

**The Petticoat Searchers**  
*aka Runcible briggs*

~Part One~

**Chapter One**  
der Engländer  
*a Prologue to Treason*

The Silver Cross  
a pub in Whitehall  
London  
Wednesday 5th October 1887

The Silver Cross pub while not crowded was sufficiently busy to enable the man a degree of anonymity. After getting a drink, he'd chosen a small table against the wall offering a view of the entrance, and there he sat and waited.

He picked up and sniffed then put down, untasted, the glass of claret. He felt he couldn't sit in the pub and go unnoticed without a drink. However, he should have ordered something different, instead of automatically asking for claret—he tutted quietly, club habits, eh what?

This pub claret, he pushed the glass to the middle of the table, would most certainly be quite a step down from the twelve year old Bordeaux he was used to quaffing at his club or indeed, anything available in the Naval Intelligence Division's offices, a mere ten minute walk away and where he was a passed-over lieutenant—a rank unbecoming, he believed at least, of his intellect, ability and skills. He ought to have been captaining his own ship by now, not sifting through banal reports.

He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke from the corner of his mouth and slowly glanced around; here they were the hoi polloi; the cabbies, the clerks, the middlings; the lesser knowns and also rans. All together yet separate in this public house.

“Here mate, you looks like a decent gent; someone with what you'd call a discerning eye. I got me some very nice Egyptian mummy trinkets. All the rage they is: rings an' wot-not, straight from the fingers of some long gone Egyptian king or queen. All top notch stuff, pukka. You interested?”

He shook his head and refocused his attention on the pub entrance.

“Not a trinket sort of feller then, eh?” The hawker leaned in closer. “You after a bit of private entertainment, is that it? I got a very nice looking belly dancer. Egyptian an’ all she is. Very supple and eager to satisfy, if you get me drift.”

He thought of pouring the glass of claret over the man’s head or just shoving him away...the man’s breath was foetid. But no, he had more pressing business. Instead in quite plain terms, he told the hawker to go away.

“That’s the trouble with your lot, init, you thinks you owns the world. In here seeing how the workers enjoy themselves are you, is that it? A bit of slumming for you? Too far up yourself to know what enjoyment is that’s your problem.” And with that the hawker went off in search of someone more malleable.

And that was it! That was everything that was wrong with the country and the Empire, he told himself. The great unwashed with their irresponsible breeding were ruining everything.

He lit another cigarette. The writing was on the wall for the *great* British Empire. It was as rotten at the bottom as it was at the top. Those in the top positions were the more blameworthy though; whether it be the government, the army or the navy, all were moribund and atrophied. There were other, stronger nations clamouring and ready to rule better and more efficiently than Britain and her absent queen.

Just look at Naval Intelligence; how long had it taken for the intelligence division to be set up? It was only in February of this year it came into being; cleaved off from the Foreign Office. It would take years for it to become more than the skeleton department it currently was. And all the while other nations were striding ahead.

“Ah, mein Herr.”

The greeting jolted him from his reverie. He looked up, annoyed, at the tall thin man standing before him—he could not have looked any more Prussian if he had tried.

“Are you mad? I picked this public house for discretion, yet you march in and announce to any open ears...” He stubbed out his cigarette.

The Prussian smiled, a thin smug smile. “Herr— Nein, I will exercise, whatever it is you English call it... Discretion-ness? Ja? Now, if you will permit, I will sit and we may discuss our, let us call them affairs...”

The Englishman indicated for the Prussian to sit and pushed the untouched glass of claret toward him. The Prussian declined, saying he only ever imbibed wines produced by the German Empire.

“We had better make this quick. I need to get back to the office.” The Englishman lied as he always did. He trusted the Prussian less than... Well, less than the Prussian trusted him.

The Prussian raised an eyebrow. “Your dedication surprises me. If it were me...well, clearly it is not. But you are aware, you will be unable to risk remaining here in London, let alone in your position—”

“You don’t have to lecture me. I am ready and packed; he lied again. I need only the money you promised. Do you have it?”

Since their first meeting some months ago, the Prussian had come to enjoy the Englishman’s impatience and anxious nervousness. There were times too he liked to provoke it.

The man sat opposite the Prussian was hopelessly naive and had that typical English arrogance about him. It was entertaining watching this passed-over, what? Ah, the Prussian sighed to himself; Napoleon was correct: the English were nothing more than shopkeepers; *petit bourgeoisie*, peddling and hawking their wares. And this man’s wares, his stock-in-trade? Treason.

Honour, duty and discipline were ingrained within Prussian military culture. He could no more betray the *vaterland* than cut off his right arm. If he were able to satisfactorily conclude this transaction, he would be certain of a promotion: a very good promotion. Perhaps a move to Paris? Yes, there was talk of aiding the French in their desire to bring more of Africa under their influence—this nation of shop people could keep India: *Afrika* offered greater untapped wealth and riches. Let the French do the hard, heavy work and then the German Empire, led by the dominant Prussians, would march in and take over; just as they had done so in 1871.

The Prussian smiled to himself, was this what they called diplomatic artifice? Or just subterfuge? Non, c’est un stratagème astucieux, as the French would say. Well, one of them at least, surely?

“I’m talking to you, damn you! This is my life!”

“Was ist das?”

“Speak bloody English; we are already attracting looks.”

The Prussian looked around. He only saw people caught up in their own little lives.

“I fear you are developing paranoia, my friend. You should have remained in your linen suit, it brought out your better temperament. This sack suit, cutaway jacket, cheap tweed nonsense combination,” the Prussian waved his hand dismissively at the

Englishman's attire. "Whatever it is has made you quite sour. I can recommend my own tailor, if you wish?"

"If you knew anything, you would know an Englishman would never wear a linen suit beyond the end of summer." He testily lit another cigarette.

The Prussian nodded and got to his feet. "You talk of English tradition yet you betray your country for money." He looked down at the Englishman. "I have a cab waiting outside. I suggest we take a ride, away from whatever eyes and ears that seem to be concerning you here."



The carriage ride had been brief. The Prussian had handed him an envelope containing an amount to cover expenses. He would not receive payment for the goods until they were delivered—this had caused a heated exchange being as it was at variance with their original agreement.

The Prussian then brought an additional element into play: unless the Englishman delivered the goods to Paris, the Prussian would see him exposed. His parlous financial status, inveterate gambling and willingness to betray his country broadcast to every newspaper editor in Fleet Street. He would be disgraced, ruined and imprisoned.

To emphasise his point, the Prussian handed *der Engländer*, as he liked to call him, a small Remington Derringer pistol.

"If you decide to renege on our agreement, this will be your salvation. A Model 95 with twin barrels. Even you could not fail to fatally shoot yourself."

The Englishman and would-be traitor, took the small pistol and turned it over in his hands.

"I could just shoot you in the head and have done with it. End this nonsense."

The Prussian took out a silver cigarette case and amber holder. He slowly fitted a cigarette into the holder, lit it and looked thoughtfully at the man sat next to him.

"Yes, you could proceed in that manner, if you so wish. However, this cab driver is in the employ of the Imperial German Army and has instructions to deliver a letter to the editor of The Times newspaper, should you attempt to harm or kill me. Besides, the pistol has yet to be loaded."

He reached into a pocket on the cab door and produced a small box and an envelope the size of a calling card. "There are ten bullets in this box. If you require more you will need to purchase them yourself. Inside the envelope is the address in Paris where you will deliver the goods. Your money will be paid upon receipt and verification of the goods. You understand, ja?"

The Englishman shook his head. "Paris! You really do take the biscuit."

The Prussian turned slightly toward the Englishman and drew in on his cigarette. "Let me put this as you English are fond of saying, in a succinct way; you my little Englishman have chosen to betray your country for money. You are the Judas in this transaction, I am merely an opportunist. However, there is always the possibility your estimable Scotland Yard is aware of your intentions and surveilling you. Similarly, you may be some sort of agent provocateur and this," he waved his hand dismissively once more at the Englishman, "this is just an act; an entrapment ploy. A game devised to embarrass the Imperial German Empire."

He raised an eyebrow waiting for a response but none was forthcoming. "I do not wish to be bested by you or your government and its Empire. Therefore we will meet and exchange in Paris, away from the jurisdiction of your Majesty, Her officers and the auspices of the British Empire. Verstehst du mich?"

The Englishman said nothing, what could he say? He opened the envelope and removed a blank calling card, turning it over he read the neatly written address.

"A church? A bloody church! Is this some sort of joke?"

"A little indulgence on my behalf, perhaps. It does, however, have its practicalities: quietude and privacy. It would also not be unusual for disparate people to, if you will allow a pun, congregate in such an area without suspicion. Furthermore, it is not difficult to locate.

