

5. “He Sent forth a Dove...”

General Craig Lawrence Ratwell had spent his adult life working behind the scenes. As Commander of the Overland Security Administration, or “OSA,” a branch of military intelligence whose existence itself was classified several levels above Top Secret, he did his job without hope of public acclaim or, indeed, recognition of any sort, which suited his stubborn, dedicated, and confident temperament well. Let others seek the balms of praise and bays of celebrity. Ratwell understood his mission, to defend the United States of America from its most insidious enemies, knew he was the best man for the job, and was well satisfied with his calling. The OSA, which reported directly to, and was responsible only to, the President, undertook operations that were too difficult or sensitive for the CIA and NSA. Many of the OSA’s operations in the previous few decades had involved military campaigns in the middle east. Few outside the Oval Office would ever suspect how critical the OSA’s intervention, and Ratwell’s personal actions, had been in averting disasters that could have engulfed the nation in a global conflagration.

Early on the morning of November 14, while still in bed, Ratwell received a call about the theft of Englemeyer’s Baconian documents, the looting and destruction of the Oxford genetics laboratory, and the Oxford murders and possible kidnapping of Lucinda Milne. After his briefing, that afternoon, his first move was to contact Professor Galahad “Gil” Jones, in order to coax the man out of his academic retirement and persuade him to return to active service in military intelligence. In other words, he needed Gil on the case!

Jones, a former Green Beret, who had risen to the rank of Major, had been Ratwell’s star undercover operative for several years. Reared in a Midwestern family in which God and country were ever foremost in his father’s cajolery and his mother’s blandishments. As a

consequence of this coaxing, he had joined the service out of patriotism, a sense of moral responsibility, and, it must also be admitted, to escape his sleepy hometown and look for adventure. Unfortunately, as the years went on, Jones had experienced a change of heart about the military life he had chosen. He had begun to question the clarity of his “moral duty” to his country; for, after all, so many of the missions on which he was sent seemed to involve, at best, a “long view” for their justification, a view that he was less and less inclined to entertain. Jones also underwent a spiritual crisis, doubting, despite his early religious upbringing, the existence of God, or at least His abiding concern for our affairs on this earth. Finally, Jones tired of adventures that entailed bringing so much destruction to so many lives, even when it was the lives of the “enemy” that were being destroyed. Jones therefore decided to reinvent himself. In his early thirties, he quit the military, entered graduate school, and threw himself into his academic work. With little heart, and, he thought, little time, for the amusements that sapped the energies and distracted many of the younger scholars around him, he devoted himself entirely to his studies, with a seriousness that earned him the nickname “Deacon Jones.” After only four years of dedicated application, Deacon Jones had acquired a double doctoral degree in molecular biology and cryptography, two subjects that had fascinated him since boyhood. With his outstanding academic record and the brilliant originality of each of his Ph.D. theses, both of which had been published to considerable acclaim, he had little trouble securing an appointment as a professor and began pursuing the quiet, rewarding life of a distinguished scholar in the Graduate Faculties of Harvard University.

It had been a delicate job to win Jones back to the fold; but Ratwell, as always, was equal to his assignment. It helped his cause that Jones had a distinguished record as a secret agent and combat operative, followed by post-doctoral work in genetics and cryptanalysis. He

was not only perfectly qualified to undertake the mission to find the lair of the people who had murdered two Oxford dons and three of their students, perhaps infiltrate the group, rescue the girl they had probably kidnapped and, more important to the authorities, recover the Baconian secrets they had stolen. He was also, perhaps, the only man in the world who had the wherewithal to do so. And that was the argument that won Jones over: Your country needs you. Needs you, not some one else, you! All those evenings in his boyhood, sitting on the front porch on the long rocker bench, next to his father, who was puffing on his pipe, looking out over the peaceful, darkening fields, and expatiating on the wonder of our freedoms and on the debt we owed to protect our Constitution, had inculcated a sense of duty the call to which Jones must always respond.

And so, for the duration of this crisis, “Professor Galahad ‘Gil’ Jones” was sworn in and became, “Major Galahad ‘Gil’ Jones.” Somehow, and this surprised Jones, it felt good to be Major Jones again. Which was just as well, Jones thought ruefully, for, Major Jones, he was going to be!

