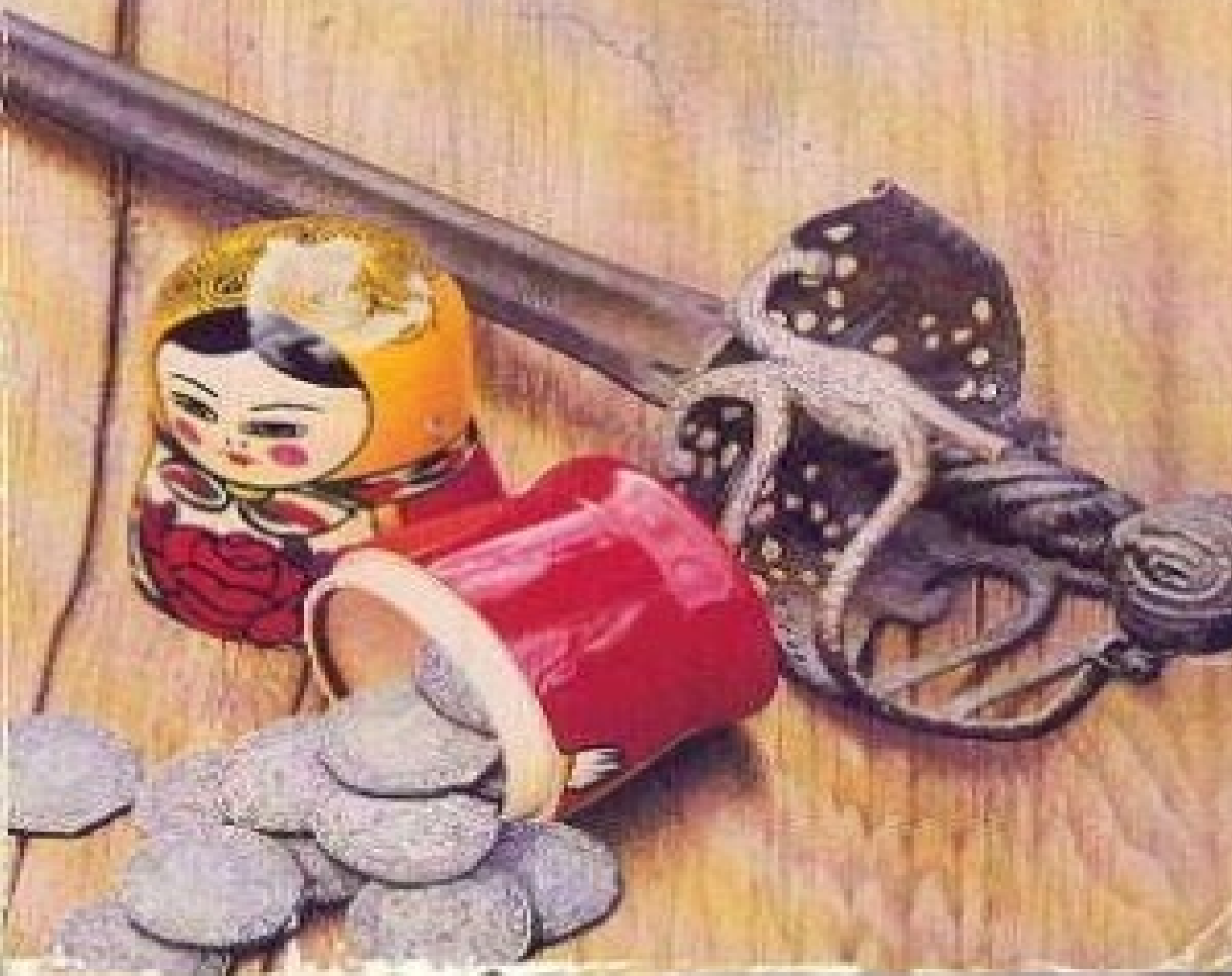


FASCINATING AS WELL AS TREMENDOUSLY EXCITING
DAILY TELEGRAPH

ANTHONY PRICE WAR GAME



WAR GAME

ANTHONY PRICE

First published in 1976

I've travelled the world twice over.

Met the famous: saints and sinners,

Poets and artists, kings and queens,

Old stars and hopeful beginners,

I've been where no-one's been before,

Learned secrets from writers and cooks

All with one library ticket

To the wonderful world of books.

Janice James

For Margaret and Brian Aldiss

From *Perfect Occurrences of Parliament and Chief Collections of Letters*

from the Armie, 9th to 16th May 1645:

Friday, May the 9.—I shall this day in the first place present you with a May-game; but such a one as is not usuall, and deserves to be taken notice of, and it is an action of Warre too, and therefore the more sutable to the times.

In Kent the countrey people (no where more) love old customes, and to do every yeer what they have done in others before, and much pastimes, and drinking matches, and May-Poles, and dancing and idle wayes, and sin hath been acted on former May dayes.

Therefore Colonell *Blunt* considering what course might be taken to prevent so much sin this yeer did wisely order them, the rather to keep them from giving the Malignants occasion to mutinie by such publique meetings, there having been so many warnings by severall insurrections, without such an opportunity.

Colonell *Blunt* summoned in two Regiments of his foot Souldiers to appear the last May-Day, May the 1, at Blackheath, to be trained and exercised that day, and the ground was raised, and places provided to pitch in, for the Souldiers to meet in two bodies, which promised the Countrey much content, in some pretty expressions, and accordingly their expectations were satisfied.

For on May day when they met, Colonell *Blunt* divided them into two parts, and the one was Roundheads, and the other as Cavaliers, who did both of them act their parts exceeding well, and many people, men and women, young and old, were present to see the same.

The Roundheads they carried it on with care and love, temperance and order, and as much gravity as might be, every one party carefull in his action, which was so well performed, that it was much commended.

But the Cavaliers they minded drinking and roaring, and disorder, and would bee still playing with the women, and compasse them in, and quarrell, and were exceedingly disorderly.

