-door and up it came with the squeak we had already heard; hidden behind it he was safe enough.

The lamp was standing by the side of the trap-door and showing some dusty stone steps. There was a sudden gust of cold air and a strong smell of the sea. The lamp-flame fluttered.

I thought that going down those steps holding a lamp could be a quick way to get perforated and Alex had the same thought. There was a cheap cupboard in the corner. He pulled off the door and kicked it until he had a piece of wood about one and a half meters long with some nails still in the end. He hooked the lamp over the nails and lowered it carefully down the hole.

Silence.

`Make some noise like you're not alone,' I suggested.

`He's here!' he shouted. `Sergeant, take two men outside and see if you can find the exit to this tunnel. And watch out, he's armed!'

Good stuff. He looked cautiously over the edge of the hole and could see the steps led down about three meters to a sandy floor. The tunnel was about a metre wide and disappeared out of view. He pulled the lamp up and put it on the edge of the trap-door again.

With a last "Follow me, men!" he lowered himself down and was soon standing on bare rock. He hooked the lamp down, and holding it in front of him, at the end of the stick, started moving down the tunnel. Sand grated underneath his feet.

I looked curiously around. This part of the corridor was man-made; you could see the tool marks in the rock. It must be some old smuggler's tunnel. Sloping steeply it was quite an engineering feat for the time it was constructed - the 17th Century, I supposed. Generations of "Nanny knows best" British governments have traditionally put high taxes on alcohol and made illegal liquor imports from the Continent profitable.

There was a sudden rush of cold salty air. The sea end of the tunnel had just been opened.

`The tunnel can't be more than fifty meters long; it probably leads into the back of a cave,' I said.

`And now's his last chance to stage an ambush,' said Alex.

No sooner had he said this and there was a bang and a red flash from up ahead. A bullet buzzed off the walls and dust fell from the rocky roof.

Alex fired, aiming the pistol to one side. We could hear the ricochets off the walls. And then the rush of cold air ceased. The exit had been closed.

Holding the lamp on its stick in front of him, Alex rushed forward until our way was blocked by the end of the passage which was closed by a large rock. But recent footsteps and marks in the sandy floor of the tunnel showed clearly enough that the rock swung out. A slight test push on it and it moved easily, its weight cleverly balanced. He put the lamp down to one side so it wouldn't be behind him

and then pistol ready he shoved hard on the rock door. A draft of cold air and the rustle of the sea. Using the pole he had used with the lamp he propped the rock door wide open and waited.

'7, 8, 9 and 10,' he said to himself and then rushed out and to one side, pistol pointing in all directions. Nothing.

He was high up, at the end of a cave. In the faint light coming from the cave mouth he could just see several large rocks leading out of the cave down to the sea. The tide was in, and small waves were lapping the edge of the rocks.

Sweating, with his back to the cave wall his eyes tried to pierce the gloom. He reached inside the doorway to the tunnel and fished out the lamp. He held it up at arm's length.

The lamp cast flickering shadows over the tumbled rocks, but nothing moved. He let his breath out slowly. He put the lamp down outside the door and scrambled down the rocks almost to the sea. In the increased light he could now see that there was a rough path by the side of the cave mouth, leading upwards to the cliffs above. He scrambled up it, the scuffle of his feet covered by the sound of the sea.

Now we were above the cave and on a narrow path winding off in both directions along the lonely cliff edge. To the left or the right?

'I've got to save Giselle,' he said to himself starting off to the right.

'Hey, wait a minute - let's think!' I said. 'This whole thing was started by Madame Vautour receiving a warning message in the middle of the telepathy test' I continued. 'For my money the guy who was operating the sender must have seen something.'

'You mean the one sitting up in the loft in that house? Yes, if he'd been looking he would have had a good view of the police moving in. I should have thought of that.'

'The man we are chasing must be Scarron,' I reminded him, 'who must have realised that when this lot gets into the papers Madame Vautour's credit as a Medium will be shot. He must have heard the cops floundering around her house after all the shooting, and will guess they must also be around the house where the transmitter is. He knows the telepathy test can't have more than another quarter of an hour to run, at which point the police will break in. If he can get there first, he may be able to draw them off and give the other members of his gang time to escape.'

'So he's heading for the other house?'

'I'm sure of it.'

Convinced by what he thought was his own reasoning, and pleased that head and heart pointed in the same direction, he turned right and started jogging along the cliff path.

Chapter 49

'And what about Ian?' Alex asked himself.

'They'll try to overpower him without warning the police,' I inserted, 'he's tough but they're two to one at least and will have surprise on their side.'

The track was going down-hill now and he was able to keep up a good speed. With any luck he would be able to catch up with Scarron, burdened as he was with the converter box.

Alex tripped twice in the dark, the second time quite heavily and as he sat there dazed and breathing heavily, he heard several pistol shots from ahead, along the path. About five hundred meters in front. That must be Scarron's diversion!

He picked himself up painfully - Felix's pistol had banged him in the ribs - and started jogging towards the house. There were more shots, red flashes and now shouts.

No use running into a fire-fight. What should we do?

It depended on what had happened at the other house. The police, massing for their raid, had been seen by the man in the loft. He would have signalled this to Claude and then they would probably have wished that radio communication was possible in both directions so that they could be told what to do. But now they would realise they were surrounded and couldn't escape. So when the police rushed in they would just brazen it out. They were just doing a telepathy test and the man in the loft with the spark-coil was there to generate "electric influence" or some such nonsense, to try to improve results. No one could disprove them.

'I think they will try to escape as soon as they see the police running off and taking cover from Scarron's firing,' I said. 'And Scarron will try to join them, taking the receiver with him. Once he has that hidden, the rest of the Medium Gang are safe.'

'I'm not so sure of that,' said Alex. 'Now we know they killed Blum for the wireless telegraph, it shouldn't be too difficult to find proof. For instance we have witnesses who heard the sender and tracked it to their house in Woking.' He had a point. Best to disappear completely.

'Then he'll try to get Claude, Giselle and the sender operator in the coach with him. Especially Giselle,' I said.

Again that red glow.

We had moved round to the front of the house. The lights at the windows went out and a moment later the door opened. Three figures hurried out. The door to their coach opened and a hand from inside urged them to hurry. Scarron! One figure entered the coach and the other two climbed up to the coach driving seat.

There was a sudden heavy burst of firing from round the back of the house.

'The fools are shooting at each other,' said Alex as he ran forward to try to stop the coach.