Ratwell and Jones flew in an OSA jet to a small airstrip in the French countryside. The staff car chauffeured them from the airstrip, across the bleak, wintry landscape, along winding, hilly roads, through the wooded, low hills of Provence. After touring miles of tree lined lanes, they suddenly turned onto the vast open space that held the ruins of the ancient Palace of the Popes at Avignon, a monumental marble edifice, with eight chambered towers and a giant bell tower, ringed with parapets, walkways, and all the structural appurtenances of Gothic architecture in its glory. On Ratwell’s signal, the car pulled up some twenty yards from the line of enormous, peaked frontal arches, the entrance to the main hall. Then Ratwell and Jones walked ten yards closer to the center arch and stood together, waiting. But they were not at all

sure what they were waiting for. They were alone, at the foot of this isolated white and gray palace, with only Sergeant Carstairs, their driver, for company, and he stayed in the car. In winter, there would have been few tourists visiting the remote spot; but the authorities had closed the site and blocked the roads with heavily armed but inconspicuous troops stationed at a distance of several miles.

“Have you ever seen this place before?” asked Ratwell.

“Once, when I had just graduated college,” Jones told him, “I drove from Sète, a small town on the southern coast, to Paris, with two friends. I insisted we take a detour to pass through Avignon.”

“Insisted?” said Ratwell. “It sounds as if they didn’t like the idea.”

“No,” agreed Jones. “They’d never heard of the place and thought it was a waste of time and energy to go scouting around for some old buildings in the middle of nowhere. I was pretty easy to get along with. But I put my foot down about it. I had it in mind that I might never have another chance to get back here.”

“Well,” said Ratwell, “you were wrong about that!”

“Yes,” said Jones, looking around at the overgrown shrubbery and the poorly tended paths and up toward the so called “Palace of the Popes,” the distressed but monumental ruins of the largest Gothic palace in Europe, which had, in the fourteenth century, been the home of the men claiming to be the Sovereign Pontiffs of the Catholic Church. The building itself recalled a time when the unquestioned assumption that the Pope sat enthroned in Rome and that we knew for sure who he was, was suddenly exploded. There could be, in fact there had been, two Popes, one in Rome and one in Avignon, each claiming the Papacy at the same time. This place was a

monument to that uncertainty, to the possibility that the Apostolic Succession might unfold in surprising ways.

Inside, Jones remembered from his visit over twenty years ago, were a couple of dozen restored rooms, including ceremonial chambers, chapels, cloisters, and private papal apartments decorated with priceless frescos. “But what are we doing here? That remains the question.”

Ratwell looked at his military issue Rolex.

“We’ll know in two minutes,” Ratwell answered, “if we can believe the message we received in Washington.”

A message had been delivered to the Secretary of State, advising the recipient that, at the palace at Avignon, on December 15, at noon, word would arrive containing information of the utmost importance to the world. Bound with the message was a scrap of the Voynich manuscript. Clearly, the message had been sent by the people who had committed the Oxford murders and stolen the Oxford research materials.

“I’m a little surprised you made the trip,” Jones commented. “I could have intercepted this information, whatever it is, and delivered it to you.”

“You’re not the only man in the service with a sense of curiosity,” answered Ratwell, with a crooked smile. “Something big is happening. I can feel it. I want—”

At that moment he was interrupted by a fluttering sound in the air above, the beating of wings. They looked up and saw a dove, descending from the eastern sky. It flew in a small circle above the entrance gallery, then turned and settled on one of the large decorative granite spheres that abutted the doorway, not thirty feet from where they stood.

“What the—!” exclaimed Ratwell. “Is that the ‘word’ we were to expect to arrive?”

“It’s a carrier pigeon,” said Jones. “There’s a capsule attached to one of its legs.”

As if on a signal, they began jogging toward the bird, which sat preening its wing with its beak, oblivious of the stir its arrival had caused. When they reached the stone ornament and stood before the bird, they stopped and looked at one another again. Neither, it seemed, had been trained in retrieving messages from pigeons.

“Here goes,” said Jones, grasping the bird gently in his large hands and bringing it toward him. “See if you can unlatch the band on its foot. It’s attached to a capsule. There should be a message inside.”

A gold capped, gold colored metal cylinder a little over an inch long and a third of an inch in diameter was firmly clipped to one of the dove’s legs with two gold colored metal bands that were placed about a third of the way from either end.

“Here, let me move into the light,” Jones said.

They walked a few paces, out from under the cover of the overhanging portico, stepping into the diffuse light of the cloudy winter afternoon.

“That’s better,” said Ratwell. “Look, it’s beautiful! What a piece of work!”

