

7. Someone Wants to Be Pope?

Jones wanted to return to the OSA laboratories in Virginia with General Ratwell, to be present at the examination of the dove and help unravel the contents of what he assumed would be the message it carried; but he knew his duty lay in Southern France, following their only lead to the identities of the religious zealots who had murdered five people, possibly kidnapped another, looted a scholar's manuscripts and notes, ransacked and firebombed a medical laboratory, and were now masterminding some grandiose plot that, it seemed, could have only sinister and even catastrophic consequences were it to be permitted to come to fruition.

Not that any of this was, strictly speaking, any of Jones' professional concern. He had been recruited for, and his assignment was confined to, retrieving the manuscripts, documents, and computer disks that had been stolen from Oxford on November 13, destroying any copies that had been made of these manuscripts, documents, or disks, and, if possible, rescuing and returning with Lucinda Milne, assuming that she had, in fact been taken against her will and had not been a collaborator in the criminal scheme.

Ratwell bore down heavily on Jones about the focus of his orders during his briefing.

"The information that was taken has the power to change the world," Ratwell had told him. "Englemeyer cracked a code that had concealed Bacon's most valuable secret for nearly a thousand years. That secret was a way of restoring youth to senescent animals."

Jones looked astonished.

"Yes!" Ratwell said. "Bacon's methods were imperfect, and the effects didn't last. Of course, Bacon didn't understand the mechanisms he was affecting. Even though, as you know, he was, in many ways, centuries ahead of his time, he lived in the age of alchemy and Galenic

medicine. But, still, he recognized that he had discovered something that, with enough tinkering, could become the secret of perpetual youth, of virtual immortality!”

“I can see why he would have kept that a secret,” Jones said. “Bacon thought a way to make a superior form of gunpowder was too dangerous to leave to the world in unenciphered form. I can only imagine how much more this scared him!”

“You’re exactly right!” agreed Ratwell. “The British put up a good front—stiff upper lip, and all that—but they’re desperate for all the help they can get! So I can tell you the whole story. The briefing I got from Whitehall was incredibly thorough.

“It seems,” Ratwell explained, “that Bacon was afraid that evil rulers would keep the secret of immortality for themselves and rule forever. The only way he could prevent that, without destroying the knowledge—something he believed was contrary to religious law—was to bury it in a cipher so hard to crack that he thought no one would ever be able to penetrate it.”

“I studied the Baconian ciphers at Harvard,” said Jones. “They’re remarkable. His theory was that, once a text is recognized as a cipher, people will begin working on trying to crack it. So he used a technique known today as ‘steganography,’ embedding his true text inside an apparently innocuous text that could be read as if it made sense, but which dealt with a different, and entirely innocent, subject. The idea was that if someone opened his enciphered book, he wouldn’t have any idea that it was enciphered, and so, of course, he wouldn’t try to decipher it! The same underlying concept of embedding was used during World War I, by the Germans, who shrank secret documents into microdots and placed them on the top of a miniscule letter ‘i’ that occurred within the text of an innocent document. And steganography has had a renaissance in the computer world. For example, computer text files can be easily embedded in computer image files. The amount of information in a text file is small, so its presence doesn’t

affect the way the image looks. When you see the image, you have no clue that there's any text file to decipher. You just don't know it's there. The word 'steganography' comes from the Greek for 'closely covered writing,' and good steganographic encipherment really does put something down a hole and pull the hole in after it!"

"Well, the Voynich Manuscript was his steganographic masterpiece," said Ratwell. "Many suspected, but no one could prove, that it held his final secrets. No one could prove it, that is, until Professor Englemeyer came along."

"I'm curious," said Jones. "How did he crack the cipher? After so many people had tried and failed, for nearly a thousand years?"

"He had a dream!" Ratwell told him. "Bacon appeared to him in his friar's robes, standing beside a great, interlocking chestnut board on which a long passage of the encrypted Voynich manuscript was inset in ivory and gold. As Englemeyer watched, the board fragmented into small, irregular, geometric pieces that, as if under the power of Bacon's unspoken alchemical spell, spread apart, shifted places, spun, and rotated. Then, suddenly, the parts drew together, fitting snugly in a new pattern in which the meaning of the ivory and gold words that had been formed could be understood! Englemeyer woke up drenched in perspiration, ran to his desk, and wrote the rules of transformation down. Then, he went back to his bed and fell into a deep sleep. The next morning, Englemeyer started to apply the formulas and work out the sense of the text with Lucinda Milne, his assistant. To his amazement, a book about a course of treatments to make aging animals young again began to emerge."

"One thing I don't understand," said Jones, "If Englemeyer had made this discovery, what was he waiting for? Why hadn't he published his results?"

“We’ve pieced that together as best we can,” said Ratwell. “At first, while he was still working out the decryption, Englemeyer kept his discovery pretty much to himself, quite naturally. But he talked it over in confidence with a close friend, probably his only close friend, a brilliant Oxford geneticist, Lawrence Kinmore. Kinmore, for whatever reason, suspected that some of Bacon’s formulae might actually work by affecting the production of stem cells. He asked Englemeyer to let him set up a trial, to investigate the effects of the Baconian treatments and determine what, if anything, was behind them in modern scientific terms. Obviously, Bacon’s discussions of the mechanisms underlying his treatments were completely fanciful—he lived centuries before cells had been discovered, and so, of course, he never heard of chromosomes or genes, much less stem cells!