But he was too far off. The horses were whipped up and the coach disappeared with a clatter of hooves along the cliff and round a bend.

Alex took one last look at it and ran to the house. The door was locked. He put his shoulder against it, but the lock held.

'Shoot the lock out,' I advised. It always worked on the holos.

He pulled out his pistol, cocked it and fired. When the smoke cleared the bullet could be seen buried in the wood. Useless.

'Try in the lock.'

He cocked and placed the barrel against the lock.

Again a loud report and clouds of smoke. No visible effect.

'Use your heel.'

He stamped at it and perhaps the shot had weakened the lock because after the third stamp the wood splintered and the door swung open. He thrust it aside and dashed into the main room where a bundle on the ground was blaspheming in a strong Scots accent. Alex whipped out his knife and quickly released Ian.

'They've escaped in their coach,' said Alex. 'Did the police bring horses?'

'No, they all came together in a coach. But they'd have hidden it somewhere. I'll ask them.'

'If you go round the back you'll likely get killed. They're shooting at anything that moves,' said Alex, trying to look out of the windows. A sudden burst of firing confirmed his words.

They stood in the house driveway indecisive. The coach must be making for a port - probably Ryde. Once off the Isle of Wight, and on the mainland, they would be almost impossible to find.

'How far's Ryde?' asked Alex.

'About eleven kilometers,' said Ian. 'Two hours by foot.'

'Let's get into the village. We can get some transport there. Here, take this pistol.'

They jogged down the hill into Shanklin. It was 9:30pm and there were a few lights lit, but there isn't much going in holiday towns in February.

'How about the railway station?' I suggested. I had always found that the railway station was often the most lively place in a town after everything else had closed.

'There'll be no trains today, said Alex aloud.

'That's the place!' said Ian, only partly hearing. 'It's just down the road here. I saw it yesterday. We may be able to find a cab there.'

And sure enough there was a railway-station, standing in a square with a big train shed and some workshops. Some lights were on in the main building and there was a coach and horse outside.

'Great!' said Ian. 'Just what we want. Now we have a chance.'

But Alex was suddenly hesitant. He put his hand on Ian's arm.

'Just a minute. Isn't that the coach they escaped in?'

'By God, you're right!' said Ian. They both moved back into the shadows. 'But why's it canted over?'

Alex moved to one side to get a better view.

'The off-side wheel's broken,' he said.

They watched it a few seconds more, but nothing moved. They ran forward and looked inside. Empty.

'They canna be far away with the load they were carrying,' said Ian looking around. But apart from some pedestrians in the distance, the square was deserted. There was a high tarred wooden fence around the train sheds and from behind it a faint hissing. Then a clank. They looked at each other.

'Sounds like a train,' said Alex. It certainly did sound like the hissing of steam.

Without a word they dashed towards the station entrance, but it was firmly closed, with a faded notice pasted across it saying "Service suspended until April". They stood back baffled.

'Just a wee moment,' said Ian, leaning forwards and running his finger along a tear in the notice. The station door had recently been opened!

They heaved at it, but whoever had opened it had very securely closed it behind himself.

'Here!' said Alex, pointing to a side door in the wooden fence. It was locked too, but Ian bent over it. A soft screech and a loud click and it swung open. They entered quickly and found themselves in a sort of junkyard with bits of scrap iron lying all around. There was another clank from the long shed and the hissing was quite loud now. Ian banged his foot against something and cursed softly.

The sides of the shed stretched away in both directions. To the right was the railway platform with the name "Shanklin". A distant solitary gas-light made harsh shadows and it was cold.

There came a "chuff" from inside the shed and smoke drifted out of the open doors, facing the platform.

'I can't see anyone on the platform or in the waiting room,' whispered Alex. 'I think they're in here.' He touched the side of the shed.

'We must try and get in round the back,' said Ian.

Good thinking. If they tried for the front door they would be outnumbered by Claude, the sender operator and Scarron - three to two. And a shoot-out would be dangerous for the girl.

They followed the line of the shed to the left, but there was no convenient door. The only entrance to the engine shed must be from the front. Inside could be heard slow chuffing sounds over the hissing. Then more clanking.

'Shit,' said Ian, 'they're moving off. We've got to break in.'

They moved rapidly now, running their hands over the boarding, trying to find a weak one. But they all seemed firmly nailed on to an internal frame. Then Alex saw some faint light where one didn't fit as well as the others. They got their fingers around it and pulled, but it hardly moved. A straight pull - they'd need a bulldozer to get one off.

'You're wasting your time there. Try a pull at the bottom,' I said.

Alex bent down and grasped the plank at the bottom and heaved. A slight squealing sound. Now they both had their hands on the bottom of the plank and their legs braced against the shed wall.

'One, two, three - heave,' said Alex.

There was a loud squeal of nails being wrenched out and the plank was pulled off the horizontal mounting frame. It was still fixed to another higher frame but the extra leverage meant it could be easily bent up. They repeated the procedure with another plank and this gave them enough room to climb through.

Now they were in the train shed itself it was perceptibly warmer and there was a strong smell of burning coal. They could see the train now, its high flared chimney silhouetted against the platform light outside the open doors. Behind the train itself was a tender for coal and then five coaches. There was a momentary orange glow from the engine as the furnace was opened and two figures could be seen on the footplate.

Keeping in the shadow of the train they moved slowly forwards crouching. Ian stumbled into something. He bent over and then called over Alex. A workman was lying on his back groaning. Alex put his hand behind his head to support him.

'What the fuckinell's going on?' It was a workman dressed in oily overalls.

'Someone's stealing your train,' said Alex. 'Are you all right?' He didn't want to waste time here.

'Stealing the train?! Yer mates are fuckin' crazy then. There's maintenance work all along the track and at Ryde they're building a new bridge!'

'They're not my "mates",' said Alex coldly and dropped him. Hearing Alex's accent the workman obviously thought the whole thing was an upper-class prank.

The both stood up and completed their stalk to the last coach and opening a door silently hoisted themselves in and collapsed into the seats.

They were just in time. There was a loud hissing from up front and several chuffs. Ian mopped his fore-head thankfully. It now should be possible to creep up the outside of the coaches and surprise them. The gang would be divided, with at least two of them at the controls of the train. The end was in sight and it should be possible to rescue the delightful Giselle without danger. And recover the receiver, of course.

'We're not moving,' I said. It was a pity to spoil the mood.

Alex leapt up and threw open the door, looking forwards. They were joined to the next three coaches but then there was a gap - a widening gap. Only one coach was connected to the train!