And these had severall skirmishes one with the other, and took divers prisoners one from the other and gave content to the Countrey people, and satisfied them as well as if they had done a maying another way, which might have occasioned much evill after many wayes as is before declared ...

(Appendix F from Sir Charles Firth's *Cromwell's Army: A History of the English Soldier during the Civil Wars, the Commonwealth and the Protectorate*, being the Ford Lectures delivered in the University of Oxford, 1900-1.)

THE BATTLE OF SWINE BROOK FIELD

THE Swine Brook was running red again, with the wounded and dying laid out along its banks under the dappled shadow of the willows.

Mostly they were quiet now, engrossed in the final act of the tragedy which was about to take place in the bright sunshine of the water-meadow where the London pikemen and the wreckage of the brother regiments were huddled, waiting for the last great Royalist assault.

Bathed in sweat under their buff-coats and breastplates, unnerved by the suddenness of the fall of their general, the footmen had nevertheless fought like lions. Twice already they had repelled enemy attacks at push of pike; once—ill-advisedly—they had even tried to follow their retreating attacker up the ridge; galled by the fire of the two sakers up the hillside when their own cannon had fallen silent they had closed up and stood firm, so that the original extent of their line was now marked by their dead to the left and right of them. “Steadfast” had been their field-word and they had lived up to it: now they were about to die by it. The lions had become bullocks waiting for the arrival of the butcher.

The moment had come. The sakers banged out for the last time, the trumpets on the hillside shrilled and were drowned by the rising tide of Royalist cheers.

God and the King!

The answering cry from the water-meadow, *God our strength*, rang hollow. This day God was on the side of the Cavalier, and both sides knew it.

Even so, the Parliamentary ranks held firm for one shouting, grunting, groaning minute after the rival pikemen met. Then the lie of the land and superior numbers—and history itself—overwhelmed them: they broke and ran in panic towards the stream, their fear fed by the knowledge that Thomas Lord Monson, was notoriously averse to taking Roundhead prisoners. Black Thomas had private scores to settle—a dead brother and a burnt home among them—and this was his day for the reckoning.

Clouds of insects rose from the water as the fugitives splashed through it in the thirty-yard gap between the hawthorn and blackberry tangles; the smoke from their burning wagons thinned, to reveal their abandoned cannon on each side of the rout.

The Royalist infantry surged after them, Monson on his great black horse now leading them. But

he reached the Swine Brook one of his men overtook him—

This was the moment of victory, and also the moment of the act which was to immortalise the victory—and Black Thomas with it—when greater triumphs and commanders would long be forgotten.

The soldier tore off his helmet and filled it with the dirty, reddened water. Then he climbed back up the bank and offered it to the Royalist general.

There was a growl of approval from the footmen as Black Thomas lifted up the dripping helmet high for all to see, a growl rising to a great cheer as he lowered it to his lips, the water cascading on either side down his gilded black half-armor.

Black Thomas had promised.

Black Thomas had fulfilled his promise.

“A Monson! A Monson!”

“God and the king!”

The Royalist infantry shook their pikes and waved their swords in triumph; and the watching crowds on the hillside above, who had been waiting for this above all things, took up the applause.

Henry Digby, observing the spectacle from his post beside an old willow ten yards upstream, grunted his disgust. One well-aimed musket ball would have cut Lord Thomas Monson down to size at this moment, and would have gone some way towards avenging the Swine Brook Field slaughter of the righteous. But he had no musket and today there had been no musket ball with Black Thomas's name on it. That day would come, but it was not yet come.

The dead man beside him raised himself on an elbow.

“He's not actually drinking the stuff, is he?” asked the dead man.

A dying man who had been dabbing his toes in the water nearby laughed. “I wouldn't put it past him. Just like the real thing—and I'll bet they're all damn thirsty by now.” He pointed to Digby's plastic container. “It's not poisonous by any happy chance, is it? But that would be just too much to hope for, I suppose.”

“The dye?” Digby shook his head, frowning at the implications of the suggestion. “Of course not. It's strictly non-toxic. But I hope to heaven he doesn't drink it. The stream's full of cow-dung.”

“Yrch!” The dead man stared at the stream, wrinkling his nose.

“But *they* drank it. And *he* drank it, that's for sure,” said the dying man. “And it was probably full of pig-shit then. And it didn't do him any harm.”

“I expect they had stronger stomachs than we've got. Probably had all sorts of natural immunities

said the dead man.

“I doubt that,” said Digby. “They were rotten with dysentery at the Standingham Hall siege a week later.”

“Both sides were rotten with it,” countered the dying man. “I was arguing with a chap from Boxall’s Regiment last night in the pub. He said the cavalry was queen of the battlefield, when it came to a killing match. But I reckon squitters was queen. More of the poor bastards crapped themselves to death than ever killed each other, for a fact. I had a bad dose of enteritis last summer, and it bloody near killed me, I tell you. And I was full of pills and antibiotics.” He nodded wisely. “I should think the safest ingredient in this water back then was probably the blood, and Monson just struck lucky.”

As if he had overheard their conversation, the Royalist commander came riding along the bank towards them while his troops surged across the stream in pursuit of the broken Roundheads.

He waved at Digby. “Keep pouring it in, Henry,” he shouted. “We want to make sure it goes all the way down to the road bridge—that’s where the crowds will be.”

Digby waved back and slopped more dye into the stream. It hadn’t occurred to the silly man that it was pointless to waste the dye when everyone was churning up the water, but now most of them were across and he wasn’t going to argue the toss. It was enough that he understood better than anyone that his role today, though unglamorous, was probably the most important one of all: just as Black Thomas’s unhygienic act had fixed Swine Brook Field firmly in the history books, so that it would be remembered by people who’d never heard of such crowning mercies as Naseby and Marston Moor, so today’s red stream was what would catch the public eye and the public imagination. The afternoon before, when the other officers had been checking out the battle scenario, he had superintended a dress rehearsal of this bit of it for a BBC TV News crew. By this evening with any luck it would be seen in colour by millions, and from those millions there would be some hundreds of would-be recruits. From them the Mustering Committee would be able to raise half a dozen new regiments—good quality regiments of those who knew what they were fighting about, and loved what they knew.