Someone from my staff will wait in the church every morning for a week, beginning on Monday 17th of October but excluding Sunday. That I believe will provide ample time for you. Although, you may wish to secure the goods sooner rather than later and make your way to Paris in a casual manner. I myself will be in the vicinity of the church from time to time to observe. Is that clear? Gut."

The Prussian tapped on the ceiling of the cab with his signet ring. A moment later the cab drew to a halt.

"Good evening to you, Herr Leutnant."

The Englishman stepped from the cab and watched as it drove off. Perhaps he should have tried the Americans instead? Although he had the impression they wanted

everything gratis... The Russians had not been interested in his offer—perhaps he had been too vague? Deliberately so, obviously. And that was why he'd gone to the Germans. Pointless going to the French... A simple case of expediency—loyalty had nothing to do with it.

He turned and began walking back to the offices of Naval Intelligence. He'd get the 'goods' tonight or maybe—he stopped and looked in the first envelope the Prussian had given him: the one with his expenses. Generous.

Perhaps a little flutter was called for? Yes, a hand or two of cards at his club. After all, this expense money was free money. And he would be collecting a great deal more in Paris. The 'goods' could wait another night or two. After Paris he fancied America and yes, a change of name. One can't be too careful. Escape all this, reinvent himself. Once in America he would buy the biggest plot of land he was able; populate it with cattle and an army of cowboys. His own fiefdom.

He looked around and flagged down a passing cab.



## Chapter Two

### The Treason Express

The Redoubt Club  
Pall Mall  
London  
Thursday 6th October 1887

He awoke with his head feeling thick, as if it were filled with one of London's choking pea soup fogs. He rolled to his left side, eyes still closed: he needed a moment or three to assess if...wait; good, a little sweaty but thankfully no nausea. His body though; it felt like—he tried to think: an over-done piece of liver. Yes! Quite specific that but, yes. He was indeed somewhat liverish but pigs liver not lambs. He yawned and pushed a hand through his hair. He only had the vaguest of recollection of the previous night. How many bottles of claret had he got through? And more importantly, how many hands of cards had he lost...?

He opened one eye then the other and looked around: he was in his room at the club and not some brothel. There had been talk during the evening of visiting a nearby house of ill repute but from what little he could recollect, nothing came of it. At least he didn't recall anything coming of it. He suddenly flinched, worried, and nervously reached out and felt the sheets behind him. Relief. He was alone; no lady of the night slumbered contentedly next to him and who he would then need to smuggle out, dressed no doubt in his overcoat and best hat. He'd been caught like that before and threatened with expulsion from the Redoubt—he'd only managed to retain his membership by paying a hefty fine. Why was it always easier to smuggle a woman in to the club than get one out?

He propped himself up, time to get dressed; a little hair of the dog wouldn't go amiss. Perhaps a light breakfast and then put in a few hours at the Naval Intelligence Division before lunch.



Lunchtime had not arrived soon enough. He needed a good, fatty soup and a hunk of bread. Something basic and earthy to comfort his constitution. A glass or two of champagne to wash it down, if indeed soup needed washing down. Yes, champagne would off-set any creeping nausea or biliousness that may unexpectedly arise. It sounded good: the peasant heartiness of a fatty soup combined with the refinement of the wine of kings. Where to dine though? Somewhere with an agreeable clientele and reasonable prices. Unless he were able to dine for free...This was something his

losses last night certainly dictated. Although, he had almost got away scot free with those losses...

After breakfasting and a little brandy snifter, he had been passing through the foyer of his club toward the front doors on his way to the Naval Intelligence Division offices, when one of the club's stewards approached him.

"Begging your pardon, sir. The Bursar sends his compliments and asks if he might have a word?"

He looked from the steward to the front doors and inwardly cursed. Half a dozen more strides and he would have been outside and away.

"Very well. Is he in his office?"

The steward nodded and escorted him to a well-polished oak door with the hand-painted legend, Office of the Bursar. After a polite knock, the steward opened the door and showed him in. The room was dominated by a sturdy but plain and functional oak desk, varnished to a glass-like finish.

"Ah, there you are. Sorry to way-lay you on your way out. This will only take a minute." The Bursar motioned for him to sit and slid a piece of paper across the desk.

"You wrote out this IOU last night, I believe. Quite a large amount for a friendly game of cards."

He stared at the note and nodded.

"It is your note, is it not? I mean, you did issue it and it is correct? As you know, the club holds all such notes until they are settled. We find it a slightly more agreeable arrangement. Gentlemen do not wish to be looked upon as unseemly by chasing debts."

He nodded at the Bursar once more but added, he could not attest to the amount. He had a vague recollection that it been several hundreds of pounds but £1,500?

"Oh, it is not the amount that concerns me. Your German uncle recently settled your outstanding account here at the club and we do like to look after our gentlemen and offer whatever concessions we are able." The Bursar smiled and continued. "No, you merely forgot to sign and date the IOU." He held out a dip pen. "If you please, unless of course, you do dispute the note?"

"No, no dispute. I am more than happy to sign." Frankly he didn't care. If all went well he'd be out of the country before he would be required to settle it. Besides, a



gambling IOU wasn't real money... He scrawled his signature and offered the pen to the Bursar.

“And the date of course.”

“Ah yes, the date.” He brusquely scribbled the date and handed the note and pen back. “Will that be all?”

The Bursar nodded. “I must say your German uncle was very striking in his uniform. On your father's side of the family?”

He got to his feet and quietly cursed the Prussian. He wasn't bothered about selling out his country or the Empire—they no-longer...what? No-longer resonated with his beliefs. A smile rippled across his face. Yes, that sounded good. Stuff the British Empire, this was about him. It was just, well, he'd prefer to retain some degree of control. Blasted Prussian! The damnable man had prepared the ground and laid the foundations in a ruthlessly efficient Prussian way. He must want the goods badly. The pay-off in Paris had better be a good one. Otherwise... He smiled politely at the Bursar.

“On my mother's side actually.” With that he bade the Bursar good morning and left the room.

Outside the club he cursed the Prussian again—the man was no uncle to him or even a relative. He had said to the Prussian, “Give me the money to clear my club account: think of it as a down-payment towards the goods.” But no, the Prussian did not trust him. He had a horrible feeling and not just from the hangover, that the Prussian would expose him, goods or no goods. He'd better do the job tonight then afterwards get a train from Victoria Station down to Dover and the first available paddle steamer across the Channel to France. He gave a little chuckle, forget the *Express d'Orient* this would be *L'Express de la Trahison!*

He was suddenly jolted from his recollection of that morning's meeting with the Bursar by a cheery slap on the back.

“There you are, old boy. Took your time coming out. Looked like you were away with the fairies. I've been loitering about outside, waiting, for a good ten minutes. Must say, quite surprised at getting a telegram suggesting lunch. Extravagant eh? Dammit, you look washed up. Heavy night, last night, what?”

He'd opted to dine at the National Liberal Club at its new location on the Embankment: he was friendly with a Liberal Party constituency agent who was always happy to sign him in as a guest and pick up the tab for lunch. In return, he would listen to an endless drone of the Liberal Party's woes for an hour and a half.

And here was the constituency agent in person, outside his offices. The man knew only that he was attached to the Foreign Office and not Naval Intelligence. He extended his hand and greeted the man as enthusiastically as his lingering hangover would allow. The man's ebullient manner never ceased, by turns it both elevated his mood and annoyed him. But then where else could one dine out for the price of a telegram?



## Chapter Three

### A Single Ticket

Office of Naval Intelligence, Whitehall  
Friday 7th October  
Afternoon

“Oh Fortuna, why hast thou forsaken me?” He didn’t speak it out loud just thought the words. It was true enough though, he needed some good fortune. Otherwise he’d never get his hands on the damnable goods. Today, this afternoon, this moment now was the first time he had been alone in the office he shared with three others. He got up from his desk and exhaled noisily, venting his frustration. He had hoped to have been in Paris by now. Well, he’d really hoped to have been there two days ago! Enjoying whatever distractions were on offer. The sooner he was away from here the better.

He stubbed out his cigarette, checking his watch as he did so; a regular Friday afternoon ritual and one that, all being quiet, hastened the end of the working day, was drinks in the Naval Intelligence Director’s office. Seeing this as an opportunity, he had sent his three colleagues on ahead, lying that he wanted to finish the memo he was attaching to a file he’d been working on—he would be no more than five minutes, six at the most he told them.