With a curse he jumped down from the coach followed by an uncomprehending Ian, who then saw the problem and cursed too. The rear end of the coach was now ten meters away and fast receding, the train chuffing away, surrounded by clouds of sooty smoke.

Fortunately the side of the track was relatively uncluttered, allowing the two detectives to run as fast as they could without having to jump over obstacles. But it was touch and go. Alex managed to leap on the back of the coach but I didn't think Ian would make it. He only did because Alex gave him a hand and that for some unaccountable reason the train slowed for an instant with a squealing of brakes. There was sudden clatter and the coach they were on rocked dangerously. Looking back, Alex could see that they had just moved over some complicated points system. No doubt the train driver had just seen them too and realised he was going too fast.

Alex now started to look around. The train was coupled to just one coach and the word "coach" meant just that. It had four wheels, was high with curved sides and would sit 6 people. Put a horse in front of it and it would pass without comment on any high street in England. Apart from the wheels, of course.

There was plenty of room for the two extra passengers, although they had to crouch under the overhang of the coach. Eyes squinting in the wind Alex peered round the side of the coach but couldn't see much of the train except its front wheels and the moving pistons. But there was an occasional orange glare as the fire was kept fed.

There was a small wheel fixed to the back axle which when turned would brake the coach. Used during shunting, I supposed. But it would never hold the coach back against the pull of the locomotive.

By leaning out further Alex could see the light inside the coach had been lit, but no faces were visible.

We were now rattling along through the small town of Shanklin, doing maybe fifty kilometers an hour. At this rate Alex estimated they would be at Ryde in a quarter of an hour. His eyes watered in the wind.

Scarron and Giselle must be in the coach, with the wireless receiver. He moved back out of the wind and motioned to Ian. There couldn't be much time left.

'Let's get in the coach. One each side,' he shouted over the noise of the wheels and the wind. They both pulled out their pistols and checked them.

Ian nodded and Alex put his head into the wind again and looked round the side of the coach. By retaining a grip on the back of the coach it should be possible to put a foot on the foot-rest in front of the door and then open the door and swing himself in. He put his pistol into his waistband.

He swung across, grabbed for the door handle and swung the door open. One foot on the foot-rest and his left hand on the door he grabbed for his pistol and levered himself into the coach.

There was a muted scream, and opposite him, sitting in the middle seat was Giselle. But she had her hand to her mouth and was looking upwards. Alex spun round but the other seat was empty. He jerked the barrel of his pistol upwards, but too late he saw the face of Scarron, crouched in the luggage rack. He was holding his fist out in front of him and between his fingers a short tube protruded. A palm pistol! I had only seen pictures of them. It was a disk which could be carried

in the palm of the hand, just the barrel showing between the fingers. There was a lever around the edge of the disk which was moved in when the hand was clenched. This fired the shot and moved the next cartridge into place. It could hold up to ten cartridges. Impossible to aim, of course, it was really just for self defence, but he could hardly miss at this range.

‘Shoot him!’ I said. He would never have time to squeeze it to fire.

But helplessly Alex dropped his pistol. Shooting in the coach would risk Giselle's life.

‘There's going to be an accident ...’ he started.

‘And you just dropped in to warn us,’ said Scarron. He kept his aim on Alex as he slowly climbed down off the rack and sat opposite. He motioned Alex to sit on the same bench as Giselle. He must have felt the coach sway when Ian and Felix jumped on it.

‘So, the famous Alex Salisbury,’ he sneered. His English had a lifeless, mechanical tone, probably coming from speaking too many languages.

‘There's going to be an accident in ten minutes at the latest,’ thought Alex. ‘Where the hell's Ian?!’

‘Of course I recognised you immediately when you presented yourself as an American. What a childish deception!’

‘Keep him talking,’ I advised, ‘Ian must be having problems.’

‘Easy to say that now. You were all completely fooled. Otherwise you would never have agreed to the telepathy test. And I would never have met Giselle,’ he said, looking across at her, his heart in his eyes.

‘Take a good look at her,’ advised Scarron ‘for you won't see her again. Soon she will be my wife and we will be rich.’ One small elegant foot tapped the box on the floor between them. He looked bitterly at Alex.

‘You stupid over-sized Anglo-Saxons, you do nothing but eat beef and play stupid games. Because of you the culture of the world, Latin culture, has been put back years. And what have you put in its place? Advertising, money grubbing, cheap transport for the peasants. The civilisation of the common man. The Servant Civilisation.’

‘It is unthinkable that Giselle be married to an Anglo-Saxon,’ he continued. ‘She is going to be a beautiful woman with a beautiful body, a body that should learn to sing. And you,’ he said contemptuously ‘what would you do with her?’

‘I would make her my honoured wife and the mother of my children,’ said Alex. ‘If she would have me.’

Giselle looked across at him with big unfathomable eyes.

‘You would put her on a pedestal and worship her. You would make her give you many children.’

‘And you would play with her until you were tired of her, until she showed the first sign of age. And then you would drop her and find another. As you have already, many times.’

This shot must have hit the mark as his face twisted and the knuckles of the hand holding the palm pistol whitened.

I was watching Scarron carefully but saw something that Alex hadn't noticed. Ian's face had appeared twice in the corner of the window on the other side. He must be having difficulty in getting in. Perhaps there was no foot-rest on that side or perhaps the door opened differently.

‘We call you Frogs,’ said Alex bleakly, although inside was a white-hot furnace, ‘not just because of your revolting habit of eating frogs, a habit which most civilised people refuse to believe, but because of your ungainly way of

hopping from one superficial and illogical idea to another in the way a frog flops from one leaf to another when it finds the leaf will not support it.' He made a jumping movement with his hands.

Giselle gasped. She had probably never heard Scarron addressed in this way. She was about to hear more as I could see a few more metaphors being lined up, likening the French language to a nasal croaking and something about the texture of frog's skin that hadn't been quite worked out yet. He had a nice line in invective.

But the blood had drained from Scarron's face. It was white in the light of the swinging lamp and as his hand came up I knew he was going to fire.

'Kick the other door open!' I shouted. Alex suddenly lay back and stamped out both feet at the far door. This move undoubtedly saved his life as there was a sharp "crack" and smoke jetted from the tube between Scarron's fingers. Alex felt a sharp pain in his left arm. But the door opposite sprang open and Ian's smoke-blackened face appeared in a rush of cold air. He seized up the position in a moment and fired his pistol at Scarron. Scarron clasped his left hand to his thigh and raised his fist but Ian, who now had been taking a steadier aim, fired again. Scarron collapsed and lay slumped in his seat, eyes looking upwards sightlessly. There was the distant bang of a pistol from the locomotive up front and Ian leapt agilely into the carriage. Giselle was coughing in the smoke, which however soon cleared in the draught from the open door. Alex was hugging his arm which was giving him considerable pain.