“How long do we have to lie here?” The dying man consulted a wristwatch. “I’m getting damn thirsty—it comes of watching Black Thomas do his thing.”

Good quality regiments were composed of better material than the dying man, thought Digby disapprovingly. Wrist-watches were strictly forbidden in battle, together with all other anachronisms except spectacles, and even those had to be National Health steel-framed.

He added more dye to the stream. “5.30 for us.” The man hadn’t even read his scenario properly. “We have to perform for the crowd first.”

He pointed towards the ridge, which was already black with spectators who had been released from the retaining ropes by the crowd marshals.

“Don’t worry, Phil,” said the dead man. “Any minute now we’re due for succour from the Angels
Mercy and consolations from the Men of God.”

“You can keep the Men of God—you’re dead,” said the dying man. “Me, I’ll settle for an Angel of
Mercy to ease my passing. A little bit of succour is just what I need at the moment.” He peered around
uneasily. “You haven’t seen the Lord General anywhere, have you?”

“He’s in the next gap,” said Digby. “Why d’you want to know?”

“Because he’s probably keeping his beady eye on me, that’s why. I got chewed up for putting my
hand up an Angel’s skirt at Overton Moor.”

“By the Angel?” asked the dead man innocently.

“Are you kidding? It was my own private Angel. But the Lord General doesn’t think a god-fearing
man ought to fancy the flesh in his last agonies—he’s a stickler for bloody accuracy... . There are
times when I think I ought to have been a cavalier. They expect that sort of thing, lucky bastards.”

Digby was slightly shocked by the dying man’s profanity. It was true that Jim Ratcliffe was
meticulous in his requirements. But it was also true that it was becoming a point of honour in the
Parliamentary Army that there should be no swearing on the field or off it. He had noticed that
previous evening that even after the beer had flowed freely and the politics had become vehement
there had been very little swearing among the men of his own regiment.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t change sides?” He tried to sound casual.

“Change sides?” The dying man repeated the words incredulously. “Christ, man—my old dad was
a miner. I’ve voted Labour all my life, and I’m not going to change now... . Bloody cavaliers, you won’t
catch me among them.”

“Phil talks like a Malignant,” explained the dead man loyally, “but his heart’s in the right place.”

“Too true,” agreed the dying man. “Just happens Dave and I don’t happen to be a couple of your
Eastern Association men. We’re low-grade cannon-fodder— what Noll Cromwell called ‘old decayed
serving-men and tapsters’. We run away when things get too hot, but we bloody well come back again.
And we died out there too—“ he pointed towards the water-meadow “—before there ever were any
Ironsides in their pretty uniforms. This is 1643, remember, not ‘44 or ‘45.”

He could be right at that, thought Digby penitently. But more than that, there ought to be a use for
such cheerful rogues because even in defeat there was a marked reluctance among members of both
armies to behave shamefully. The dying man and his friend might become the nucleus of a special
group prepared to disgrace themselves—a company of cowards. He might usefully raise the idea with
Jim Ratcliffe before the next Mustering Committee meeting. Although he was a successful
stockbroker, Jim’s enthusiasms for the realism and the Roundhead cause were unbounded.

As he emptied the last of the dye from the canister and reached for a fresh one a shadow fell across his hand.

“Keep it up, Henry—keep it up.” Bob Davenport’s broad American voice followed the shadow. “It’s going down great at the bridge, the people there are loving it. If we could bottle it I swear we could sell it for souvenirs... . Casualties ready to perform?”

“Any real casualties?” Digby’s private nightmare came to the surface.

“Just the usual cuts and bruises ... plus one minor concussion. No fractures— nothing serious,” the American reassured him. “The boys are getting pretty good at looking after themselves.”

“Have you seen the Lord General?” asked the dying man.

“Not since he was hit. He’s just round the next bush.” Davenport looked over his shoulder. “Well, here they come. Do your stuff now.”

Digby screwed the dripper-top into the new canister of dye and fitted it into the recess he had scooped out in the bank between the roots of the willow. When he had checked that the red stain was spreading satisfactorily he camouflaged the plastic with the grass he had cut in readiness and climbed back up the bank to where Davenport stood beside the bodies. As the first of the spectators drew near he dropped on his knees beside the dying man, his hands clasped in prayer.

“Courage, good friends,” said Davenport in a loud voice. “We must needs look upon this dread day as the hand of the Lord raised mightily against us poor sinners, for it was only He that made us free from the ungodly hosts.”

“Amen to that,” said Digby. “For those that He loveth He first chastiseth, even as the mighty Samson was brought low before the Philistines.”

“Ye shall be cast down in this wicked world that ye be raised up in the world everlasting,” agreed Davenport. “And doubt not that on the dreadful day of judgment the Lord shall know His own.”

“He that loseth his life in Thy service shall save it,” said Digby.

“Look! He’s all covered in blood, mum,” said a shrill treble voice in the crowd.

“Sssh!”

“Tomato sauce, more likely,” said another voice irreverently.

There was a titter of laughter, which the dying man cut off with a realistic groan. “Lord, Lord—Thy will be done,” he croaked.

“Amen,” intoned Davenport.

The bushes on the far side of the stream parted and the first of the Puritan Angels of Merce appeared exactly on cue, a fine buxom girl bursting out of her tight black dress in unPuritan style.

“Water, water,” croaked the dying man.

Raising her skirts with one hand and grasping her leather water-bottle firmly in the other the Angel stepped bravely into the water.

“Thou comest as an angel of mercy, sister,” said Davenport. “This poor fellow hath need of thee.”

The Angel knelt beside the dying man and tenderly lifted his head as she tilted the bottle to his lips.

The crowd murmured appreciatively, cameras clicked, Digby smelt beer and the dying man winked solemnly at him.

