



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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THE EMPIRE OF NOTHINGNESS

by Geoffrey Maloney

Overture: The God-Killer

“So there we were, Adams and myself, in the sitting room of the Resident’s bungalow at Kalapur. We had the civilians safely upstairs and our infantry in the residency garden, exchanging cannon shot upon cannon shot with the mutineers. The first we knew that our line was broken was when this mountainous great native came crashing through the window. Seven feet tall he was, I swear it. And the bastard’s got this huge sabre in his hand that he starts swirling all over the place. Then Adams says, cool as a cucumber, ‘Should I give him the full twelve or do you think six will do?’

“Now this is that silly gun Adams claimed he himself invented. Weighs a ton, the damn thing does. It has twelve chambers which may be fired individually, or a combination of the chambers simultaneously. At this stage, I was down to nothing but my ghurka, so I said to Adams, ‘Dear chap, I think the circumstances warrant the full twelve.’

“No sooner had I said this than Adams blasts away. The native went one way, his arms and legs blown to the four

corners of the room, his head blasted out through the window. Adams went the other way, the recoil of the gun smashing him into the rear wall of the sitting room. He was dead by the time I got to him. There was nothing I could do but close his eyes, place two coins upon them and a farewell kiss upon his lips.

“The day after the siege was broken, the mutineer’s head, still intact, was found on the cantonment’s cricket field. A few of the local lads were using it for football practice.

“So the moral of the story, gentleman, is that the Adams revolver cannot be trusted. I thank God he had it with him that day, and that he used it to save my life. But his own gun did kill him in the doing of it.”

Major Powell, finished with his story, took his *choti* peg of whiskey from the Kalicut Turf Club’s immaculately polished bar and drank it down in one go.

“Major Powell,” cried one of the small crowd who had listened to his tale, a gleam of intelligent eagerness showing in his bespectacled eyes, “what if you had advised Major Adams only to trust the simultaneous firing of six chambers. Perhaps that would have won the day and Major Adams may have lived to tell the tale as well.”

Powell studied the man for a moment. Captain Aspley. Of the Intelligence Branch. Clearly not a military man. His domain was the facts and figures and strategies of books and paper

files. All the tangible and intangible knowledge of the Empire reduced to so much paper. Powell found the thought of that entirely depressing.

“An astute observation, Captain Aspley. But this was a field situation, not a controlled experiment in the laboratory. And no doubt should the boffins have done the right thing, Adams’s revolver would have been well-tested and its limits proven, and the intelligence of that conveyed to us all, before Adams introduced it into the field. Alas, it was not so.”

Just then Major Powell caught sight of a man at the back of the group waving a black handkerchief at him. “You will excuse me, gentleman, Her Majesty calls.”

“Major, just one more question.” It was Aspley again. “Is it true that you, yourself, still use an Adams revolver?”

“Indeed I do,” Powell replied. “But as a repeating revolver only, each bullet fired in series, never in parallel. You will understand the wisdom of that, of course. Now, as I said, duty calls.”

Sergeant McKenzie, short in stature, broad in build, was waiting on the steps of the club. He handed Powell a crisp cream envelope. It was under Her Majesty’s black seal. Powell took it into his hands carefully, gracefully, as if he had just been given a gift from the gods. With long slender fingers, he broke

the seal and extracted the delicate sheet of paper that held his orders.

“Sergeant, the Black Flag summons us,” Powell said. “A small party this time. A long journey. Recruit a couple of chaps from the Engineers. Make sure they’ve got some carpentry skills, boat building experience if at all possible.

“We’ll need somebody from Intelligence as well.” He stroked his moustache. “Aspley’s one of the Flag. Yes, he will do nicely. Get onto his superiors. The idiots won’t understand, but they’ll know what it means: Captain Aspley is required for some obscure mission they care little or nothing about. It would be so much easier if we were in charge of everything, but there are so few of us and so many of them. The world is full of poodle-fakers, is it not?”

* * *

Part I: The Burden of the Desert

On a sandy beach, far up the meandering Cremorne, at the breaking edge of the Empire’s newest colony, five men lay face-down, their hands strapped behind their backs and their mouths gagged. These were the captain and the crew of the *River Rover*, a steam-driven barge hauler that had travelled one port too far.

