

2. A Child's Game

“So, this room hasn't been touched?” asked Galahad “Gil” Jones, standing in the center of the late Professor Englemeyer's study, on the Claremont College quad of Oxford University, surveying the vandalism of the scene.

Lieutenant Leif Balder, the beefy, energetic homicide officer assigned to the case from the Oxford Constabulary, regarded his companion with a certain awe: Jones, 6' 2" tall, powerfully built, his curly black hair tousled from the November breezes that had assailed them on their way into the compound. With luminous, steady, pale blue eyes, he gazed placidly around the room. The handsome features of his face, made him look, for all the world, despite the anachronism of his olive trench coat, like a Greek classical sculpture of an athletic champion.

“Naturally, the crime scene was thoroughly examined, dusted for prints, searched for fiber and particle traces, and a complete inventory was performed,” answered Balder. “Then the room was sealed, and everything's been left in place. We received strict orders in that regard from Scotland Yard. I don't know who you are, Major Jones, and I gather that I'm not supposed to know. But I do know I'm to offer you every assistance, no questions asked.”

Jones turned to face Balder and looked him squarely in the eyes.

“And you'd like to know what the hell this is all about?” Jones asked.

“An old professor, with no known enemies, is murdered,” answered Balder, “his assistant vanishes into thin air, his office is ransacked—and then you show up, from America, to take over the investigation! Yes, if it isn't asking too much, I would like to know what in blazes is going on!”

“Naturally, you're curious,” acknowledged Jones. “All I can tell you now is that Englemeyer's work had vital national security implications for the United Kingdom and the

United States. That's why the intelligence agencies of our countries are cooperating to break this case."

"But Englemeyer was an antiquarian, a philologist!" protested Balder. "He spent his life studying old manuscripts. Are you telling me some volume of old ballads from the fourteenth century, or perhaps some livestock records from the thirteenth century, are the subject of an international power struggle?"

Jones smiled faintly, but made no further reply. He walked to the file cabinet behind the desk. The top drawer was already open. He rummaged inside for a moment, then slammed the drawer shut and turned toward Balder again.

"I've seen the inventory you spoke of," Jones told him. "but I wanted to see it for myself."

"Oh?" said Balder. "And just what did you see?"

"It's what I didn't see," answered Jones. "I didn't see certain files under the letter 'B.' If you'll read your own report, you'll find they're reported as missing."

"Lots of papers and books were missing from this office," Balder admitted, with annoyance. "It's one of the most peculiar aspects of the case."

"It isn't just peculiar, my friend," said Jones, moving around the study, looking over the room as he went. "It's the central clue of the case. You said it yourself: Professor Englemeyer was a student of old manuscripts. We find him murdered, and we find his current work stolen and his assistant gone. The conclusion is inescapable."

"Well, I'm known for my deft escapes," quipped Balder. "So, let's not take any chances. Why not simply tell me what it all means?"

Jones interrupted his meandering inspection of the room.

“It means,” Jones told him, “that a powerful agency hired a professional crew to murder the professor, possibly in order to silence him, and certainly in order to secure his research. It also means that either his assistant is collaborating with this criminal cartel, or she was kidnapped by them, and that, in either case, she is fated to help this group bring the professor’s work to fruition.”

Balder looked up, turned his head to one side, then looked back at Jones.

“But what interest could the professor’s work have for criminals?” asked Balder.

“What was filed under the letter ‘B’? Wait!” Balder’s eyes lit up. “Are we dealing with some sort of manuscript theft? Someone after something like an original copy of the Magna Carta? I guess something like that could be worth a few million quid, after all!”

“I wish it were that simple,” said Jones. “All right. I can tell you this much. The professor was working on a major project when he was killed. Have you ever heard of Friar Roger Bacon, philosopher, naturalist, alchemist, and cryptographer?”

“I’ve heard of Francis Bacon,” answered Balder, in self-defense. “I remember my sixth form English instructor told us he was supposed to have written the works of Shakespeare.”

“Roger Bacon lived three hundred years earlier, in the thirteenth century,” said Jones. “He was among the first to be granted a degree by Oxford.”

“A bit embarrassing to be tutored in Oxford history by a visiting American!” complained Balder. “So Bacon was a medieval friar with a good education and eclectic talents. I gather, then, that he left manuscripts behind, and that the professor was—what?—redacting them?”

“Not exactly,” answered Jones. “Bacon published twenty thick books. He also left a number of unpublished manuscripts. As I said, he was a cryptographer. Several of his books, both published and unpublished, are enciphered. One of the unpublished works has resisted all

the efforts made in eight centuries to decipher it. Until late last year, that is. That was when the professor succeeded in finding the key to unlocking Bacon's last, hidden work."

"That sounds like a bang-up scholarly achievement," Balder said. "But hardly something worth murdering a man for! I'm sorry. I still don't get it."

But Jones had concluded his explanations for the present. He was rummaging through Professor Englemeyer's desk, scrutinizing the papers and the objects on the top surface and then opening the drawers, one by one, removing them, placing them, on the desk, and going through them carefully as well. Then he went to a secretary on the side of the room, the front panel of which was already lying open, and began enacting the same procedure.

"May I ask," said Balder, "what you're looking for? Maybe I can help you find it."

"No, thank you," answered Jones. "You can't help. I'm looking for specimens of a certain text. Pages or parts of pages that the professor might have copied from something called the 'Voynich manuscript,' together with his notes on the deciphered version he was making. You wouldn't recognize this stuff, even if you saw it."

"I suppose you'll want to examine the scene of the fire-bombing next?" asked Balder.

He was referring to the West Wing of the New Biological Sciences Laboratory Complex. Almost at the same minute as Professor Englemeyer was being murdered, insofar as anyone could determine the exact time, a bomb was exploding in an advanced genetics laboratory belonging to Professor Lawrence Putterman Kinmore. Kinmore and his three assistants had all been present, working late, and all had been killed in the explosion and firestorm.

"That won't be necessary," Jones told him. "The place was gutted, the bodies badly damaged, I understand. The hard drives on the desktops were removed before the explosion

went off, and the storage disks and laptops are all missing. No, there won't be much left to see at the laboratory, now."

"Yes," agreed Balder, "It's a bit eerie, you know. These two horrible crimes occurring at the same time. And yet, none of us in the department can think of any connection between them."

"There's a connection, all right," Jones said. "Did you know that Englemeyer and Kinmore had been working together?"

"No, I didn't know," answered Balder. "A medieval manuscript expert and a cellular biologist? What were they working on? A way to prevent mold on old documents?"

"That's classified," answered Jones. "But whoever committed these crimes stole information of the greatest importance. And they went to a great deal of trouble to obliterate all traces of this information and murder all of the people who were familiar with it. We don't know exactly why they did what they did. But, whatever the reason, it's vital that we recover that information."

"Who are these people?" asked Balder, shaking his head. "You make them sound like the intelligence agency of an evil super power. But there aren't any superpowers any more, except for the dear old USA."

"I don't know who they are," admitted Jones. "And I'm afraid we aren't going to find out until they're ready to talk."

"Ready to talk?" said Balder.

"You can be sure they didn't do all this as an expression of their avid interest in human learning," Jones explained. "They want something, they expect to get something, and it must be

something pretty big. In my experience, that probably means that they'll have something to say. Something we won't like hearing."

"Something we won't like hearing?" echoed Balder. "And what message could they possibly deliver that would matter to us, one way or the other?"

"A threat," said Jones. "A threat of harm so great it would make the death and destruction you've seen on this campus so far seem like a child's game."