Davenport launched himself into his standard five-minute sermon on the wickedness of the Royalists, the diabolical nature of their recent victory, its temporary nature and the inevitable outcome of their obstinate adherence to Popery, prelacy, superstition, heresy, profaneness and other abominations contrary to sound doctrine, godliness and the will of Parliament.

It was good stirring, authentic-sounding stuff and the American put it over with hellfire sincerity that thought Digby. Indeed, it knocked spots off all the modern political harangues he had heard, from National Front meetings to International Marxist rallies, at which each side had bayed for the other's blood, but in dull twentieth-century language lacking the marvellous Old Testament vocabulary which had come naturally to seventeenth-century speakers.

Now the climax was coming—

“The Swine Brook runneth red this day with the blood of the servants of the Lord, shed by the men of Belial whose cause is the horridest arbitrariness that was ever exercised in this world,” Davenport pointed towards the stream. “It crieth out for vengeance, and be assured that the vengeance of the Lord of Hosts shall be terrible to behold—“

Digby rose unobtrusively from his knees (those who were not listening open-mouthed to the American were staring pop-eyed down the Angel's cleavage) and made his way back to the stream's edge to check the spread of the dye.

It was still dripping out nicely from the container, and also spreading—Digby looked down suddenly perplexed. Where the stream had been stained rusty-brown downstream from the container now it was also already coloured a vile unnatural pink *upstream*.

He stared to his left, into the dark tunnel of overhanging bushes. Some unauthorised joker was at work up there, spiking the water with a chemical of his own—possibly a toxic one. And that must be stopped quickly.

The look on his face as he turned back towards the crowd was caught by the dying man.

“What's up, Henry?” he said, reviving himself miraculously.

“Somebody's playing silly buggers,” hissed Digby angrily.

“Well, you can’t go now—the Preacher’s just getting to his blood-and-confusion bit. He’ll need you for that.”

“This won’t wait.” Digby pushed into the crowd.

The Preacher paused in mid-flow. Where—“ he caught himself just in time. Where goest thou brother?” he called out.

Digby raised his hand vaguely. “Upon the Lord’s business, brother, upon the Lord’s business.”

He made his way through the crowd and out round the straggle of blackberry bushes and young hawthorns to the first gap in the thicket, where Jim Ratcliffe was stationed, carrying with him a gang of small boys who were concerned to discover what the Lord’s business entailed. But the gap was empty; without the distraction of the Preacher’s performance Jim had obviously spotted the tell-tale stain ahead of him.

Somewhat reassured he continued upstream. The next opening in the undergrowth was nearly a hundred yards on, by a gated farm bridge. That was the most likely place for—

“Mister! Mister!”

The treble yell came from behind him. One of the small boys waved frantically at him, and the other pointed at Jim’s empty gap.

“‘E’s in the water, mister!” yelled the boy.

Digby pounded back the way he had come. Inside the gap, between the high tangles of thorn and bramble, there was a yard of ground beyond which the stream widened into a dark little pool.

“ ‘E’s in the water,” the voice repeated, from behind him now.

Two slightly larger boys stood on the bank of the stream looking down. One of them squatted down abruptly to get a better view of what lay out of sight.

“Well, I still think ‘e’s shamming,” said the boy who had remained standing. “It’s what they do like on the telly.”

Digby noticed a bright splash of red dye on the crushed grass beside the boy’s left foot.

“Get out of the way,” he commanded.

As the boys parted he saw that the pool was bright red.

He took two steps forward and looked down.

One thing Jim Ratcliffe certainly wasn’t doing was shamming.

HOW TO BE A GOOD LOSER

1

CROMWELLIAN GOLD HOARD WORTH “MORE THAN £2m”

By a Staff Reporter

A SUBTLE skein of historical mystery, interwoven with the red threads of piracy, civil war and sudden death, surrounds the discovery yesterday of a great treasure of gold, thought to be worth more than £2 million, at Standingham Castle in Wiltshire.

The discoverer—and the probable owner—of this vast fortune is Mr. Charles Ratcliffe, 26, who inherited the castle recently on the death of his uncle, Mr. Edgar Ratcliffe, 70, after a long illness.

The gold, nearly a ton of it in crudely-cast ingots, is now under guard awaiting the coroner’s inquest which must by law decide its ownership.

Meanwhile, Mr. Charles Ratcliffe, who is a Roundhead “officer” in the Double R Society, which re-enacts English Civil War battles and sieges in costume, has revealed how his special knowledge of the period helped him to discover what so many others, Oliver Cromwell among them, have sought down the centuries.

Yet the story that he has finally unravelled begins, it now seems likely, not at Standingham Castle at all, but far out in the Atlantic Ocean in the year 1630, with the disappearance of the Spanish treasure ship *Our Lady of the Immaculate Concepcion*.

Legend has it that this ship fell prey to one of the last of the Devon sea dogs in the Drake image, Captain Edward Parrott, of Hartland, whose own ship, the *Elizabeth of Bideford*, was lost that same summer on the North Devon rocks.

It was widely believed in the West Country, however, that Captain Parrott had earlier landed the gold secretly (since England was nominally at peace with Spain at the time), and then had put to sea again.

No confirmation of this rumour emerged until August, 1643, when during the Civil War a party of Parliamentary horsemen from North Devon led by Colonel Nathaniel Parrott, the Captain’s son, took refuge in Standingham Castle to escape capture by the Royalists.

Colonel Parrott and his men reinforced the defenders of the castle, which had been re-fortified by its owner, Sir Edmund Steyning, himself a fanatical supporter of the Parliamentary cause.

They brought it no luck, however. For after a Roundhead relief force had been defeated at the battle of Swine Brook Field, twelve miles away, the castle was stormed by the Royalists and the majority of its defenders massacred.

Both Colonel Parrott and Sir Edmund were among the dead, but it is known that the Royalist commander, Lord Monson, instituted a thorough—but fruitless—search of the castle directly afterwards. The historical assumption (though one not widely maintained until now) is that both the search, and indeed Lord Monson's energetic prosecution of the siege, had been inspired by some knowledge of a treasure brought to the castle by the Roundhead horsemen.