He’d been attempting to get his hands on the goods as he liked to call them since, well it didn’t matter, it just felt like a long time! All to no avail. His attempts constantly thwarted: his four-man office had been busy and fully occupied, tasked to explore whatever possibilities there were of close-blockades and major coastal assaults using naval units. Not on any specific coastline just in general, which was not helpful. A lot of fanciful schemes had been put forward and he was becoming wearisome of constantly looking at ways of combing different elements of each scheme to come up with one cohesive strategy. The Admiralty and Foreign Office failed to understand what may have worked in 1812 was likely no longer feasible over seventy years later!

The afternoon had passed slowly, scribbled ideas on paper either crossed through or noted as ‘Possible’ and given to one of his colleagues to look into further. The hands of the wall mounted office clock seemed to move backward rather than forward, stretching out the afternoon until it reached a point where it felt it had never started nor would it ever end.

But now, finally, he was alone and could open the safe untroubled by curious eyes, and remove the goods he had agreed to sell to the Prussian. He slowly unlocked and pulled open the door of the five-foot tall, free-standing safe and reached in...

“Are you coming?” A head poked around the office door “The old man is asking if you’ve got yourself lost again? He says you were never able to navigate your way at sea either!”

He stepped back from the safe and turned to face the door, startled: his attempt frustrated.

“I was just about to come actually.” He tried to sound composed, not surprised; masking his intentions, readying his lie.

“I was just locking up some files.”

Quite strategically he had tucked a random file from his desk under his arm. He now waved the file in the air then dropped it on one of the safe’s shelves, closed and locked the safe door then placed the key back in the duty officer’s desk drawer.

“Don’t forget to sign the key book.”

He nodded, smiled and removed the key book from the same drawer and scrawled an entry, noting he had opened the safe on 7th October at 3.55 pm for *misc files*. He placed the book back in the drawer with the key and proceeded with his colleague for drinks in the Director’s office.



Saturday 8th October  
Afternoon and evening

Saturdays in the office were always half days, everyone without exception took the afternoon as ‘holiday’: an accepted perk. The end of the working week had been reached and everything was more relaxed safe in the oft-cited but never completely proven maxim that no one civilised ever started a war on a Saturday! From the many intelligence reports he had studied over his short career, most nations seemed to go to war on a Tuesday or a Thursday. Of course once at war, any bloody day was good enough for fighting!

Today of all the days of the week, he had found it easy to open the safe and remove unnoticed the goods he had promised the Prussian. In fact it had been laughably easy: of the three other naval officers he shared the office with, one was now off sick, another on an errand to the Foreign Office and the third had gone in search of tea and buns. Almost as much as drinks with the Director on a Friday afternoon, tea and buns were a Saturday tradition.

He left the Naval Intelligence offices at lunchtime and made his way to his club where, to the surprise of the steward serving in the reading room, he ordered a large brandy and downed it before the man had time to turn away. Fortified and if not fully relaxed he repaired to his room where after a brief nap, he changed out of his naval uniform into a dark green plaid, single breasted suit. For the first time in many months he felt alive, fizzing with electricity. This business of treason was intoxicating!

He had already chosen a selection of clothes to take with him to Paris. He now placed them, with the goods from the Naval Intelligence safe in a Gladstone bag and tried to think what else he would need. Of course, he could always get one of the club's stewards to pack for him but then...No, he wanted to slip away quietly, hopefully unnoticed. Whatever he forgot to pack he'd have to buy in Paris.

Next, taking some paper from the desk drawer, he wrote out the address in Paris from the card the Prussian had given him. He wrote in slightly large letters to allow him to show the address to whatever Parisian cabbie he came across. The Prussian's hand writing while being legible was quite small and ornate.

He checked his watch: the train was due to depart Victoria Station at 8pm for Dover, more than enough time for an early dinner here at the club.



It was his first time travelling on the London, Chatham and Dover Railway or the LC&DR to give its common abbreviation. He did not find the experience enjoyable. Boarding at Victoria Station had been straightforward, the train punctual. However, the carriage had become draughty, mostly due to the man sitting opposite insisting on the window being open from the moment he had got on.

From Victoria Station until the said arrival of the man, the journey had been uneventful, bordering on pleasant. The man, possibly one of the new breed of so called commercial salesmen had boarded at Chatham Station, roughly the half way point between London and Dover and taken the seat opposite. The carriage was empty other than the two of them.

The man had been one of those chatty types, the sort who would not have been out of place at a meeting of The Ladies Discussion Society. He'd stared at the man with this thought in his head and pictured him, moustache and mutton chops intact, in a florid dress of some description. This had made him smile and although the image amused him somewhat, he began to feel uneasy and immediately he'd finished his cigarette,

he lit another one. What if this man were not a commercial salesman but someone from Scotland Yard, his treason discovered and this man sent to arrest him?

“Not a good traveller then?” The commercial salesman enquired, watching him, seeming to study his face.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Not good at travelling, I asked. That’s why you are smoking cigarette after cigarette. Me, forgive the pun, but travelling comes with the territory. Going all the way are you?”

He inhaled slowly on the cigarette, releasing the smoke through his nostrils. He was a good traveller, yes, he told the man. It was just...he imagined leaning forward and beckoning the man closer and saying; *I am indeed a very good traveller truth be known. It’s just that...I have stolen some very secretive documents from the Navy Intelligence Division...*

Of course he didn’t, wouldn’t say that: the man might actually be Scotland Yard. He decided to spin a lie. “I’m just getting over a recent bereavement. Thought a few days on the coast would help.”

“Quite understand. But if I may say, I would have thought someone in your obvious distress would be more soberly dressed?”

The man was irritating. No wonder he was a travelling commercial salesman; his wife probably welcomed his absences. The man was still talking; he’d stopped listening though. He closed his eyes but no sooner had he done so than he detected a sudden draft.

“I’ve opened the window. Get some air circulating. Myself I am not a partaker and you do seem to be filling the carriage with smoke.” He gave a chuckle. “If we had a sudden fire in here, we’d not see it because of all your cigarette smoke!” He chuckled again.

In his mind, he grabbed this irritating little man, removed his wallet, found the imagined Scotland Yard identity card, took whatever money the man had then yanked open the carriage door and thrust him out into the dark night and certain death.

The man, perhaps sensing he had irritated his travelling companion pulled out a hip flask and offered it to him. “It’s nothing special. At least it takes the edge off. We all need a good nip of something now and again. I’m going all the way through; all the way to France. This time tomorrow, no wait that’s Sunday. Monday then, I’ll be knee deep in fabrics: picking out whatever looks good but comes cheap and having it shipped back poste haste as the French say.”

He declined the hip flask and felt duty bound to point out *post haste* was not French. The French were more likely to say something along the lines of *à toute vitesse*.

“Bit of an educated man then, eh?” He took a long swig from his hip flask.

If there was one thing he didn't want, it was to share a paddle steam ferry and then a French train with this man. What to do though, what to do?

“Here we are,” said the man nodding at the open window. “Dover. End of the line.” He lifted the front of his hat barely an inch, bid farewell and was out the door and scurrying across the platform.

“Thank god for that,” he muttered to himself then stood up and pulled his Gladstone bag from the overhead rack and alighted the train.

No sooner was he off the train though than he was informed by a porter that night's ferry had been cancelled due to adverse weather in the English Channel. The next ferry would be 10am the next day, weather dependent.



## Chapter Four

### The Micawber Factor

Office of Runcible Briggs  
Clifton  
Bristol

Thursday 13th October 1887

Isidore reached the top of the narrow, double-back stairs and standing on the small landing paused for a moment. She could do with a pair of gloves for although it was only just coming up to mid October, the weather had begun to change; what would have been a gentle breeze mere weeks ago now had a bite to it. There was to be no Indian summer of balmy halcyon days this year, just an interminable slide toward winter. It didn't help that Isidore felt weary and had been up since god knows what o'clock and had yet to eat or even enjoy a cup of something tepid let alone hot.

She let out an undisguised yawn and as she did so, reached out and gave the small brass plate attached to the door in front of her a gentle wipe with the cuff of her overcoat.

In an understated script the plate on the door read,

Runcible Briggs ~ Consultive Detective.

She smiled at the name then turned the doorknob but for whatever reason, and unusually, the door was locked. She pressed against it with her shoulder and called out.

"Tilley, are you in? Open the door. It's me, I'm back. Why's it locked? I'm positively exhausted out here; I want to warm myself on the stove!"

The potbelly stove had been a valuable addition to the office and one that brought dividends, especially on days like today. It also helped that it required less coal and was correspondingly cheaper to run than the fireplace it stood in.