I was pleased to be able to try out something that I had so far only done on my Observer training course.

'There's nothing wrong with your arm. Why are you holding it like that?'

'What do you mean "nothing wrong"? That fool shot me and it's hurting like hell.'

'No it isn't. It's just a scratch. The bullet went right through. And it was only a little one. Just ignore it.'

'"Ignore it", he says. It's damn painful.'

'Just don't think about it. What will Giselle think?' Already he was feeling it less.

'God, yes. Giselle.' He turned to her. She was sitting rigid, her hands to her mouth, staring at Scarron's body and talking to herself in French.

He put his arm around her. At first she stiffened and tried to push away but then collapsed against his shoulder, weeping copiously.

Well, this would have been a nice way for the scene to end but we were not out of the woods yet.

'How much time do we have before we crash into the bridge repairs and all die?' I asked Alex conversationally.

He plunged his hand into his pocket and pulled out his watch.

'Five minutes,' he gasped. He looked across at Ian who had been prowling from side to side of the coach, looking forwards from the windows.

'You must disconnect this coach and try to slow it down,' I said.

'How the hell can I disconnect it?' he said.

'The coupling must be very simple. Probably all you have to do is pull a pin out.'

'Those two in front are not going to let me.'

'Ian must give you covering fire.'

He accepted all this as his internal thoughts and shouted it to Ian over the noise of the wind, at the same time giving him his pistol. As an afterthought he bent

and opened Scarron's dead fist and pulled out the palm pistol. Just a toy but it would make a noise if nothing else. He had completely forgotten his wound.

'It's not enough to uncouple,' said Ian. 'Someone'll have to put the brake on too.' He looked doubtfully at Giselle.

'What!' said Alex 'that's impossible!' The idea of her climbing out of the moving coach was unthinkable.

'Yes,' said Giselle, speaking for the first time. 'Tell me what you want me to do.'

Alex looked on in horror as Ian opened the door and helped her out onto the step. Alex held out one hand as though to restrain her, but she was gone, her skirts flapping noisily in the wind. He heard Ian guiding her onto the back of the coach. Ian returned.

'She's a good lass. She'll be all right.'

Alex was about to say something but I interrupted him.

'How long now?'

For answer he climbed out of the left-hand door as Ian, now back in the coach, leaned out of the other. A figure was lying on top of the coal in the tender and there was red flash as he fired. An answering bang from Ian's side of the coach and the head disappeared.

Alex had now moved to the front of the coach and was crouched down, looking at the coupling. It was quite simple, as I had thought - just a pin holding an inverted U-shaped piece of metal to an eye-bolt. Alex tugged at a chain attached to the pin, but it wouldn't move. Too much tension, which was not surprising as we were going up a small rise.

'You'll have your chance when we go down the other side of this hill,' I said. 'And then you must put the brake on.'

Just then two heads appeared above the coal and fired simultaneously. A bullet thumped into the coach just above Alex's head. He raised his fist and squeezed twice. Flame spurted from between his fingers and there was a slight recoil. Ian fired from the other side and both heads disappeared. There was a red glow from over the tender and a sound of shovelling. They had got to keep the train moving no matter what.

Now we were over the crest of the hill and coasting down. The coupling was clanking back and forth loosely and Alex was able to pull the pin out a bit.

'Just keep a steady pressure,' I said 'and let it come out when it will.'

'It's coming. Christ, those lights must be Ryde!'

There was a shout from Ian. He had seen the lights too.

'Got it!' said Alex to himself and there was a clank as the pin dropped against the side of the coach, held only by its retaining chain. Immediately we started slowing and the train was now pulling away from us. There was a rapidly increasing stretch of rails opening out between us, the steel shining in the moonlight. The two in the train must have sensed the difference in the load as they both looked back over the coal and started firing rapidly. Ian fired and one threw up his hands and fell backwards out of sight.

'We're free,' shouted Alex. 'Brake!'

The balance of the coach shifted and from behind could be heard a hissing, scratching sound, getting louder. The coach tilted slightly and I guessed Ian had gone back to help.

Alex was looking forward at the train. It had stopped chuffing and sparks could be seen coming from the wheels. They were furiously braking! Over the

rushing of wind and the rattling of the wheels he could hear the squealing of the train's brakes. They must be able to see something we couldn't!

The twin gleaming steel lines joining us to the train were shortening again - its brakes were more powerful than ours, and Alex was beginning to fear we would actually crash into it when abruptly the train up-ended and disappeared!

One minute it was there and the next it was gone! And with it, its noise. The two shining rails stretched silently forward and ceased to exist after fifty meters!

And a second later there was a snapping sound from behind, the hissing sound stopped and we stopped braking. The coach was now gently coasting towards the end of the silvery lines at a brisk walking pace. The brake had only been meant for parking and had broken. In about twenty seconds we would follow the train over the edge! At the edge of his hearing he heard shouting.

'Giselle!' he thought and jumped back on to the foot-rest and then onto the back axle. Empty! He crossed to the other side and was about to enter the coach when he heard faint distant voices shouting urgently "Jump! jump!".

He jerked himself backwards and it really was at the last moment. The coach dropped away under his feet and with a crash he hit the ground. Jerking himself upright he found himself sitting on a plank spanning two girders, looking down into a ravine. The skeleton of the new bridge stretched across the ravine and water was glittering far below.

Suddenly, far below, there was a shower of red sparks and then the echoing roar of an explosion. A pause then another smaller crash as the coach fell onto the remains of the train. A large cloud of steam rose, white in the moonlight. Alex looked down at it in fascinated horror. Two seconds later and he would have been there too!

And at that moment it happened, something that was going to exercise me and many people cleverer than me for a long time.

I was roughly elbowed aside and a voice said:

'You cretin! what are you playing at? I leave you alone for five minutes and look what a mess you're in!'

There was a burst of high pitched chirping.

'It's impossible to be in all places at once,' said the voice, apparently in answer. There was a familiar view of the earth from space.

'This was an emergency and risks had to be taken.'

More chirping.

'But during programming no one thought that when we started they would advance so quickly.' There was an image of thousands of people pulling stone blocks in bright sunlight and in the background an unfinished pyramid. 'Next transmission in ...??..Oops.'