The North Devon legend of Spanish gold now became firmly rooted in rural Wiltshire, strengthened by a second search, reputedly by Oliver Cromwell himself, in 1653. Since then there have been at least four other major treasure-hunting operations, the last in 1928 by the late Mr. Edgar Ratcliffe's father.

This long record of failure, which led most historians to discount the whole story, has now been ended by Mr. Charles Ratcliffe's brilliant historical detective investigation.

Standing beneath the crenellated outer ramparts yesterday, Mr. Ratcliffe, a youthful and colourful figure, said: "I have never believed the experts who said either that there never was any gold, or that Cromwell must have found it in 1653. As a boy I listened to all the old stories, and I believe that local traditions are worth far more than the half-baked facts in the history books."

Mr. Ratcliffe, who is a postgraduate sociology student and runs a workers' paper in his spare time, said that he had not searched haphazardly for the gold.

"First I studied all the known facts and compared them with the local tales," he said. "Then I simply put myself into Colonel Nathaniel Parrott's shoes.

"I took my final conclusion to a distinguished historian of the period, and he agreed with me. But I shall tell the full story of that at the coroner's inquest to be held shortly."

And he added intriguingly: "I can say that once I had worked out what really happened I didn't have to search for the gold. I went straight to it."

The only shadow on Mr. Ratcliffe's good fortune is the recent death of his cousin, James Ratcliffe, in circumstances peculiarly relevant to—and strangely connected with—the Standingham treasure.

For Mr. James Ratcliffe was killed earlier this year during the re-enactment by the Double R Society (of which he was also a member) of that same battle of Swine Brook Field which preceded the storming of Standingham Castle.

The suspicious circumstances of his death are still being investigated by the Mid-Wessex Police Force, following the adjournment of the inquest in June.

The police have stressed that Mr. Charles Ratcliffe, who was also present on the fatal mock-battlefield, is not involved in their inquiries.

Our legal correspondent writes: It will now be for an inquest jury convened by the local coroner to decide on the ownership of the Standingham gold. Broadly speaking, buried treasure comes under two categories: that which was deliberately abandoned with no intention of recovery (i.e. burial goods, like that found in the fabulous Sutton Hoo ship cenotaph), and that which was temporarily hidden by an owner intending to recover it (like the Romano-British coin and plate hoards) or otherwise lost accidentally. The latter category provides the classic examples of “treasure trove” in which, in default of finding a rightful owner, the established principle of English law is that the Crown is entitled to the treasure but grants “full market value” to the finder. This custom, designed to encourage finders to declare their discoveries, has aroused controversy in recent cases where there has been a marked discrepancy between what the Treasury and the British Museum consider “full market value” and what dealers on the open market are prepared to offer, since the finder has no redress in law.

In the case of the Standingham gold, therefore, the sum which Mr. Ratcliffe will receive depends not so much on the value of the gold, which is easily established, as on his ability to establish original ownership to the satisfaction of the coroner’s jury.

Audley glanced from the newspaper cutting to his wristwatch. Although they had been cruising along for nearly ten minutes they had somehow contrived to stay quite close to the airport: somewhere just ahead of them a Jumbo was straining to get airborne, engines at full thrust. Like his own words, Audley’s suspicions.

Naturally they would have known, because they knew him, that he would arrive back from Washington tired and dishevelled and desperate to get back to the loving quiet of his home and family. More, they would have known that he had confidently expected to do just that, because that had been the deal: two weeks of tranquillity at home in deepest Sussex to complete his report (which could be done in less than one) in exchange for a barely endurable month of American high summer among old friends who could no longer afford to trust him as they had once done.

And most of all, because of that, they would know that he would be mutinous to the limits of loyalty about taking any new assignment before the present one was discharged.

“Very interesting.” He handed back the cutting to Stocker politely.

All of which meant they were very sure of themselves, that had to be the first conclusion.

“Did you read about it in the States?” Stocker inquired with equal politeness.

“There was a story in the Washington Post. I didn’t read the British papers in the embassy, they would only have depressed me.”

Stocker delved into his brief-case. “There’s another cutting here.”

“I don’t want to read another cutting. I want to go home.” Audley kept his hands obstinately in his lap. He noticed as he looked down at them to make sure they were obeying orders that his thumb

were tucked into his fists. According to Faith that was a sure sign that he was miserable, uncertain and vulnerable, and consequently in need of special care and protection. And although he mistrusted his wife's instant psychology as much as he enjoyed her interpretation of the duties it imposed on her, it was an interesting fact that one couldn't punch anyone on the nose with thumbs in that position.

"In due course," said Stocker.

Audley re-arranged his thumbs. Not that punching Stocker would do any good whatsoever; besides, Stocker was quite capable of punching back.

"I've a lot of work to do," he said.

"I know. Your report on the current state of the CIA." Stocker nodded. "Sir Frederick told me."

"Did he also tell you it was for the Joint Chiefs?"

Stocker smiled. "Yes, he told me that too, David."

The Christian name was an olive branch.

"Well, Brigadier—" Audley trampled the olives—"it isn't going to get done by remote control. I intend to write it now, while it's fresh in my mind. Could be it's not without importance."

"I'm sure it is. But this is more important." Stocker lifted the second cutting. "In fact if your time in Washington hadn't run out today we would have brought you back today anyway—no matter what."

"We?"

"Sir Frederick and I." Stocker paused. "And others."

"Others?"

Any chance of a reply to that question was blotted out by the roar of another big jet. This time the noise was almost unbearable, with the brute force of the sound vibrating the car as it slowed down at the entrance to a lay-by on its nearside. There was a police car—a large, vividly-striped Jaguar—parked in the entrance so that there was only just sufficient room for them to squeeze by. The uniformed man at the wheel raised his gloved hand to Stocker's driver, beckoning him on.