Isidore released the doorknob and began rummaging through her pockets; she knew she had a door key tucked away somewhere: overcoat pockets, no; she unbuttoned her overcoat: jacket inside pockets, no. Hah, the pockets of her plus fours? No...but, tada!

"Et voila!" Isidore exclaimed and pulled a bronze-coloured key from her jacket breast pocket and brandished it with a flourish in the air.



“And for my next trick, I will make a space in this wall, which I will call an open doorway!”

Isidore slid the key into the lock, turned it and gave the handle a firm twist and the door a good push and stepped into a small porch area. She slipped off her overcoat and hung it on one of the three ornate metal hooks. Two steps later, entering through the inner door, she was in the office proper of Runcible Briggs Consultive Detective. A further half step and she stopped dead.

Tilley, Isidore’s assistant, was in what Isidore in her typical understated way would call a delicately compromising position. Not wishing to intrude further, Isidore quietly retraced her steps to the front door, back out onto the landing and waited...

Several minutes later a tall, smartly dressed, well-built man, looking very pleased with himself strode confidently out of the office and, to Isidore’s mind, positively skipped down the stairs. Seconds later Tilley appeared, spitting into a handkerchief.

“Sorry Izz, he insisted I lock the door. When you came in, things had reached an erm critical moment, as they say. Now I really need to go down to the lavvie.”

“Just a minute, you might find this useful,” Isidore stepped into the porch and pulled a hip flask from her overcoat pocket. “Rinse and spit. It never fails to take the taste away.” She grinned then watched Tilley clatter down the stairs.

On the ground floor were, quite luxuriously, two indoor lavatories—something reflected in the premium rent charged by the building’s landlord.

Isidore re-entered the office, put a small scoop of coal into the stove and warmed her hands while waiting for the kettle to come to the boil.

By the time Tilley returned, Isidore was sat behind her desk, hands wrapped around a milk-less, over-sized cup of tea. She looked up at her tall, auburn-haired assistant, who just managed to stay on the right side of what the Germans termed *geschick*; the French, *mort-chic* and various London periodicals, the *à la mode* haunted-gaunt look.

“Sorry, Izz, I really needed to spew that out. There was no way I was keeping that inside me. It felt like bone factory glue! God knows what sort of life he’s been living to get...”

Tilley stopped, shrugged and handed Isidore the hip flask.

“It’s only cheap stuff, I’m afraid, Tilley. Needs must as they say. But it suffices as something to keep the blood flowing on a cold day, or indeed, as a mouth rinse. At least it’s not the rot-gut brandy that isn’t even good enough for cooking with. We

haven't quite reached those depths." Isidore flashed a smile then added a splash of the brandy to her tea.

Tilley agreed. "Yes, that definitely is a cheap brandy. But I have had a lot worse I am sad to say!" She opened her hand and dropped four sovereigns onto Isidore's desk blotter.

"Was this from your...encounter?"

Tilley nodded. "An American gentleman, as they say. Quite generous. He could have probably got himself two or three dock whores for a whole night for that amount. I did tell him I was very exclusive: it's funny how old habits die hard. He was here on some business or other; heading to London next and then onward to Southampton and a ship back to America. Wanted to experience a true, high-class British madam, he said." Tilley gave a mock curtsy.

Isidore shook her head in amusement then reached into her jacket pocket and produced two sovereigns and dropped them next to Tilley's.

"One very well-groomed white cat tracked down and rescued from a tree, complete with her mistress' three-string pearl bracelet with cabochon garnet clasp, worn as a collar, would you believe. By the time I retrieved the cat, it was looking a little less well groomed. Luckily being white the pearls didn't stand out as much as they would on say a black cat. Otherwise the cat would likely be no more and the pearl bracelet in a local fence house, I imagine."

Isidore stacked the sovereigns one on top of one another then continued.

"It seems, whenever the lady of the house is away, her maid lets the cat wear the bracelet as a fancy collar. As a treat would you believe! I imagine the cat would rather have a nice piece of fish. In my limited experience of cats they do not go out of their way begging to be dressed in pearls. Treat indeed! I did suggest to the maid, five pounds would be a fairer recompense, given the obvious value of the bracelet, but these sovereigns were all she had to hand, she said. Oh and a pound of Fortnum & Mason's best tea, which I naturally accepted. The lady of the house is away on the coast for a few days and obviously ignorant of the incident and the maid is having to stretch out the meagre housekeeping money she was left."

Tilley gave a wicked grin. "You should have kidnapped the cat then taken it back when the lady returned home. Perhaps she would have given a more generous reward."

Isidore laughed. "Either that or accused me of thievery, called for a policeman and no doubt dismissed the maid! At least we now have enough for this quarter's rent. And only a week late!

Plus, I do believe we can stretch to a cheap luncheon.” Isidore finished her tea. “Speaking of rent though, I was down around Broad Street the other day. It looks as if there is the possibility of an office or two becoming vacant. The rent would be less than here.”

Tilley shrugged. “But at least here it’s well away by a good mile from the hurly burley and stench of the docks.” She held up her hand. “I know Broad Street isn’t right on the docks but... Look, who knows what gets thrown in those docks: pig swill; dogs, cats, people! Besides, we’re on the high ground here and that must count for something.”

“I agree, Tills, there is that. But we would be a short distance from The Grand Hotel, if we moved to Broad Street. Perhaps we’d get some work from there?”

“Other than fill-in waitresses or maids, you mean?”

The two fell silent. Income over the last few months had been erratic. Rescuing pearl bedecked cats from trees was not what Isidore had in mind when she founded Runcible Briggs. Nor did she envisage her assistant having to service random Americans to raise rent money.

Isidore picked up the stack of sovereigns and dropped them one at a time back on top of each other. “As Micawber said, Tills, more or less anyway; income twenty pounds, outgoings nineteen pounds, Micawber happy. Income twenty pounds, outgoings twenty-one pounds, Micawber in misery.

Come on, grab your coat; Micawber is happy, we are currently in credit. We will pay the quarter’s rent, get chastised by the landlord over its lateness and then dine: drown our sorrows with beer and oysters at the Alma. I haven’t eaten since yesterday!”



The Alma Tavern  
Clifton, Bristol

Isidore and Tilley entered the Alma Tavern, a mere ten or so minutes stroll from the Runcible Briggs office. The tavern, not unusually for that time of day, was quiet. A little dark inside perhaps but in the main it was clean and hospitable. Isidore ordered enough oysters for them both to share and two glasses of porter. They then sat themselves at a small table next to a window.

For a good twenty minutes they fell silent, making their way through the oysters—pausing only for long sips of porter. The silence was eventually broken by Tilley.

“Tell me, how was the cat rescue? The actual trekking down of it, I mean. I see you donned your plus fours—very fetching if I do say so.”

Isidore gave a little laugh.

“I think it cost me more to have them taken in and re-tailored than what they are worth. I just assumed getting a pair men’s trousers, albeit from a pawn shop, and having them altered would be cheaper than having a pair made by an obliging tailor.”

Isidore sighed then added.

“A woman’s lot is a hard one, Tills. At some point someone somewhere will recognise that women like to wear things other than skirts and dresses. But despite their cost, these plus fours have proven quite practical and are the ideal thing when meandering around the streets of Clifton at ungodly hours of the night and early morning, in search of a cat...”

“How on earth did you manage to track it down? I mean cats are just...” Tilley made a face.

“I would like to say it was by the inspired use of deductive reasoning...” Isidore giggled. “But sadly it wasn’t. Instead one consulted a felinologist, don’t you know. He just happened to also be a taxidermist, a strange mix I thought, and is in the process of launching, *A Weekly Journal Devoted to Cats*. I did remark, as a title it seemed over-long. He agreed and thought he may just go with, *Paws for Thought*.” Isidore gave a grimace. “But, by-the-by, he did tell me cats like to explore in ever increasing circles. Using that I tried to circle around the house in...well you get the notion.

I eventually found the cat stuck in a tree some quarter of a mile from the house, more than relieved to be rescued and definitely too hungry to fight or run. I think years of pampering had dulled or diminished the cat’s otherwise natural abilities.

The maid told me later when I returned the cat and pearl bracelet-collar, she had placed the bracelet around the cat’s neck, then become distracted searching for a grooming brush. The cat seized upon this opportunity and made off through an open window. The poor maid spent a very sleepless night fretting over her carelessness. She had even packed her bag and written out her notice.

Now, no more cat-talk; let us raise a toast with our remaining drink to a more successful up-coming quarter than this last one. Perhaps with winter looming and

dark nights, there may be more detecting to be done. Or at least more people in need of our detecting services and who will pay the full going rate!”

“I’ll certainly drink to that!”