Major Christopher Powell of Her Majesty’s Black Flag strode up and down the firm wet sand, surveying his captives

and enjoying the early morning sunshine. With his tanned face and aquiline nose, he could have easily passed for a member of the Pakhtun tribe, a warrior race that inhabited another breaking border of Her Majesty's Empire in a far and distant land. Further up the beach, on higher ground, Powell's subordinates, Captain Richard Aspley, Sergeant McKenzie, and the two privates, Benson and O'Neill, laboured to calm the horses and shackle the bullocks to their dray.

"Captain Aspley," Powell called out, "bring your journal please."

Aspley finished securing his mare, then grabbed his leather-bound journal from his saddle bag. He sat himself down upon the beach cross-legged, adjusted his spectacles, and opened his journal, ready once more to play the role of loyal intelligence officer to Powell's warrior major.

"Such a glorious morning for the executioner to call," Major Powell said, pulling the Adams from his holster and walking to the first man. "Captain Aspley, please read the charges."

"Stephen Lewis, boat-hand. Asked too many questions, sir."

"Oh, yes, he was the one who said, 'Gotta be madder than a cut snake to go up to Claridine these days. Madder than ten cut

snakes to go beyond it, out there into nothing. You chasing something, I reckon.”

“Well, remembered, sir,” Aspley replied. “Nicely mimicked.”

“Oh, sweet dreams! Oh, pleasant land of solitude and mystery,” Powell said as he fired his first shot into the back of the boat-hand’s head and moved to the next prisoner.

“Daniel Sharpener. First mate. Another who asked too many questions, sir, and not as sharp as he should have been,” Aspley said.

The second shot was fired. “The sun upon my skin, the taste of the air, the scent of the soil and the stillness, the immaculate, immaculate stillness of it all,” Powell said. “You may omit your feeble humour, captain. Next.”

“Captain Frobisher. Asked for too much money to hold his tongue, sir,”

“Never was there such a country full of nothing,” Powell continued, aiming his pistol once more. He pulled the trigger. “Sweet dreams, Captain Frobisher, a pleasant solitude. A bullet always buys more quietness than all the gold in Ophir. Next...”

Two more bullets were fired. Captain Aspley closed his book and rose to his feet. It was a pity, he thought, but still it was work that had to be done. Order was being brought to the natural chaos of the world. Tough measures were needed.

Sacrifices had to be made. He looked forward to the day when the Empire completed its dominion of the globe and peace and prosperity for all prevailed. In any case, men of this kind knew nothing but rough justice anyway.

“Sergeant,” he called. “When you have finished loading, arrange for the deceased men to be returned to the ship, then torch the lot of it. I imagine these ill-repaired steamers are always blowing, and a wash of charcoal down the river will bring no surprises.”

“Aye, Captain,” McKenzie said. “No surprises. I’ll grant you’re right.”

“Splendid, isn’t it?” Powell said, coming up behind Aspley. “It is an immaculate land. Can you feel it, Aspley, can you feel it calling us?”

And there was such a passion in Powell’s voice that for a moment Aspley did listen, capturing the sound of the she-oaks whispering and the soughing of the tall white gums in the breeze. But there was no hint of anything else.

“With all due respect, sir,” Captain Aspley replied. “I know nothing of the purpose of our endeavour but follow my orders as my duty requires.”

“Nor do I, Captain, nor do I, but all shall be revealed in due course.” Powell winked at him and tapped the breast pocket of his jacket where he kept the next of his sealed orders. “Our

instructions are to follow the river to its source, and that is all we need know for the moment.”

Major Powell climbed the riverbank, up to the rest of his men. “Gentlemen, when you have finished your work please change into your regimental khaki. We are no longer required to cloak ourselves as simple-minded gold-diggers. This is an official expedition of Her Majesty’s Government. We sail under the Black Flag.”

* * *

The Journal of Captain Richard Aspley

25th June

We have followed the river for three days as it cuts its course through a green valley. It has narrowed severely, now barely broad enough to take a canoe, yet its flow remains strong.