It wasn't a custom-built lay-by, Audley realised. Once upon a time, before the runways had swallowed the fields, this had been the line of the main road lurching in a drunken meander between the quiet hedgerows, Chesterton's rolling English road to the life. But when the new highway builders had amputated this unnecessary loop they hadn't bothered to grub up the tarmac, and now the unrestrained hedges had sprouted into trees which screened it from the passing traffic. But for the jet it would have been an admirable place for love in the back seat.

But there was no love in this back seat, nor would there be any waiting for him in the back seat. The car parked in the shade of a gnarled crab-apple tree, an anonymous new wedge-shaped Leyland

2200 of the sort he and Faith had contemplated buying in the autumn, in patriotic replacement for her rusting old 1800. In a more peaceful, more honourable world he would be returning to her now.

He waited until the jet thunder had become a distant rumble.

“Others?”

The Joint Chiefs ... among others. “Uh-huh? You mean Sir Frederick and you and the joint Chiefs ... and others ... all cried my name with one voice in their hour of need?”

“Something like that. Something very like that.” Stocker was so sure of himself that he was prepared to be magnanimous. Audley recognised the tone. Magnanimity was the civilised victor's final body-blow to the defeated.

“I'll bet.”

“You should be flattered, David. This is an awkward one, but you have the right equipment for it.”

Audley strained to make out the features of the man in the back of the 2200. “I have the right equipment for rape, but I've no intention of letting anyone make a rapist of me, Brigadier.”

“That wasn't quite what we had in mind for you.” Stocker was almost genial now. “It's your brain we need, not any other part of you. You won't even have to do much leg-work—I've detached Paul Mitchell and Frances Fitzgibbon to do all that, directly under your orders. And you can have anything else you want within reason, short of the Brigade of Guards.” He paused. “If you like you can choose your field co-ordinator too.”

Now that was flattering, thought Audley. To be given two bright field operatives who had worked with him before was commonsense. But to be allowed to choose a co-ordinator was patronage on a grand scale.

Unfortunately it was also rather frightening.

“We'll give you Colonel Butler, if you like.” Stocker actually smiled as he baited the hook with the best co-ordinator in the department. “He's free at the moment.”

Audley was saved from not knowing how to react to that by the opening of the 2200's rear door. The mountain was coming to Mahomet.

“It's entirely up to you, anyway,” said Stocker mildly, offering the second cutting a second time. “And naturally we're not going to insist on anything. But ... well, you read this first, David, before you make up your mind.”

They weren't going to insist. Audley watched the 2200 as though hypnotised. Of course they weren't going to insist; with his own money and what he could earn—Tom Gracey had as good as promised a fellowship for the asking—he could flounce off in a huff any day of the week.

The pressures were much more subtle than that, though.

The occupant of the 2200 stepped out of the shadow on to the sunlit tarmac.

Of course they weren't going to insist. They didn't have to.

He took the cutting—

A TON OF GOLD FOR RED CHARLIE

Half a lifetime's professional interest in newspapers identified the typography instantly: this was the popular version of the dignified story he had read earlier.

Dressed in a flowered shirt and with his long hair curling trendily round his collar, a 26-year-old revolutionary told last night of his amazing discovery of Cromwell's Gold—a whole ton of it.

But Charlie Ratcliffe, who inherited near-derelict Standingham Castle in Wiltshire only six weeks ago, is not yet willing to reveal how he found the treasure which is likely to make him one of the richest men in Britain.

Audley looked up as Stocker opened the car door for the man from the 2200.

“Thank you, Brigadier. No—it's all right. I'll sit here.”

The Minister drew open the extra seat from its fastening on the partition which separated the passenger from the driver. “There's plenty of room, I shall be perfectly comfortable ... Did everything go satisfactorily?”

“Yes, sir. We were in and out in five minutes.”

“Good.” The Minister turned to Audley. “I must apologise for the unorthodox approach, D. Audley. At least you were spared the usual inconveniences. And it was necessary, you understand.”

“Of course, Minister.” At least the man didn't try to sugar the pill with a diplomatic smile, though Audley, which saved him from the pettiness of not smiling back. But then this one was the best of the bunch, and more than that a good one by any standards; he wouldn't smile in this sort of situation unless he encountered something worth smiling about. “Or let's say I'm beginning to understand.”

The Minister stared at him for a moment, as though he had expected a different reply. Then he nodded. “But you were reading one of the cuttings. I think you'd better finish it before we go any further.”

Audley stared back into the cool, appraising eyes behind the thick spectacles before lowering his own to the fragment of newsprint. There were times when it wasn't disgraceful to be out-stared, even diminished. In that better—and nonexistent—world which he had been mourning a minute or two back, this man might have been the leader of his party, rather than a senior member of an embattled flank. He had it. Half his mind struggled with the printed words and the meanings beneath them—

... treasure trove inquest shortly to be held.

And in the meantime an inquest of another kind—of suspected murder— stands adjourned. Its subject is James Ratcliffe, Charlie's cousin ...

—while the other half grappled with the Minister's presence and the meaning beneath that.

Politics. They were the nightmare grinning on every intelligence chief's pillow; the wild card in the marked pack, the extra dimension in a universe which already had too many dimensions. In his time he had watched the Middle East and the Kremlin as he was watching Washington now, and the politics were to him never more than academic matters to be assessed only in terms of his country's profit or loss.

But British politics were different. And so were British politicians, even this man for whom he was already half-inclined to break the golden rule of non-involvement.

... however. But country memories are long, and for the price of a pint in the oak-beamed public bar of the Steyning Arms the locals will still tell you the tale of Cromwell's Gold and the bloody siege of Standingham Castle on the hill above— the gold for which so many treasure hunters have searched in vain ...

He needed time to think. Time to figure the forces required to bring the Minister to a lay-by behind some bushes at the end of a runway.

But there was no time. He re-read the last three paragraphs as an act of self-discipline before looking up.