Isidore touched glasses with Tilley and suggested they ought to make a move. Otherwise, not only would they would while away their afternoon and left over money in the pub thus becoming miseries like Micawber but perhaps attract more attention from the figure currently leaning with their back against the bar and staring at them.

In a lowered voice, Isidore asked Tilley, “You don’t know them do you? They have been watching us, not constantly but just enough to make me think we should leave before they decide to become a pester.”

Tilley looked over at the bar, studying the figure. “You know what, I do think I do know them, Izz.”

Believing there had at last been some sense of recognition, the bar-prop approached the two women. “Tilley? It is you isn’t it? I know my eyes sometimes play me tricks but...”

Tilley smiled. “Hello stranger. Yes, indeed it is me. How are you?”

The stranger smiled warmly and nodded at Isidore, winking. “Have you got yerself a wife now, eh?”

From their dress, this friend or past acquaintance of Tilley’s was clearly a sailor: a merchant captain. Their face weathered by wind and sea spray but and this is what Tilley had always said about Captain Eliot Marian, their eyes had a warm, kindly sparkle about them.

“Cap’n Marian this is Miss Runce, my employer.”

Cap’n Marian touched a finger to their worn cap. “Tilley and I go back a short while, shall we say. I didn’t mean any disrespect suggestin’ you were Tilley’s wife. I have what they call a skewed outlook.”

“Of course not, no apology needed. Sometimes it’s the skewed outlook that saves us.” Isidore held out her hand. “Pleased to meet you. Unfortunately we were just about to leave.”

“Now that is a shame indeed. But we are all slaves to the toil and heave of makin’ coin. If you ever be down by the floatin’ harbour have a look out for me ship. Tilley knows her well. You are both welcome on board for a glass of whatever I’ve got to

hand or even a cup of tea if you prefer. We will be there for say another week then we sail for France—just a short jaunt across the channel and back.” Cap’n Marian touched a finger to their cap again as Tilley and Isidore got to their feet.

For a moment Tilley smiled at Cap’n Marian and held her hand out before quickly withdrawing it and stepping forward, planted a kiss on the cap’n’s cheek. She turned to Isidore.

“Cap’n Marian here saved me and gave me, well, gave me hope when there seemed none.” Tilley turned back to Cap’n Marian and squeezed their hand. “You took me in and looked after me.”

Cap’n Marian waved a hand dismissing Tilley’s words. “All I did was see wrong being done, step in and help out.” Cap’n Marian gave a shake of the head. “You were a terrible sailor tho’. Every gentle swell had you lurching for a pail or the ship’s rail.”

“Gentle swell? I will tell you, Izz, I went down to Ceylon and back with this person in a three masted clipper. Six months there and the same back! By the time we returned to Bristol fully laden with tea, I was so used to being at sea, I couldn’t walk straight for a week! What Cap’n Marian here calls gentle swells were nothing more than full blown storms!”

Cap’n Marian laughed out loud. “It is good to see you doing well and in good company. I am off to see my sister in her fancy house; I’ll show her the books from the last voyage and see if she agrees we should invest in a steamship. She’s the one holding the purse strings. As good as our old clipper is and as good and loyal as our crew, we need to move with the times.” Cap’n Marian touched their cap once more and bade Tilley and Isidore a pleasant afternoon.

Outside the Alma Tavern, Isidore remarked Cap’n Marian seemed to be a good-hearted type.

Tilley agreed. “The Cap’n and their sister are Quakers. I never got to meet her but Cap’n Marian used to say she was as stern as she was teetotal. The Cap’n’s a bit more luskish but is no less imbibed with a deep sense of honesty and rightness. Completely trustworthy: just don’t go sailing with them, they have a taste for rough seas!”



**Chapter Five**  
A Morning Caller

Office of Runcible Briggs  
Clifton  
Bristol  
Friday 14th October 1887

Tilley had thus far spent the morning sewing up a rip in the seat of Isidore's plus-fours—incurred but unnoticed Isidore surmised during her rescue of the Pearl Cat, as they had begun to refer to the recent cat case .

While Tilley deftly stitched away, Isidore finished writing an account of the cat rescue in *The Official Case History of Runcible Briggs*. Isidore had tentatively numbered the journal as *Vol. 1*—the first of many volumes she hoped. The journal detailed in brief but succinct and unadorned terms, every case, no matter how small or inconsequential, they had undertaken since opening the—Isidore stopped and looked over at Tilley.

“Is *detectancy* a word?”

“What do you mean?”

“What we do or what we are meant to be doing; aiming and striving to do. Would you call it *detectancy*?”

“You mean detectives, as in detecting?”

Isidore nodded. “Are we, is this, a *detectancy* business or just...?”

“Well, you are the educated one; I thought it was just a detective consultancy. Is this for the journal?”

“Mmm, yes. Don't worry, it was just an idle thought.” Isidore blotted the page, gave it a little blow over and closed the journal. She leaned back in her seat and studied the plus-fours Tilley was now holding up for her inspection.

“That is a very good job, if I do say so. You have such neat stitching, Tills. I think I will get you to do all my repairs and alterations from now.” Isidore gave a hopeful smile.

“I don’t know about that. But neat sewing is something I have Cap’n Marian to thank for. There is little else to do on long ship evenings but improve your sewing. Or play cards, or drink, or whittle or even all four!”

At that moment there was a rapping on the inner door of the office. The sort of rap that only came from the handle of a walking cane.

“Are we expecting company this morning?” Isidore stared at the door, waiting for it to swing open and reveal their visitor.

Tilley shook her head and folded up the plus-fours, placing them on Isidore’s desk. There was another burst of rapping on the door.

“Well, Izz, it is definitely not the landlord. We paid him yesterday. Is there anyone else we owe money?”

Isidore ran a hand over her head, checking her bun was secure. “I don’t believe so. At least no one who immediately comes to mind. Unless...” She paused, thinking. “No, I do believe at this current moment in time, we are solvent. We have on hand the princely sum of nineteen shillings and sixpence, half-penny. Or is it ha’penny.”

“I suppose if it was a royal sum rather than just a princely one it would be more, wouldn’t it?” Tilley grinned.

“Very true. We must be more aspirant! Now, would you like to see who is at the door, before they begin to damage the paintwork and we have to use our nineteen shillings to hire a painter?”

“Me? Why not you? Whoever it is behind that door may have a walking stick in one hand and a revolver in the other.”

Isidore pulled open her desk drawer and removed a short leather cosh then called out to the mystery door rapper. “Come in. The door is not locked.”

Tilley picked up a heavy glass paperweight. “I can see the headline now: *Detectives Slain In Own Office*. Underneath it would say; *Female detectives fail to detect danger!*”

“No, Tills, they’d go with something like; *Petticoat Searchers Slain!* That’s what they call we women detectives, is it not; Petticoat Searchers? And there would be a remark that if only we’d worn bustled dresses, we could have had a concealed revolver. Mind you, the size of some of these bustles you could hide a shotgun in them!

Perhaps a better headline would be, *Work Kills Women* and something in the text along the lines of, *women are only guaranteed safety in the home.*”



The inner door to the office swung open and a tall man with a well-groomed moustache and short, greying hair entered the office. In one hand he held a walking cane with an ornate silver top and in the other, not a revolver but a hat. He swung the cane in front of himself and laughed. “So, ladies, is it to be death by paperweight or your little cosh, Isidore? Forgive me but I could not help but eavesdrop.”

Isidore sprang to her feet. “Uncle! I’m stunned. What are you doing in Bristol?”

The man offered his hat and cane to Tilley. “You don’t mind, do you. I do not see a hat or coat stand.”

“We are saving up for one and usually the floor suffices. But as you seem to be related to Isidore, I will place these on my desk.”

“Very considerate of you, miss.

Isidore. I have left the comfort of Scotland Yard to come and visit you with an offer of work. But first...” The man looked from Isidore to Tilley.

“Of course, my apologies. Uncle, this is Tilley, my assistant. Tilley this is my uncle, the Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard, Charles Runce.”

Tilley nodded. “Impressive. Would the Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard like a cup of tea?”

“Tea would be most welcome, thank you. I will assume you make it without milk?”

Together Isidore and Tilley replied, “Always.”

Runce smiled and sat himself down. “I started Isidore here on her path of discovery regards milk-less tea. I myself learned to go without milk during the Siege of Lucknow, when I was a young subaltern serving in India.”

Isidore put a hand to her head and pretended to swoon. “Don’t let him get started on the Siege of Lucknow, Tilley, we’ll be here until midnight!”

“There’s no respect left in the world!” Runce smiled again and fell silent while Tilley poured out three cups of tea—she hadn’t bothered making a fresh pot, just refreshed the existing one from the recently boiled kettle.