Jones joined in his admiration. The outer casing of the cylinder was chased with intricate patterns and designs, too small to make out under these conditions without a glass, but conveying the impression of careful and artful work. Only the marking on the cap was simple and unadorned: It was a crucifix.

Ratwell carefully unsnapped, first one band, then the other, freeing the capsule from its sling.

“What do we do with the bird?” Ratwell asked. “We have to hold on to it, obviously.”

“Have Carstairs radio for a box,” answered Jones. “Meanwhile, we’ll just put it back where we found it. This bird isn’t going anywhere.”

“You sound sure of that?” questioned Ratwell.

“The dove was well trained to come to this spot,” Jones explained. “Now that it’s here, it isn’t about to go anywhere else. Yes, I’m sure of that.”

Jones carefully replaced the dove on its stone perch, and he and Ratwell returned to scrutinizing their find.

“It’s not solid gold,” said Jones, who had taken the capsule in his hand. “It’s much too light. But it’s not electroplating, either, or that deep etching would have been impossible. If I had to guess, I’d say it’s titanium covered with a thin gold sheet.”

“Yes,” agreed Ratwell, “something like that. You’re probably right. Someone went to a lot of trouble to make this little bottle.”

“It’s so delicate and ornamental,” Jones commented, “it almost looks like a ladies’ lipstick case.”

“Sorry,” said Ratwell, “but you don’t get a kiss, even if you do figure this thing out! I’ll stand you a few French draughts in Avignon, though!”

“Good enough!” answered Jones. “Well, here goes.”

Taking the cylinder in hand, he carefully unscrewed the top, which loosened, turned easily, and came off in his fingers with little effort.

“That wasn’t hard,” Jones said to Ratwell, handing him the tiny cap for safe-keeping.

“Now, for what’s inside!” Jones added, turning the capsule over his left hand with his right and tapping on the bottom of the capsule gently with his forefinger.

Another cylinder dropped into his palm!

“It’s a cartridge!” exclaimed Ratwell, eyeing the contents of Jones’ hand. “It’s been gilded and carved like all the blazes, but it’s a brass cartridge all the same, I’d stake my life on it! And it looks like an old issue, as if its from an old European automatic.”

“It’s a cartridge from a pre-World War I German Luger,” Jones told him. “I studied ordinance as a hobby when I was laid up after my last mission in Iraq. It’s almost like studying antique jewelry or old coins. Every important gun ever made has signature ammunition.”

Ratwell, his eyes narrowing, exclaimed, “Did I ever tell you were a smart boy? You’re so damned smart, you scare me!”

Jones looked at him bleakly. He didn’t feel particularly smart at the moment.

“This is the second part of our message in a bottle,” Jones told him. “A bullet from a German gun. From a country at a time when that country was desperate and on the brink of war with the rest of the world.”

“The second part of our message?” asked Ratwell.

“As I see it,” Jones told him, “there are three parts to this message. The first is the sending of the dove itself. The second is the cartridge which the dove is carrying.”

“The sending of the dove?” echoed Ratwell. “What can that mean?”

“In the Bible, in Genesis, Noah released the doves to discover if the flood waters had receded and if it was safe for him to make a landing with the Ark.”

“Yes, even an unregenerate heathen like me knows that story,” said Ratwell.

“Everyone knows that story,” Jones replied. “That’s part of the point. Noah was the progenitor of a new race of men. Even more, he was the father of a new kingdom of living things. The old race of sinners was being killed, wiped from the face of the earth. He was starting again, a fresh, new world, with a new population to breed and to populate the earth under

his dominion. I can't be sure," added Jones darkly, "but I think someone is doing God's work again. And he means to make some fatal changes to the bad, old lot—that's us, by the way—on behalf of the Almighty!"

"But as I recall that story," Ratwell protested, "God promised never to destroy the world again. And that's why he put the rainbow in the sky, as a sign of His covenant to let us live!"

"He promised never to destroy the world with a flood!" Jones corrected him. "He didn't say anything about biological or genetic warfare."

"And the third part of the message?" asked Ratwell, in a more subdued tone.

"Unless I miss my guess, that's rolled up inside the cartridge," said Jones. "But we shouldn't try to pry it open it here, obviously. The primer might even still be live—who can tell? We'd better get it back to a lab, fast, and examine it as carefully as possible. Right now, I'm afraid, it's the only physical evidence we as to who 'sent forth a dove.'"