The same stare was waiting for him. One reason the Minister was here was to see in the flesh the man who had been selected for a particular job. There was no substitute for that.

"I've heard quite a lot about you, Dr. Audley," said the Minister.

"None of it true, I hope," said Audley.

"Exaggerated, perhaps. Or it may be that you've had more than your share of luck over the years."

"I wouldn't deny it. But then ... wasn't luck the chief qualification Napoleon looked for in his marshals?"

"Yes, it was." The Minister nodded. "But I've always preferred Wellington to Napoleon, myself."

Audley smiled. "As a general, I hope. I seem to remember that he was a deplorable politician."

"True." The smile wasn't returned. "And the moral of that—?"

Audley shrugged. "Good generals usually make indifferent politicians. One should stick to one's profession after the age of forty—I think that I should be just as ... unlucky ... if I became involved in politics at my age, don't you think?"

The Minister regarded him thoughtfully. “Yes, very probably. In fact neither of us should seek to meddle in the other’s —ah—sphere of activity. If we both agree on the broad principles there’s a lot that should be taken on trust, wouldn’t you say?”

The oath of allegiance was being put to him more quickly than he had expected, thought Audley. But at least it was phrased in the best feudal spirit, with the acceptance that loyalty was a two-way obligation.

“For example—“ the Minister continued smoothly “—whatever political mistakes the Duke made he did lay down one guiding principle for times of crisis, a rule to which I wholeheartedly subscribe. ‘The King’s government must be carried on’. I intend to see that it is carried on, and that is why I’m here now.”

Audley tried another smile.

“I’ve said something that amuses you?” The Minister frowned.

“No, Minister. I was smiling at myself for jumping to the wrong conclusion for your being here.”

“Indeed? Which was—“

“That otherwise I might have gone off to sulk in my tent. I didn’t want to go to Washington in the first place—not simply because I don’t like to spy on my friends, but because I don’t like being bugged about. Because I know why I was sent, in fact.”

Stocker gave a warning cough. “David—“

“No, Brigadier. If the Minister has heard quite a lot about me he may as well hear this too. I’m a hard-liner in East-West relations, Minister. I dislike the Russians, and I hate Communists. And with the Helsinki nonsense coming up my face didn’t fit at all—I’d become an ancestral voice prophesying war. Or if not war then treachery. So I was banished to the New World with the promise of a fortnight’s extra holiday after that, and then a choice of research projects on NATO security. Which promise is about to be broken as thoroughly as any of the undertakings the Soviet government may have appeared to give at Helsinki. And Sir Frederick Clinton knows that *that* just might have been enough to break the camel’s back.”

“You’re beginning to sound suspiciously like a prima donna, David,” said Stocker.

“Beginning? Brigadier, *I am a prima donna*. If you insist on giving me damned difficult arias—like this one—“ Audley waved the newspaper cutting “—I’ve no choice in the matter. So if you want someone else to sing this, you get whoever you can. But if you want me to sing it, then you damn well have to put up with me, temperament and all.” He turned back to the Minister. “So?”

The Minister smiled. “So you’ll sing for us?”

“Of course. The Queen’s government must be carried on, one way or another. If you’re prepared to

take me on trust, I'm prepared to take you, Minister. Sir Frederick gave you good advice."

"That you would trust me face-to-face? Obviously he knows you very well."

"Too damn well for my own good. And I know him too."

"He also says that you're good at finding things—that you once recovered a lost treasure for him."

"I've found a number of things for him. And people. But in this case the treasure appears to have been already found. So what exactly do you want me to find?"

"What makes you think we want you to find anything?"

"Well, you surely don't want me to solve a murder for you. Because solving murders isn't my forte. Murder is for policemen—just as politics is for politicians."

Again the Minister smiled, though more coldly this time. "Touché, Dr. Audley— I'll try to remember that. But you've read the two cuttings: what do you make of them?"

"Textually, you mean? You want a comparison between the two?"

"That would be interesting—for a start."

Audley looked down at the cutting in his hand. Cromwell's Gold—and now Charlie Ratcliffe's gold—was an incomparable "silly season" story for any newspaper by any standards. It was every reader's Walter Mitty dream come true: a ton of gold uncomplicated by taxes and death duties. Besides such a fortune even the biggest football pools win looked like a lucky afternoon at the bingo hall; but more than that it was a quick fortune won not by luck, but by the sweat of the finder's intelligence, and therefore deserved as no chance fortune could ever be. Only sour grapes would disapprove of Charlie's riches.

Except for one dark suspicion.

"All right ... Two cuttings, two papers ... One a heavyweight Sunday, the other a popular Monday. He raised the second cutting. "But the difference goes deeper than that."

"How—deeper?"

"Ratcliffe gave the story to the Sunday. But he didn't give a thing to the daily— there isn't a single first-person quote from him, not a real one. It's all second-hand, or out of their cuttings morgue."

"Inverted revolutionary snobbery, perhaps?"

"Perhaps. But also a mistake."

"Why a mistake?"

"Because it never pays to be unfair to the press when you've got a good story. This Ratcliffe—he's not quite as clever as he thinks he is, if that's what he did."

“I’m still not quite with you, Audley.”

“Well, it’s like this, Minister. He gave the Sunday a splendid story about the discovery of a great treasure, and that’s what their story is about. But he gave the daily paper nothing, so they had to dig up the story for themselves—and they dug up a new story. But it’s not a treasure story, it’s a murder story.” He looked towards Stocker. “What about the rest of the daily press? Did they write about treasure—or murder?”

The Brigadier’s expression soured, as though the thought of the British press as a whole was distasteful to him and the only good newspaper was a dead one. Then he nodded.

“Meaning ... murder?” Audley smiled. Obviously it wasn’t quite the moment to admit that some of his best friends were journalists. “Of course they did. That’s where the best story is. But if he’d saved a bit for them, or if he’d been fair all round, they might have felt a tiny bit inhibited about putting his skeletons on display so prominently. But he didn’t—so they weren’t. Of course, as a revolutionary he might have lost either way, but this way he made it a certainty.”