The presence abruptly left and I was alone in Alex again.

What the hell had that been?! There had been someone else in Alex's head, and someone a lot stronger than me. He had just entered and pushed me aside. But he had made a mistake; he had thought Alex was one of the Medium Gang.

It must be them - the Extra-terrestrials! I had heard them! And I knew what they were doing! They were in orbit around the Earth and had been Observing us by Inserting into selected humans! And that chirping sound - I knew what that was too, I had heard it often enough in my time. High-speed digital-data transmission!

Chapter 51

I sat there stunned, trying to think what to do next. Was there any way I could continue the contact? Apparently not. The Extra-terrestrial had Inserted into Alex by accident and had not known, I was quite sure, that someone else was already there. Was the Alien likely to jump into Alex's mind again? Probably not. Should I wait longer in the hope of getting more information, or should I return to Chrondisp? Would the Alien realise that he had been detected and return and try to stop me taking my news back to the 21st Century?

While I was pondering all this, Ian and Giselle had run forward and helped Alex back from the edge of the ravine. I could see one part of his brain going over the implications of the accident - the radio destroyed and so no evidence to convict the Medium Gang. Not that there were any left, anyway. Only Madame Vautour and Felix. Not Giselle - she couldn't be considered a member, of course.

He had his arms around Giselle at the moment in fact, and she was looking up at him in the moonlight. They only imperfectly understood each other's language, but it seemed no great impediment.

She put her hands on his shoulders.

'He was bad,' she said, 'but 'e fascinated me like a ...like a rabbit is fascinated by a viper. 'He called to ze dark side of my soul. But you, you are clean and normal like ze wind from ze sea.'

This must have required some imagination because Alex, if he looked at all like Ian, was covered with soot from the train.

He looked down at her, filled with tenderness and protection.

'All that's over now,' he murmured. He reverently touched her face.

Ian, who had been staring over the edge of the ravine turned and looked down the road.

'Ach, here they are at last.' It was the police in two coaches.

*

The coaches took them all to the police station at Newport where statements had to be made and signed.

Madame Vautour and Felix were already there and the Medium spat at Alex when she saw him, but when she heard that Scarron was dead her first reaction seemed to be of relief.

As I had predicted, no one even thought of charging Giselle with anything and perhaps the fact that Alex had his arm around her most of the time may have helped too.

The bodies of Claude and the unknown radio operator were recovered from the wreck of the train, but they were mangled beyond recognition. The body of Scarron was in better condition and he was able to be identified by an extremely nervous Madame Vautour and Felix. They seemed to think he might come alive again.

There was nothing left of the radio receiver; it was destroyed in the fire that burnt the coach.

The police took Madame Vautour and Felix into custody but they didn't seem to have much idea what to accuse them of. I suppose they just had to have something to show for:

- a fire-fight outside the house of a fraudulent Medium (five policemen slightly wounded),
- the stealing and destruction of the local train.

I tried and failed to imagine the Charge Sheet.

Alex was on the quay-side, waiting for a boat to take him and Giselle to the mainland, when Ian appeared.

They grinned at each other and shook hands. Both Cases had been solved and they had had a bit of adventure too. It was something they would remember.

Ian had washed up but there were still streaks of soot around his collar. Alex had had his arm bandaged up by Giselle and it was hurting. It would hurt even more when I left, but now he would have someone else to care for him.

Ian looked at Giselle, encircled by Alex's arm.

'Ye fancy her, I reckon,' he said.

'I love her,' said Alex simply, 'and I'm going to marry her, if she'll have me.'

'Well, it's no a disadvantage to have a wife ye can mesmerise,' said Alex, the Scots accent coming through strongly. Alex looked at him in amazement.

Ian had made a joke.

Chapter 52

So that was it. There was nothing more to be done here. Mission accomplished. I had discovered the Extra-terrestrials! I could hardly wait to get back to Chrodisp. All I had to do now was to recite my Return-Key, the lines of poetry which would be decoded by the Chrodisp computer, the electro-narcosis would be switched off and I would wake up in my bed at Chrodisp.

The green light over my bed would start discreetly flashing and I would wake up in that quiet dimly-lit hospital ward, lined with the beds of other sleepers, Observers on Mission. Then those two men would arrive with their little trolley of hot food and ask me technical questions about the Mission. I would get dressed and then in the Debriefing room at the end of the corridor I would finally drop my bomb and tell Dr Duluth that I had discovered ETs! I tried to imagine surprise and joy on his face, and failed. But there would be others.

It had been an interesting Mission in an interesting time. Rational thought was finally being applied to the construction of "things". Things so useful that they sold themselves and in so doing sold the idea of rational thought, the idea of the "scientific method".

Anyone with the slightest trace of curiosity in them wanted to know what made a steam-engine turn and from here it was but a short step to ask how the man who had built the engine had designed it, how he had thought of it.

And if he can do it; I can do it.

I had a last look round. I would have liked to have lingered longer but I had this fantastic news about the ETs to impart. Extra-terrestrials have visited us! Interstellar travel is possible!

And if they can do it; we can do it.

Like the Victorian age it would give a whole new push to human society and science.

Yes, I must get back to Chrodisp. A last look at Giselle holding Alex's hand and ...

"In Xanada did Khubla Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree
Where Alph the sacred river ran

Through caverns measureless to Man
Down to a sunless sea".

Chapter 53

I opened my eyes slowly and squinted at the ceiling light. Of course I couldn't see much because the Helmet blocked out everything except that directly above me. A green light had started flashing somewhere and I knew that the monitoring computer had noticed my arrival and was signalling it.

But something had changed - there was something different from my last return from Mission. It was noisier, that was it. I was used to waking up in a quiet hospital ward. People were talking in the distance, and not quietly either. Shouting, in fact.

And another thing - the lights were usually dim in order to let the returning traveller adjust his eyes after having them closed for a two weeks or so. But here they were positively dazzling.

A face swam into view. A soldier. A soldier wearing a helmet. He said something and his face was joined by another. Young men, their faces looking grim under the rims of their helmets. Sticking up behind their shoulders I could see the barrels of their rifles. What on earth were soldiers, armed soldiers, doing in the ward?!

I heard the click of boots and their young faces were replaced by an older face, the face of an officer, looking down at me strangely. He was about to say something when he was disturbed by distant shouting and the clatter of approaching, hurrying feet. He looked over his shoulder.