“You said you had an offer of work, Uncle?”

“And there’s my Isidore, always straight to the point.”

Tilley handed Runce a cup of tea and apologised for the lack of saucers then sat down behind her desk. The office was not a big one, about the size of a parlour in an average-sized, middle class, terraced house. With two desks, attendant chairs plus a further two chairs for visitors or clients; an eight drop-drawer filing cabinet and a small utility table, the room was what Tilley termed, cosy.

Runce placed his saucerless cup on the edge of Isidore's desk. "Sadly Isidore, I am not going to ask you to return to Scotland Yard."

"Good, because I would not. My days trying to bring order to the Records Department are long gone. Besides, I would be constantly looking around for Briggs."

Runce nodded. He too missed the methodological approach of the late Detective Inspector Reginald Briggs. "Here we are two years later and he is still sorely missed. The two of you were a good, working match. I still find it hard to believe something as random as a ricocheting bullet..." He stopped, noticing Isidore's eyes beginning to well up.

"But enough of this. I am sure his spirit walks with us each and every day. Now let us move on to why I am here."

Tilley leaned forward on her desk. "I'm all ears..."

"It is rather sensitive, Isidore. Perhaps we could discuss it privately?"

"I assume, whatever the matter is, you believe my, even our, talents would be of use?"

Runce nodded.

"In that case, Tilley will remain. She is my assistant and we work together; equal, interdependent and reliable. Discretion is our stock-in-trade"

"Ah, I recognise the words from your business card." Runce laced his fingers together and for a moment rested his chin on them. "As you wish. However, this is a most confidential matter." He paused for effect to underline the seriousness then resumed.

"A little over a week ago, a set of blueprints or plans, if you will, went missing from an office in Whitehall. They need to be recovered lest they fall into the wrong hands."

"I see and these blueprints, plans, Uncle, would they have been held in say the Foreign Office? No, wait, you said fall into the wrong hands. That would imply something new that would give us an advantage over any adversary. Therefore the

Whitehall office in question would not be related to the army—their strength lies in numbers, supply lines and battlefield strategy. That means it is the navy we must look to and do I recall a department for Naval Intelligence was set up earlier in the year?”

Runce looked at Tilley and smiled. “She is good, isn’t she.

You are quite correct, Isidore. A set of blueprints was removed from a safe in the Naval Intelligence Division, rather than department, last Saturday. It is believed a young Naval lieutenant is responsible.”

“And you have been unable to retrieve the blueprints, even with all of the Yard’s resources? Who did you put on the case?”

“To a degree our hands are tied. We have to be succinct lest we alert our erm... Let us just say, the Navy would like the matter resolving...quietly. As for resources, thus far the investigation has been headed up by Inspector Williams.”

Isidore let out a guffaw. “Oh, Uncle. Surely not Sweaty Williams! Is he really an inspector now?” She shook her head in disbelief and leaned back in her chair. “The man is a buffoon and he hates women, even though he is married—probably more by accident than design. He actually wanted to arrest me and Briggs during the Fitzpatrick case we worked on. A man caught up in his own importance!” She let out a sigh.

Runce gave an imperceptible nod in agreement. “We must all work with the cloth we are given. Although I will say, Inspector Williams has progressed the case, shall we say as far as he is able. All to no avail. Hence my visit today. Would you be prepared to take the case on?”

“It’s not nepotism, is it?”

“Hardly. Williams has got as far as can get. The Commissioner has instructed or rather given authorisation for the use of outside agency. It is either that or we...” Under his breath, Runce muttered, “...give Williams even more resources to waste.”

“I, we, will not work with Sweaty, sorry, Inspector Williams. And we will need paying. Something on account. Work has been a little thin of late.”

Runce nodded. “Yes, that is acceptable.” He took out his wallet and removed several five pound notes and handed them to Isidore. “This will be a payment on account for sundry expenses. I’ll need some sort of invoice or receipt. Let me know if more is required.”

Isidore passed the five pound notes to Tilley who began drawing up a formal receipt.

“Shall I mark it as funds received from Assistant Commissioner Runce, Scotland Yard, in respect of consultive work?”

Runce nodded. “Now, my dear ladies we must repair to London forthwith and commence investigations. I retained a cab with ample room—it is currently parked downstairs. We can get the first available train to London, if that is acceptable to you both? I know this is very short notice or indeed, no notice at all but you will appreciate time is of the essence. Hopefully you are both seasoned in travelling light?”

Isidore looked at Tilley who nodded and handed Runce his receipt.



## **Chapter Six** The Investigation Opens

The Redoubt Club  
Pall Mall  
London  
Evening  
Friday 14th October 1887

Isidore and Tilley stood on the steps of The Redoubt Club, firmly on the pavement side of the entrance, not so much because they were female but rather, because they were not male. An odd tautological, meaningless distinction Isidore thought.

However, according to The Redoubt’s doorman, who had successfully barred both Isidore and Tilley from entering but allowed Runce free passage, there was a distinct and discernible difference.

“This is a member’s only club,” the doorman had explained in a way that only a literal gatekeeper could. “It doesn’t mean women are barred, only that entrance is given only and ever to members and I am afraid membership is currently only open to gentlemen of a particular social standing and honourability.”

Isidore had snorted at this piece of nonsense and was prepared to argue with the doorman but he retreated inside and stood staring at them through the gleaming glass panels of the Redoubt’s double doors, bathed in the club’s recently installed electric lights. A pair of stewards took up position to his left and right as reinforcement.

“Clearly,” Isidore turned to Tilley, “It takes three men to deny two women entrance.”

“Is this where we disappear around the corner, don our theatrical moustaches, shove a half-smoked cigar in our mouths and return doing a suitable male striding-swagger walk?”

“We could, Tills, but I am afraid your dress may give us away. At least I had the foresight, despite Uncle’s disapproving looks, to don my plus-fours. I just hope Uncle can persuade whoever is in charge of the club, to let us in. We really need to find out whatever we can about this would-be traitor.”

Tilley agreed. “Until then we must position ourselves, as the saying goes, like two baskets of oranges.”

“She’s a basket of oranges fit for any man’s table.” Isidore called out in a very bad, mock cockney accent. She then apologised to Tilley who burst out laughing, just as a police constable strode along the pavement.

“Been drinking have we, ladies?” The constable enquired, using his hand-held lamp to not so much illuminate as cast an eerie glow over their faces. “Had one gin too many and thought you’d come down to Pall Mall and accost some upstanding and respectable gents?”

Isidore and Tilley looked up and down the length of the wide street and shook their heads. Isidore then put on her bad mock cockney accent again.

“Well stone me, Missus Beaton, we gone and got here too early to meet any gents! Or is we just too late?” She studied the police constable. “You ain’t a gent are you?”

The constable produced a pair of handcuffs and set about cuffing the two women together.

“I am arresting the two of you for being up to no good in a respectable area and for you,” he indicated Isidore, “for wearing men’s clothing in public and for your ‘friend’ for encouraging and abetting you. You are both unnatural. Perhaps a night in the cells and a visit to the magistrate in the morning will let you see the error of your ways.”

At that moment the double doors of The Redoubt club opened, spilling brash illumination onto the steps and Charles Runce emerged.

“Can I be of assistance Constable?”

“Do not fret, sir. All is in hand. I have arrested these two vagrants and am taking them for a night in the cells.”

Runce gave a pursed smile, opened his overcoat and reached into his jacket.

“I hope you are not intending to offer me a bribe, sir? That would be most improper.” A sudden thought flashed across the constable’s mind. Perhaps this gentleman had procured the services of these two ‘ladies’ for the night...

“Do you know these ladies, sir?”

Runce nodded. “I do indeed. One is my niece and both are morally upstanding and respectable women.” He showed the constable his Scotland Yard warrant card.

The constable’s face flushed red and he began to stammer an apology, incorrectly calling Runce, Commissioner.

Runce waved his hand. “These things are sent to beset and test us, Constable. You must remember, if you wish to get on, not all is as it may first appear.”

The constable nodded vigorously, retrieved his handcuffs and began backing away, stepping into the road and narrowly avoiding being run-over by a speeding, unlit cab.

Runce turned away without commenting further and motioned to the doorman to open the Redoubt’s doors. “Shall we enter, ladies?”

Inside the polished marble-floored foyer a short, balding man greeted them. In contrast to the inky night beyond the club’s doors, the foyer shone with modernity—no doubt frightening its older members for whom gaslight had offered a comforting anonymity.