He passed the cutting to the Minister. “Read it for yourself. It’s not really about gold, it’s about murder. They say that he killed the pair of them, first the son and then the father.”

“The old man died of cirrhosis,” said Stocker.

“A mere detail. He simply anticipated his murder—and that was why Cousin James had to go first. But Charlie wanted the estate, and Charlie got it, that’s what it amounts to.”

“The estate?” Stocker growled derisively. “The estate is little more than the land on which Standingham Castle stands. And that—“

“Is near-derelict?” Audley grinned, warming to the task of imagining the extent of Charlie Ratcliffe’s villainies. “And no doubt the old man was up to his neck in debt—don’t bother to tell me. It’s all there between the lines.”

“It is?” The Minister looked down at the cutting, then back at Audley. “I must say I don’t see it.”

“You don’t see it, Minister, because you don’t need to see it—you already know it.” Audley paused. “The man who wrote that—the reporter, or the re-write man or the sub-editor, or whoever—hope they pay him what he’s worth. There’s not a word in it any lawyer could quarrel with. But what it amounts to is that Charlie found the gold, or at least he established to his own satisfaction where it was. Only he didn’t want any arguments about ownership—or problems with death duties, either. And if there was doubt about the ownership, then if the father died before the son he might have to face double death duties—which is why the son had to be killed off before cirrhosis got the father. So he killed the son, waited for nature to take its course with the father, and then came up with the goodie. How’s that for size?”

“Very neat.” The Minister stared at Audley thoughtfully.

“And substantially correct?”

The Minister nodded slowly. “Substantially ... yes, it very probably is. I don’t dispute that.” He lifted the cutting. “But there’s nothing here that says as much. In fact they go out of their way to say that he didn’t do it.”

“Oh no, they don’t.” Audley shook his head. “They most carefully don’t say that. What they say—or what they very clearly imply—is that he *couldn’t* have done it.”

“Very well—couldn’t. In this context it amounts to the same thing.”

“Not at all. It amounts to the opposite, Minister.”

The Minister frowned. “Are you suggesting that ‘couldn’t’ means ‘could’?”

“No. I’m saying that ‘couldn’t’ means did.” Audley sat back. “Not in law, of course. Otherwise the editor would be in trouble now. But we’re not a nation of lawyers anyway, Minister. We’re a nation of detective story readers.”

“So?”

“So we know a perfect crime when we see one—means, motive, but no opportunity. The locked room, the flawless alibi, the unshakeable eye-witness. And Charlie Ratcliffe has seven thousand eye-witnesses to testify that he didn’t do it, has he not?”

The Minister nodded again, clearly puzzled. “Yes.”

“Right. But everyone knows exactly what Hercule Poirot would say to that: ‘Here is a man with seven thousand witnesses to his innocence, so my little grey cells tell me that he is the guilty one, *mes enfants*. Seven thousand witnesses must be wrong.’”

Audley was suddenly aware that he was trying to out-shout a jumbo jet which had stolen up on him and now seemed to be passing ten feet above his head. He noticed also that Stocker was smiling.

The Minister waited until the jet thunder had faded. “So what do your little grey cells tell you?”

It was time to consult his thumbs again, thought Audley. Stocker’s smile had faded with the jet engines, but the memory of it still reverberated. “That I’m in the process of being conned.”

“You ... are being conned?” The Minister cocked his head on one side. “I’m afraid I don’t understand, Dr. Audley.”

“Murder is for policemen, Minister— I’ve already said so. If you want me to ... pin the rap on Charlie Ratcliffe I’m afraid you’re going to be disappointed. I won’t do it.”

“Won’t?” The Minister’s voice was silky.

“Can’t.”

“You think he’s innocent, then?”

“On the contrary. You’ve already told me he’s guilty. I wouldn’t dream of disbelieving you, Minister.”

“And the seven thousand witnesses?”

Audley shook his head. “I don’t mean he did it himself—as I’m sure you didn’t either. But for one per cent of £2½ million I could put out a contract on anyone you care to name—or let’s say two per cent, inflation being what it is ... No, I’m sure he’s guilty. But I’m also sure that I’m not the man to prove it.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve told you. First, it’s not my skill. Finding enough proof to convince twelve good men and true isn’t something I’ve ever had to do, I wouldn’t know where to start, never mind finish.

“And second, it’s a police job. It *is* their skill—they know how to do it, and they’re damn good at it, too. If it can be done, they’ll do it—and if they can’t do it then I can’t do it.” He stared hard at the Minister. “And since you’re here now I must assume that they can’t.”

The Minister relaxed, with just the ghost of a smile edging his mouth. “A fair assumption. But you haven’t taken your logic quite far enough.” The smile grew. “And that is your skill, I gather.”

It was an open invitation to go straight to the heart of the matter, thought Audley. But for some reason the Minister was unwilling to spell it out, but wanted Audley himself to deduce it.

He stared out of the car window at the crab-apple tree in the hedgerow. There was a crab like that in the spinney behind his own kitchen garden wall at home, and like this one it was laden with fruit. The late frost and the bullfinches had played havoc with his carefully tended Blenheims and Cox’s Orange Pippins, but the devil himself looked after the crab-apples. And if what the Minister said was true then it looked as if the devil had kept a friendly eye on Charlie Ratcliffe too.

So they were morally certain that Charlie Ratcliffe was the killer, or at least the killer’s paymaster, but they couldn’t prove it. But that had happened before and would happen again: there were some you won and some you lost, and there was no use weeping about it. Those were the ones you notched up your experience, hoping that the Lord of the Old Testament would keep His promise about repayment in His own time.

But Ministers of the Crown had no time to worry about such things in any case. Murderers caught and murderers free could only be statistics to them. All murderers were equal before the law.

Even revolutionary murderers.

Audley looked back at the Minister as innocently as he could. “Tell me about Charlie Ratcliffe, Minister. I’m afraid I’m not very well up in revolution at the moment.”

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