Abruptly his face was replaced by a yellow Oriental face bellowing and contorted with rage. I looked at it dazedly but it in its turn was pulled away and the bed shook as some fool crashed into it. There was a sudden pain in my left arm and I knew that that was the drip-tube needle that had just come out. I was lying flat on my back looking at the ceiling, my vision limited by the Helmet. But I could still hear the strident voice.

'For Christ's sake, take this bloody Helmet off and sit up,' I said to Alex. Nothing. Of course not.

Alex was in Victorian England and I was back in my own body in the 21st century. If I wanted it to move, I would have to move it myself. I consciously sent messages to my arms to reach up and push back and off the heavy Helmet. I paused a moment, then contracted my stomach muscles and sat up. I felt as though I had just pushed my head up into the middle of a rugby scrum.

There were about ten people crowded around my bed, the centre of the group being the noisy Oriental. He was being restrained by two beefy MP's - but that didn't prevent him from roaring with rage. He was absolutely livid. I looked at him without emotion - I hadn't the faintest idea why he was so excited. He was a large full-bellied man dressed in a wide lapelled, old fashioned double-breasted suit with an enamelled badge in the button-hole. He had lots of gold-filled teeth which I could see quite clearly as he roared away open-mouthed.

He was shouting in Japanese, a language I only know to recognise, and he was absolutely beside himself, stamping on the floor and struggling to be free of the two MP's. So much for the inscrutable Oriental. His eyes were glinting viciously as he savagely fought with them and a vein was throbbing in his sweating forehead.

But after a while the spectacle became boring and even to my ears he was repeating himself.

I slid off the bed inconspicuously, attempting to ease myself out of this embarrassing display of emotion. But to my surprise his eyes followed me and he went into a paroxysm of rage, kicking out at me as I backed away nervously. Why was he so angry with me? And what sort of reception was this? After all, I was bringing back news that there were Extra-terrestrials and that they had visited the Earth in 1852. I looked round the rest of the group in bewilderment, but although I had seen some of them before, I didn't know them by name. Except Dr Duluth who was standing in the rear, hands behind his back and an expression of polite interest on his thin face.

One of the men, who I recognised as some high-up Co-ordinator of the Chronosp Institute, was moving his hands in placatory gestures and I could hear words like 'unfortunate error, certainly not intentional, please calm yourself, sir etc' now and then appearing in the infrequent gaps when the Oriental paused to re-inflate his lungs for another barrage of incomprehensible vituperation.

I looked down the ward, hoping to catch sight of the BRD team. God, I felt gloomy. I knew it was normal after two weeks of drip-feed under electro-narcosis, but I also knew the cure was the hot food Bedside Reception and Debrief would have for me.

Ah, there they were! I knew them too - Joe and Dan, in their white smocks. They had their trolley and were concealed by the crowd, apparently too shy to push forward. But I had no such inhibitions. I was ravenously hungry.

Clad still in my white coverall I pushed through the embarrassed crowd and waved at Joe. He looked nervously at the back of the group around the noisy Jap, but Dr Duluth nodded to them that it was OK. I sat on a nearby vacant bed grinning at them and rubbing my hands in anticipation. Dan unsmilingly handed me a napkin while Joe silently opened the thermo closet in their trolley. Why were they so serious?

Soon I was holding a mug of delicious hot sweet milky tea and crunching down on a large piece of warm buttery toast.

Ah, that was better! My spirits were rising. So much so that when the Jap managed to pull the two MP's round so he could see what I was doing, I was able to cheerily wave a piece of toast at him. It didn't calm him down any. In fact he almost burst a vein.

'Get him out of here!' said the Co-ordinator urgently to Dr Duluth who took my arm and led me down the corridor. I turned to make sure the two BRD men with their trolley were following us.

We turned into the debrief room. I loaded up with a supply of toast and marmalade and another cup of tea from the two BRD men who then left.

Dr Duluth went behind the desk and I sat on the couch, and wiping my buttery hands on my smock said triumphantly:

'Well, you were right - I found them!'

He was looking at the screen set into the desk-top and tapping its surface.

'Ah, yes?. Good, good,' he said absently, watching the screen.

'The Extra-terrestrials,' I said loudly 'Extra-terrestrials have visited the planet Earth from across Outer Space and I have Spoken to One.' He looked up at me blankly.

'What!?' he said. 'You really did find something?'

'Yes,' I said, surprised 'That was the idea, wasn't it? "Victorian England is the optimum time" you said. Before then the info was unreliable and after that there wasn't any. Well, it was like you said, they were using a Medium. Sort of.'

He looked dazed.

`You had better start from the beginning,' he said, pushing the microphone forward.

Chapter 54

When I left Dr Duluth he was walking up and down the debriefing room with his hands behind his back. Outside they seemed to have got rid of the Oriental.

I went quickly back to my room and sat in the shower, letting the water pour down. I was all alone in my room and suddenly felt gloomy. Alex had sorted out both his cases, was on his way to forming a highly successful detective bureau, he was about to marry a beautiful young girl and here I was sitting in my shower in the 21st Century but mentally still in the year 1852. I could see Giselle's face as she looked up at Alex. I

could hear Alex's voice. With a sudden shock I realised that it had all happened a long, long time ago, and Alex and Giselle were long dead and buried. Alex might have just lived to see the beginning of the 20th Century.

I sighed and was changing into my normal clothes when my phone buzzed. I hunted through the clothes still lying on the shower-room bench until I found the phone. It was Jim. He welcomed me back and said he wanted to see me if I was finished with Dr Duluth. I said "yes" but I was feeling hungry again and could we make it in the restaurant?

On the way to the restaurant I thought over Dr Duluth's strange neutral reaction to the news I had brought.

He had shaken his head in amazement when I told him about the ET. He asked me a few supplementary questions and then reminded me that everything I had done was secret.

Arriving in the restaurant, I immediately saw Jim at a far table excitedly talking into his phone. Feeling instinctively that I had better get the food now, I quickly helped myself to some wrapped sandwiches and then strolled over, tearing one open. He snapped his phone shut, still grinning, then caught sight of me.

`I've just heard it was a great success!' he said. `We can go over now.'

"Go over"? To Alpha Centauri? What was he talking about?

`They sent seven out, as fast as they could charge up their Inserter!' he said. `We broke the code on the fourth, and now we've got them! Oh boy, Chondiski was a like a stirred up wasp's nest yesterday! Let's get over to the computer room.'

I chewed my sandwich. When you are confronted with something you don't understand, it takes a little time, and a certain skill, to compose the exact question which goes right to the nub of the unknown, and whose answer reveals all. I had neither the skill nor the time. I finished my mouthful and swallowed.