“Englemeyer agreed to collaborate with Kinmore, and he helped Kinmore to set up a laboratory model of the Baconian procedures. Understanding the earth shattering significance of what they were playing with, they swore each other to absolute secrecy. Professor Kinmore moved ahead surprisingly quickly, and, from what we can determine, confirmed that Bacon’s methods worked to reverse aging, however temporarily and imperfectly. Kinmore, however, became convinced that the limitations of Bacon’s process could be overcome using modern methods of stem cell and genetic manipulation. In other words, Kinmore was certain he was on the brink of producing a treatment to make the old young again! He was in the process of finalizing his research results when he and his two lab assistants were murdered.

“And now it’s all gone!” thundered Ratwell, slamming his large fist on the table. “The secret has not only been stolen, but all the records of it have been destroyed! We have to get that manuscript back and, with it, the scientific work Kinmore did to make the process work to its full potential.” He paused briefly, because he assumed that even Jones’ lightning fast mind would

require a moment to grasp the full implications of his grand and terrible words. “You can see, then, I’m sure, how important this is to the world.”

“Yes,” answered Jones, slowly and quietly, “I can see how important it is.”

“And there is more,” Ratwell continued. “We don’t know the motives of the people who committed the crime. They could have been lunatics who were against life extension. But then they would have simply destroyed the manuscript and the research and put an end to it. Instead, there’s clear evidence that many of the most critical items weren’t left in the looted office and firebombed lab. They were taken. That adds a sinister twist to the affair. Why were they taken? What use can these people hope to put them to? All we know for sure is, it can’t be for anything good.

“So, your orders are simple,” Ratwell concluded. “Recover the stolen manuscript and laboratory notes and computer files and destroy any copies that may have been made. That about sums it up.”

“And the girl?” asked Jones. “What about Lucinda Milne? The girl who was kidnapped?”

“She was kidnapped, or she was a co-conspirator,” Ratwell corrected him. “If you can find her and get her back, all the better. After all, she knows a lot about the manuscript itself. But the Baconian treasures are your first assignment. I want that to be perfectly clear.”

Jones’ French language skills were good. But he would not be mistaken for a native. Therefore, he had been assigned Suzanne Sebonne, a civilian OSA operative born and brought up in France, to act as an intermediary with the local population. Suzanne had been given a “minimum information” briefing; which is to say, she knew nothing of the greater scope of the

mission, only that they were trying to trace down the people who had trained a carrier pigeon and find the people who had hired them to do so.

“Our problem is urgency,” Jones told Suzanne, a young, fiery, dark-haired beauty, sitting across from her at a deuce in the window of Le Cygne, a deserted bistro, in an outlying section of the Avignon county, where they had arranged their introductory meeting. As he watched, through the window, snow was falling lightly, and the occasional townspeople passed, huddled under a cap and coat or cape, or shielded by an umbrella. “If we had months, or even weeks, we could almost certainly follow this trail home. But we have to take action as soon as possible. Even a few days could jeopardize the greater mission of which this investigation is only a small part.”

“Then what do you suggest, Major Jones?” asked Suzanne, regarding Jones with the wide-eyed awe felt by all those who within the Agency who were familiar with his service record.

“I think I’d better take up Orders,” answered Jones, with a small smile. “I’ve contacted our people here, and I’m expecting a delivery very shortly.”

“Take up Orders?” Suzanne asked.

“I’m going out as a clergyman, a Bishop,” Jones explained. “That should make our inquiries go a lot faster. The people around here are country folk and very conservative. They look up to the Church. If they think I’m a Bishop, even a Bishop from Canada, they’ll be much happier to cooperate with us.” He paused and took a drink of his espresso. “At least, that’s what I’m counting on.”

Suzanne regarded Jones, a tall, powerful, square jawed man in a trench coat, trying to envision him as a man of the cloth. Somehow, she couldn’t do it.

“I have a funny feeling,” Jones said, changing the subject, and looking her squarely in the eyes. “You know a message was delivered to us by carrier pigeon. Something’s been bothering me about that message. I thought I had figured out its symbolism, why they used a dove, and why they sent the message in the container they used. But I knew I was missing something.”

“What?” Suzanne asked. “What were you missing?”

“Something so big, it’s pretty hard to miss,” answered Jones. “Le Palais des Papes, the Palace of the Popes! Why was that old white elephant chosen for our assignation with the little white bird? There must be a reason!” Jones leaned forward, his blue eyes opening wide. “The reason is Avignon itself! The name is synonymous with rebellion within the Church at the highest levels! The site, first, of the so-called ‘Babylonian Captivity,’ and, then, of the great Papal Schism! It was the home of the only men who ever managed to stand against Rome and set themselves up as Popes, as rivals and contesters for St. Peter’s Throne.”

“What are you saying?” asked Suzanne, with a quizzical look on her face. “That someone wants to be Pope?”

“Is that what I’m saying?” asked Jones, in return, sitting back again. “I don’t know. I just don’t know.”