“My name is Edward Barrington-Smyth, I am the Redoubt Club’s bursar.” The balding man kept his hands firmly clasped behind his back, he would not be offering his hand to either of these two female interlopers into this bastion of male refuge.

“The Assistant Commissioner has explained the situation to me and while we would not usually countenance any admission of women into the club, I have relented in this instance as it is a matter of—” He stopped and looked Runce and then the doorman and stewards who had positioned themselves behind Isidore and Tilley.

“A matter of the deepest discretion.” Runce added.

Barrington-Smyth nodded and indicated the stairs. “The room in question is this way. I will lead the way. Ronson here will follow on behind.” He clicked his fingers at one of the stewards.

The room, Bursar Barrington-Smyth explained to Runce, Isidore and Tilley as he unlocked and opened the door and stepped inside, was one of several provided by the club for a suitable stipend to its more regular members.

Isidore cast her eyes around the room decorated as it was in a somewhat gaudy, if not currently en vogue Egyptian style. Runce thanked the bursar then gently escorted him out of the room, closing the door and standing with his back against it.

“The room is all yours, ladies,” Runce announced. “You may proceed.”

“Well, Tilley, shall we make a start?” Isidore rubbed her hands together. What are your first impressions, what do you make of this room?”

“The bed looks very comfortable, a nice size too. I could do without the pillars and the blue and gold colouring of everything. It really does need a woman’s touch in here.”

Isidore held a finger to her lips. “Shh, you’ll hurt their male egos. I do agree though, it is very much a man’s room with a man’s idea of furnishing. Now, you take the wardrobe and bedside cabinet; I will go through this writing bureau and the chest of drawers over there.”

Opening the unnecessarily ornate wardrobe, Tilley found a Royal Navy uniform with the rank and insignia of a lieutenant, neatly hung up. She removed her coat and dropped it onto the bed then slipped on the uniform jacket, her hands darting into the pockets as she did so. “He seems to be of a small build, our missing sailor—he mustn’t get invited to too many lavish dinners. A skinny chap, I imagine.”

Isidore turned around from where she was seated at the writing bureau. “You should be careful, your captain friend might think you want to join them on another long voyage!”

“You are connected with a captain in the navy?” Runce enquired.

Tilley laughed. “No, Isidore is being—I will be polite—playful. Several years ago I went on a voyage to Ceylon and back on a clipper ship. It was...an experience.”

Runce nodded then took out and opened a regulation Scotland Yard note book. “I haven’t needed to use one of these for a good many years. Useful little thing though. I made what I hope are pertinent notes before I left for Bristol this morning.

The man we believe we are looking for is, Charles Fraiser. He is aged 24 and went through the Royal Naval College at Greenwich, passed his lieutenant exam after some years at sea, and was regarded as very promising and likely to progress. However, on receiving his royal commission and becoming a lieutenant, he seems to

have lost his way. This is probably the navy way of saying, he was not up to the job. Indeed, his previous captain recommended the transfer to what is now the Navy's Intelligence Division—at that time it was still part of the Foreign office. Perhaps a means of getting rid of him? It seems whilst Fraiser is considered bright, he is less than competent at navigation—something of a prerequisite on a ship one would imagine...”

Isidore nodded in an abstract way at Runce's words, more interested in the envelope she had discovered at the back of the small middle drawer of the writing bureau. She opened the envelope and removed the card inside, smiling as she did so.

“Ah, mes amis, voila!” Isidore held up the card.

Runce took the card, read the address and frowned. At the same time, Tilley pulled out a railway timetable from the wardrobe. As she flicked through the pages, a handbill advertising English Channel paddle-steamer crossings, dropped to the floor.

“Well,” Tilley said, looking from Runce to Isidore, “What do we have here? An advertisement for channel crossings and a railway timetable with train times from Victoria Station to Dover, heavily marked in pencil on let me see; Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays.”

“And we have a card here with an address in Paris.” Isidore looked at Tilley and Runce. “I think we may know where our man is heading.”

Runce looked thoughtful. “It seems very easy, does it not. All rather convenient; we just stumble across all these clues.”

“Clearly, Uncle, they were too easy for Williams to fail to stumble across. I would say these clues fall firmly into the class of carelessness rather than deliberate obfuscation. What do you say, Tilley?”

Tilley agreed. “It seems he may have been a little hasty in his departure, if not forgetful. There is a smart leather travelling case containing a razor, shaving and hair brushes as well as other toilet requirements, in the wardrobe. From the feel and quality I would say it is most certainly, not cheap.”

Runce said nothing. Inspector Williams had assured him he had thoroughly searched Fraiser's room—perhaps he had done so with his eyes closed... “Very well. We have lost much time. Are the two of you prepared to follow Fraiser to France? Although I fear we may be the last ones to the ball.”

Isidore took the small card back from Runce. “Beneath the address it states, *Monday 17 October—one week*. I don't think whoever is meeting Fraiser agreed a set date. It seems they have allowed some latitude.”



“Why does he need to take these plans or blueprints to Paris? Could he not pass them to the buyer here in London? Much less fuss.”

“A very valid point, Tilley.” Runce turned and opened the door, he guessed either Barrington-Smyth or the steward would be stood up against the door, craning their ears. He was not disappointed as the startled bursar almost fell into the room.

“Ah, Bursar. Can you tell me if Fraiser had any visitors recently, either to his room here or the club generally?”

The bursar distractedly adjusted his dark grey frock coat—a coat which had been worn by the last two holders of the bursar post—let in or out as the post-occupier’s build required.

“No visitors to his room that I am aware of.” He turned to the steward and cast an enquiring eye. The steward shook his head. The bursar continued.

“However, last year, I believe, he was caught trying to smuggle out a—” the bursar gave a little cough, “A lady of the night, if you will. Presumably he had been more successful at getting her into the club. Beyond that, no; no visitors or guests. However, but no, the man was not visiting Fraiser as such.”

“Please, elucidate, we will be the arbiters of any relevance.” Runce indicated for the bursar to proceed.

“The man claimed to be his uncle and settled Fraiser’s outstanding club bill. In fact, he left him slightly in credit.”

“Was there anything that stood out about this man? Is it usual for family members to settle outstanding bills?” Isidore gave the bursar a piercing look.

“From time to time, a member’s family will settle an outstanding amount. But this tends to be when the club member has departed for the higher realms.”

“You mean died?” This from Tilley.

Barrington-Smyth nodded.

“And what of this uncle you mentioned?” Back to Runce now.

The bursar gave a little grimace. “These are delicate, confidential matters.”

“So is the security of the Empire. Silence my dear Barrington-Smyth, can be taken as culpability and collusion. Would you like to escort me back to Scotland Yard?”

The bursar put up his hands as if trying to deflect Runce's cold stare. "No, please, I apologise. The uncle was Prussian. Very mannered but in a very fine tailored morning coat. He had the bearing of a military man. Fraiser said he was his uncle, on his mother's side. Will that suffice?"

Runce nodded and told the bursar he could go but as the man turned to leave, Runce grasped his shoulder halting him. "My apologies; do you have a telephone in your office? I suddenly feel a need to consult with someone."

Barrington-Smyth gave a curt nod. "If you will follow me..."

Sensing her uncle was on to something, Isidore pushed the small card and envelope into her pocket, picked up Tilley's coat from the bed and guided her toward the door. On the door's threshold, the steward who had accompanied Barrington-Smyth, removed the uniform jacket from Tilley with a brusque, "Thank you, madam."

Isidore and Tilley loitered in the club's foyer while Runce disappeared alone into the bursar's office. Some minutes later he emerged a smile on his face.

"Ladies we are off to Rules Restaurant for a little bit of supper and a meeting with a representative of Her Majesty's Foreign Office." Runce beckoned over the doorman, slipped a coin into his hand and instructed him to get a cab.



## **Chapter Seven**

### **The Candle in the Mirror**

Rules Restaurant  
Pall Mall  
London

Late evening  
Friday 14th October 1887

On arriving at the restaurant; Runce, Isidore and Tilley, divested of their coats were led through what felt like clouds of cigar smoke and male gazes, to a quiet table at the rear of the restaurant.

A well-proportioned man, his hair and mutton-chop whiskers silvered with age but well groomed, sat with his back to the wall; on seeing Runce he got to his feet and extended his hand.

“My dear boy. It has been far too long. Your telephone call was a ray of joy in what has thus far been a...” He paused noticing Isidore and Tilley. “...rather tiring day. There, how’s that for politeness!”

Runce took the man’s hand then introduced Isidore and Tilley. “This is Robert Currie, a distinguished member of the Foreign Office, and a very old friend for whom I have not devoted enough time of late.”