`What the hell are you talking about?' I asked.

He looked at me wide-eyed.

`Well, about your Mission, of course. I told you we've been able to pick up stray radiation from the Chondiski Inserter for some time now but didn't know what it meant. So we had to find a way to force the Wipe to send out Observers to a place and time that we knew. When they sent them out, we picked up their Inserter signature corresponding to that place and time and that enabled us to break the code.'

`And the place and time was Victorian England, 1852,' I said.

`Of course.'

It was no good.

I still couldn't put my finger on it. Had the Asians also sent Observers to look for Extra-terrestrials in 1852? Had they found them too? But that was secret; Dr Duluth said I mustn't talk about Extraterrestrials.

I tried again.

`But what was so interesting to the Asians about my Mission?'

`Didn't Duluth tell you?' he asked.

`I was told to look for ... something special, something very important to humanity. Something secret. And I found it', I couldn't resist adding.

It was Jim's turn to look surprised.

`Secret? Duluth is a devious bastard, what did he ask you to look for that was secret?'

I looked at his square honest face. We had had a lot of adventures together. If I couldn't trust him; I couldn't trust myself.

`I was to look for Extra-terrestrials,' I said.

He stared at me amazed, not sure if I was joking and I looked back at him, chewing my sandwich.

He made a impatient movement as though pushing something irrelevant aside.

`All I can think is that he told you that story to get you interested. His real idea was to place you near to someone Very Important to the Wipe and await results. And as you both have ..er.. strong characters, he was sure something would come of it.'

I put my sandwich down. I was just collecting useless information.

`Against whom was I placed, who was Very Important to the Asians?' I said carefully.

He looked at me curiously.

`Don't you remember a big guy with a beard, foreign accent?'

`Yes, of course I do. I seemed to be falling over him all over the place. But what's he got to do with it? He wasn't an Oriental. He was German, or something.'

`That was Karl Marx.'

Chapter 55

Mein Gott! The man who invented Communism!

`So Duluth sent me back into Victorian England as a sort of ferret to scare the Asians,' I said.

`And did you ever!' said Jim. `The Japanese fleet has moved into the Med with full air-cover and the Chinese Army and Airforce have been performing manoeuvres in Tunisia which are the biggest yet seen outside Asiablock. SEATO has been on Red Alert and outside it's like an armed camp. The Federation ambassador to Morocco more or less forced his way into Chrodisp and has been threatening all sorts of reprisals. They're going to send people back to pervert George Washington, to stop Christ being crucified etc. etc.'

`So that was Karl Marx,' I said. `But Marx and Christ are all Main Timeline - you can't change anything they did.'

`Maybe, and maybe not. That's really only a theory and no one's really tried hard yet,' he said. `And as someone pointed out, you'd never know if something had been changed - being a Moslem or whatever would seem quite normal to us if Christ had never made it.'

`You should have heard that Ambassador,' he chuckled. `Apparently you first tried to knock Marx under a taxi, at one point you almost shot him and then,' he

slapped his hand on the table, 'and then ...ha!...ha!...you tried to argue him out of Marxism!' He chortled and wiped his eyes.

I thought back. Yes, it could be misinterpreted. Well, this was all very hilarious, but what about the Extra-terrestrials? I wasn't supposed to speak about them, but Jim didn't seem to believe me anyway. I looked at him still snorting.

'The best part is that the Wipe think the whole operation was a reprisal for them co-operating with those Arabs. They're not going to think about the possibility of us picking up their Inserter signature for a while, let alone decoding it.'

'Yes, well, good. I'm glad you've cracked their code and all that,' I said 'and I'm sure it's going to give us the edge over them for some time in the future. But it seems to me that something much more important has happened. I really did find an Extra-terrestrial back there. Aren't you going to do anything about that? It seems they're probably around here now - listening to this conversation, for all I know. Is no one interested in Extra-terrestrials?'

'Yeah, well I guess we're interested in them too,' he said weakly.

Chapter 56

Yes, Chrondisp was very interested in the Extra-terrestrials, once they were convinced I was serious. But sometimes I wish I had had nothing to do with them. I have been interviewed by dozens of scientists in great secrecy, but I have not been able to add much to what I said at my debriefing. Some of the scientists believed me; others didn't, and thought I had made the whole thing up. I could see their difficulty - the existence of Extra-terrestrials is very important and you really can't change your whole philosophy of life on the say-so of one man (who is not even a scientist). And it was going to be tricky to check my evidence. I was convinced the ET had not noticed me; but send someone else to confirm my findings and he might not be so lucky.

Those who believe have questioned me over and over again, trying to wring the last nuance of meaning from each word I overheard and the final consensus seems to be that what I heard was the conversation between part of an observation team put in place 5000 years ago, at the time of the Pharaohs. The Extra-terrestrials have been watching us on and off since then and are surprised at our rate of progress.

A big debate is currently going on as to what the Extra-terrestrials' likely reactions have been/will be, can we contact them, should we contact them, was it pointless because they must now know they have been detected anyway, etc. etc.

But as to how they are observing us, there is less consensus. The evidence points to the Extra-terrestrials having an Inserter orbiting the earth somewhere (or at least it was orbiting the earth in 1852) but then opinions diverge. I used to sit in on these discussions for a while but they very quickly got over my head. I began to think of returning to Munich, but Chrondisp wanted me to hang around a while in case anyone had more questions.

'Yes,' I said to Jim 'Those that believe me all seem to agree that the Extra-terrestrials were in orbit and Inserting into us but they all have different ideas as to how it was done.'

'It's a problem,' he admitted, making little squares on a napkin with his pencil. We were in the restaurant. 'The distance is the problem,' he continued. He put a dot in the middle of the napkin and drew a small circle round it.

'Let's say we want to go visit our nearest star, Alpha Centauri. We start here at our sun and let's say we can move at the speed of light, which appears to be the

speed limit of the Universe.' He touched the dot. 'Off we go. It takes us eight minutes to reach the Earth, which is so close to the sun here you can't see it on this picture. After five hours you arrive at the orbit of Pluto, the edge of the solar system.' He transferred his pencil point to the circle. 'But arriving at Pluto is not even the equivalent to taking a taxi to the starport. Because the trip from Pluto to the nearest star, to Alpha Centauri, is going to take more than four years! At the speed of light.'

Well I had heard these facts before, of course, but that didn't reduce their impact any.

'At the speed of light,' I said.

He pointed his pencil at me.