Currie gestured for the three to seat themselves. “You make me sound rather grand, dear boy. I am afraid I am only an under-secretary to the actual under-secretary of the Foreign Secretary. If one wanted to be vulgar, one might say I was within spitting distance of the levers of, if not power, then foreign policy matters. Sadly, I am more devoted to gastronomy than a high-flying career.”

Runce relaxed into a chair and smiled. “I almost telephoned the F.O. before remembering it was more likely you would be here rather than toiling the evening away over dusty files.” His face then turned quite serious. “We are here to discuss a rather delicate matter. My niece, Isidore, and her assistant, Tilley, have been engaged by Scotland Yard—”

Currie tapped the table and put a finger to his lips causing Runce to look around, suspecting someone was eavesdropping.

“Let us order and eat first, get some sustenance into our grey matter. Plenty of time for discussion afterwards. Fortunately, I had yet to place my order when your telephone call came through.

I would recommend starting with the soup, then the always excellent beef and oyster pie and something sweet and decadent to finish. Unless of course, ladies, you would prefer fish? If so I recommend a bottle of Cabinet Steinberger otherwise...” Currie looked around the table, “A bottle or three of bordeaux? Perhaps a good burgundy, something with a bit of weight? I would suggest an 1864...?”

No takers? Bordeaux it will be then, shall we say 1870 from the time of the Franco-Prussian war? But most definitely well before 1880 when pesky insects ate the vine roots.”

The meal and ready supply of 1864 Bordeaux was consumed if not in complete silence then peppered with small talk. Half-way through the main course, Isidore whispered to Tilley, “By the end of this meal, this will be the most either of us has eaten for several days!” Tilley, in a cycle of chewing and swallowing, could only nod in agreement.

As soon as the meal was over and the table cleared, Runce took out his regulation notebook while Currie, having also devoured Isidore and Tilley's left-overs, leaned back and surreptitiously loosened the bottom two buttons of his waistcoat. He gave a sigh of satisfaction then summoned a waiter and ordered a carafe of aerated water.

"I have come to find a small glass of this wondrously fizzed drink to be the perfect digestive." Currie smiled at Isidore and Tilley. "I will admit," he continued, "it is a desired taste much like the spa waters of Bath and Lourdes. The restaurant kindly gets it in for me; I usually dine here a good three times week, sometimes more. Always here at the back, free from the choking cigar munchers at the front of the restaurant." He raised his right hand and tapped the wall behind him.

"Behind this wall is the kitchen. I often joke, I get to eat twice; once as I savour the delicious aromas emerging from the kitchen and a second time when my meal is served. Additionally, I am able to enjoy food that mere seconds before was in the hands of the chef. Many a soufflé has collapsed because of too long a wait or extended walk to the table." Currie sighed once more but this time in the way only someone who had watched a soufflé deflate in front of their eyes would understand.

"Shall we get started?" Runce opened his notebook and began to outline the case. After ten minutes he stopped and looked at Currie.

"You seem..."

Currie smiled. "Forgive me, I have been unkind. I am aware of the, shall we be delicate and say, misplaced documents. I thought if I let you continue your elucidation—" Currie stopped and waved a hand. "It matters nought.

However, we were made aware through corridor whispers, nothing official obviously, of the *misplacement* on Tuesday morning. It seems the Navy or rather their intelligence division became aware on Monday afternoon of the absence of the documents. Needless-to-say they decided to keep the matter *quiet*." Currie dropped his voice to utter this last word then continued.

"But as in all things, as you will appreciate, word gets out. As far as the F.O. is concerned, this is a Navy matter." He stopped for a moment before adding.

"It is somewhat ironic that while the Navy Intelligence Division was part of the F.O., nothing went astray, missing or otherwise. Now within mere months of becoming their own sovereign entity we have this..." Currie made a *there you are* gesture with his hands.

"I don't believe there is more I can add beyond that. Clearly, hence your presence, Scotland Yard was called in to investigate the matter."

Runce closed his notebook but said nothing further, instead he looked toward Isidore.

Taking her cue, Isidore leaned forward. “We have made some progress; for instance we know the man’s name but you possibly already knew that? He also seems to have made contact with a Prussian—I would proffer a member of the German army rather than their diplomatic entourage and he has, I presume, taken steps to pass the documents on and—”

Runce suddenly interrupted Isidore and slapped a hand to his forehead. “What a lummock I am! It had completely slipped my mind. Before I telephoned you from the Redoubt Club, Robert, I decided on a long shot to telephone the Dover Harbour Board and after some difficulty, I managed to speak with the harbour master at Dover. Initially I had tried the London, Chatham and Dover Railway first but without success.

It may not particularly help us but, the harbour master informed me there were no steam ferry crossings to France on either Sunday or Monday due to stormy weather in the English Channel. Crossings did resume on Tuesday. However, because of the backlog of passengers, it is very possible our man did not get a crossing until either Tuesday evening or even Wednesday morning—we cannot guarantee that though.”

“You are losing me dear boy and girl. How are we now discussing non-crossings of the Channel?”

Tilley gave a slight cough. “If I may explain and fill in some gaps.” She glanced at Runce and Isidore who both nodded.

“The person who took the documents we are seeking, has erm, fled the country. In his room at the gentlemen’s club we found a railway timetable for the London—Chatman railway and an advertisement for steam ferry crossings to France. Isidore also came across a blank calling card, on which was noted the address of a church in Paris and a meeting time. We therefore decided, no deduced, he was taking the documents to Paris to sell or pass on.”

Currie looked at Runce. “I can see why Scotland Yard has chosen to enlist the services of these two admirable women.”

Runce gave the merest flicker of a smile, silently ruing the hapless Inspector Williams and his inability to find let alone piece together any clues. “We thank you, Robert. However, it is this last part I thought pertinent to discuss with you.”

“Visiting Paris? It has been many a year since I last trod the boulevards, dear boy. Ah, être jeune et gay à Paris. J’ai été profondément touché.” Currie looked wistful a contented smile spreading across his face. “Sadly, all I have now is my enjoyment and indulgence of food.”

“Quite, indeed. However, we feel there is still a slim opportunity of recovering the documents. Isidore and Tilley are therefore intending to leave for Paris soonest. We, they, would like some advice on...” Runce leaned forward, lowering his voice. “There is this seemingly Prussian involvement.”

Currie took a long drink of his fizzed water. “I believe I understand what you are hinting at. As you ladies are not, strictly speaking representing Her Majesty’s Imperial Government, I do not foresee any immediate diplomatic complications from your side. However, you will have no formal recourse for assistance should things go awry. No *protection diplomatique* as they say. But, I can give you a name to contact in Paris—someone who owes me a favour or two and they will help in whatever way they are able.

Having said that, there may well be something bigger at play here: especially Charles as you now mention potential Prussian involvement. France and Germany are not on the best of terms. There are those in both governments who would welcome a state of warfare between the two nations.

Indeed, it was only in recent months France felt it had been, shall we say wronged, when one of its police inspectors was lured across the border, to a meeting by the Germans and then arrested, accused of spying and gaoled! Things became very tense but aggression was avoided. Never-the-less this was quite the provocation!”

Currie leaned back in his chair. “Dammit, dear boy. Please, my apologies, ladies. But these waters you are entering are very murky: we could be here for some time. I take it none of you will object to port and cheese? Aerated water is fine but does not inspire one to wax upon complex matters. For you ladies, perhaps you would prefer chablis? I believe it pairs well with most cheeses.” Currie briefly paused and as there was no descent, called over a waiter and ordered a selection of cheeses as well as port and chablis.

For the next hour, fortified by port and cheese, Currie explained recent French political and diplomatic machinations beginning with the German humiliation of France in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, and the collapse of the Second French Republic; the announcement of the founding of the German Empire in of all places, Versailles! Well, if that wasn’t a slap across the face to the French, Currie said, he didn’t know what was. Then there were the massive, bank vault emptying reparations demanded by the German Empire and so on...

Eventually, as Currie took pause and suggested further port, Runce demurred saying Isidore and Tilley needed to be alert and rested for their journey to Paris.

“Quite right, dear boy, quite right. I do sometimes get carried along in the rush of things. Let me summon a waiter to arrange a cab for us. Now remember, ladies, the

reflection of a candle flame in a mirror often obscures what one is trying to view—the eye is drawn to the flame rather than the object itself...

Or in other words, this whole stolen document episode may just be a means of one side trying to rile the other. The German Empire saying to the French, we can act with impunity on your soil, we can even buy foreign secrets here. Or it could be the French entrapping the Germans. In which case your fleeing traitor is l'agent provocateur. Currie nodded sagely, more to himself than anyone else.



## **The End of Part One**

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