'Right. At the speed of light. Which we at the moment, and probably for ever, cannot reach. If we keep on developing our propulsion systems it is thought we may be able to reach a tenth of the speed of light one day, but after that other odd effects start up which will make the journey pointless.'

'So how did the Extra-terrestrials get here?,' I asked.

'For my money they didn't,' he said. I opened my mouth, but he grinned and held up his hand.

'You wanna hear how I would do it?' I nodded. Of course I wanted to hear how Jim proposed to send Extra-terrestrials across forty point three light years.

'The main problem is communications. We need at least one and preferably two good high-speed data links from here to Alpha Centauri.' He drew a line on the napkin from the dot to the edge of the paper and then left the paper and moved the pencil point away in the air.

'Optical, of course. Lasers. I'm sure we could build a simple link immediately, but it gets much more difficult as the data rate increases.' He looked into the distance, tapping his pencil on his teeth.

'So assuming ...' I said.

'Yes. So assuming we have a half-way decent two-way link, we next send off an intelligent Probe. A Probe which also contains an Inserter.'

I made movements with my arms, but he shrugged.

'OK. Our Inserter is pretty big, but we've only been building them for five years. Remember these Extra-terrestrial chaps..' he liked the expression '... these Extra-terrestrial chaps are at least a century ahead of us.'

'And some Extra-terrestrials have to be sent too' I said. 'To be Inserted into us,' I pointed out unnecessarily.

'No,' he said. 'That's the clever bit. No Extra-terrestrials. No actual Extra-terrestrials.'

He waited, but I didn't gasp.

'It's a very intelligent Probe,' he explained. 'A Probe containing a program simulating the behaviour of your typical Extra-terrestrial.' He was drawing a little stick-figure with an antenna on its head.

'Yes,' he continued 'It would have to be a very intelligent Probe. It would perhaps have to be a Probe so intelligent that they couldn't build it and if they could: - A: It would be so big it would require extravagant energy to send it to us and B. they would have thought of a better way of building it by the time it had arrived here - which might take a hundred years.'

They'd have probably thought of a better way to build it before it left, more likely, if Extraterrestrial engineers were anything like human engineers.

'So they would send a Probe containing the biggest and best computer they could build, but they would build it so that it was far more flexible than a

normal computer. Provision would be made for it to be rewired by remote control and large pieces would probably not be wired in at all.'

'So they would have sent a Probe that was only half-built,' I said.

'Half-programmed,' he corrected. 'And they would use the two-way communications to put in the latest mods when it got here. Quite quickly too - remember they're "only" 4.3 light years away.'

And this computer would behave and react in the same way an Extra-terrestrial would do under the same conditions, receiving data from the sensors it would be provided with, filtering them and only sending the results back. It would be almost the same thing as sending an Extra-terrestrial. But wait a minute!

'Can you Insert a computer program, an Extra-terrestrial computer program, into a human?'

He shrugged.

'You tell me, you know that best. How did it feel? Any different from a human?'

Stap me! I hadn't thought of it. Of course the ET hadn't actually been Inserted into me, we had just shared the same Host, as it were. But something like that had happened to me when I had shared the Arab with the hypnotiser, in the Operator drop-out problem. Was there a difference? I thought back carefully. Jim was looking at me.

'Yes,' I said slowly. 'There was a difference. What the ET said was perfect colloquial English, but the Translator would ensure that anyway. But although the words indicated annoyance, there was no annoyed feeling behind them, if you see what I mean. Quite different to the hypnotiser in the Arab. He was really pissed off. But both were just small samples, of course.'

'Well, there you are then,' he said, as though his explanation sewed it up. He folded up his napkin.

*

Well, that was the end of the story really. But I was interested to see what happened in England after my departure, in the same way as you want to see how a book finishes. Most of the information was in the Chondisp library. The Medium, Madame Odette Vautour, and Felix, the surviving members of the Gang, had been charged with the murder of Joseph Blum after a spectacular trial in which many famous names had figured. They had finally been acquitted for lack of evidence. Madame Vautour never practised again as a Medium but made a fortune on the stock-exchange - maybe she got her information from the Other Side.

Frederick and Marta Blum had two children and apparently did not pursue the wireless telegraph their brother had invented. The world had to wait until 1887 for radio waves to be rediscovered by the German, Hertz.

But their children, both boys, became well-known and ingenious electrical engineers in the 20th Century.

I described the radio Joseph had invented to a scientist and to his surprise it was a very advanced one. Early radios had used a thing called a "coherer", a little glass tube filled with iron filings which became a conductor when a signal was received. It was very insensitive. Joseph's signal detector had been an early "cat's whisker" - a length of fine wire touching a piece of Carborundum. That was the piece of coke covered with wax contraption I had seen. A diode detector. He had even 'ruggedized' it, probably by pouring hot candle-wax on it and letting it solidify. If he had been allowed to continue his experiments he would have been able to transmit several miles, the scientist told me.

Lord and Lady Bonnors were divorced and Lord Bonnors entered a monastery. Lady Bonnors remarried and had 7 children.

Alex Salisbury continued his Bureau and married Giselle Dupont. They had 11 children! Apart from this he wrote several books, in collaboration with Ian, on the scientific method of crime detection, and is supposed to have greatly influenced Conan Doyle when he created his famous character Sherlock Holmes. I have seen faded old photos of Alex, sitting stiffly by his wife. He gets older and older, sports a long white beard and is increasingly surrounded by a larger and larger family. He finally died in 1902 at the ripe old age of eighty-two. His Giselle followed him a year later although she was fourteen years younger than him.

I had a short interview with Dr Duluth before I left Chrondisp to return to Munich. I noticed I had to walk a little further up the thickly carpeted corridor in the Chrondisp "Mahogany Row" to reach his new office

Sitting in the deep luxurious visitor's chair I looked round in exasperation. It's always annoying to have been fooled. And even more annoying when I really can't complain about it. As he so reasonably pointed out - I was sent to find an Extra-terrestrial and I found an Extra-terrestrial.

As I left his office I looked up the corridor. He's gradually approaching the Chief Co-ordinator's Office at the end. I stood there and counted.

Two more offices to go.

But the most important practical result of my Mission was quite unexpected.

The Yellow Peoples Co-prosperity Federation, or Asia-block, have become a lot more friendly and co-operative but no one really knows why. One theory is that when they mobilised for war, they found so many deficiencies in men and material that they realised that they would either have to keep down the living standards of their teeming millions in order to build up their armed forces, or be nicer to the West.

They opted for the second.

The End.