Game is abundant and a number of kangaroos have been slaughtered. The meat when roasted over the fire is pleasant enough, and certainly the freshness of it is preferable to the salted beef we keep in reserve. Major Powell has insisted that we live off the land, in so far as it is possible to do so, and save the major portion of our provisions for the day when no further choice remains to us. As always with such remarks, Major Powell seems to hint that he may know more than he is willing to allow myself or the others be privy to.

Later ~

The river petered out shortly after lunch, ending in a small marshy lake thick with reeds. Major Powell and I rode ahead. After a distance of only a few miles, we found our further passage blocked by sheer granite cliffs that reflected the sun harshly. The river and its valley had come to a simultaneous end.

I thought at this point that Major Powell would pull the next of his orders from his pocket and break their seal. In fact, I willed him to do that very thing, but he did not. He merely dismounted his horse and gazed upwards, to the top of the hills.

At that very moment, a flock of birds passed overhead. There were perhaps twelve or more of them flying in a tight skein, each one with great white wings seemingly etched into the bright blue sky.

“Ibis. Water-birds,” Major Powell declared. “It augurs well. We shall climb. It is up and over, we shall go.”

I am no ornithologist, but I doubted the birds were ibis; their beaks were too short. “But the river ends here,” I replied, hoping that would be hint enough that our new orders were called for. A gust of wind blew down the valley, as if the earth itself had sighed with the exasperation I myself felt.

Powell crouched down and turned over a rock. Its underside was dark with moisture. “You see, dear Aspley, the river has merely gone underground. We shall find it again on the other side.” And the tone of his voice bespoke of such certainty that I raised no further objection.

Night ~

Major Powell has retired to his tent. Since early evening he has entertained Private O’Neill with rum tinctured with laudanum. I heard Powell reading poetry to the young O’Neill earlier: “Oh, great and silent land. Oh, timeless ancient place. Before you we should kneel, be humble in your space...” Clearly, the laudanum has gone to his head. Bad poetry appears to be the most obvious symptom.

I advised Sergeant McKenzie that he should discipline O’Neill. McKenzie whacked me on the shoulder in an overly familiar fashion. “Aye, sir,” he said, “you’re right, but he’s a good carpenter as well as a pretty face. Been a boat-builder too. One thing I’ve heard about Major Powell, sir, is that he knows how to pick his men. Wouldn’t any of us be here otherwise if it weren’t the case.”

“Which means?” I said.

“Well, sir, I don’t mean to be too presumptuous, but it’s plain as day to me and the lads that it’s the inland sea we’re chasing, and we’ll be needing boats when we get there, so as to

chart its waters. After all, we've got the mast and sails packed away at the bottom of the dray."

"Yes, sergeant," I replied, "that is a presumption on your part."

"I understand, Captain," McKenzie said. "It's all part of the great game we are upon, and knowledge is revealed as and when the time demands."

Sergeant McKenzie departed, certain in this venture. I reinforce his certainty merely by saying he is presumptuous. But he is an Engineer, and like all Engineers, a builder at heart. Military men grow restless when there are no skirmishes to be involved in. McKenzie and his ilk are happy if there is a wheel or an axel that warrants repair, and officers from Intelligence, such as myself, are at their wit's end when they do not have enough information upon which to judge the validity of actions being taken. I find myself thinking frequently of the orders that Powell carries, believing that they will reveal the true nature of our journey when they are finally opened.

More bad poetry has disturbed the quiet night. Just now Powell cried from his tent, "Oh, great gods, in heavenly abodes. Grant me this. Forever in a sunburnt country I shall dwell."

I shall go to sleep now, I tell myself. Mast and sails packed away! A flock of ibis! Folly, indeed.

26th June

Today I advised Major Powell of the work that needed to be done to reconstruct the dray to accommodate the bullocks harnessed in single-file for our journey up and over. He had a haggard look in his eye that bespoke of too much rum and too little sleep. He nodded abruptly, giving his assent to the plan, then retired to his tent to wrestle with the dog that bit him last night.

Seeing that McKenzie and his men were working in good order, I saddled my horse and ventured up the hills, anxious to gain some knowledge of the land that lay ahead. I was not convinced as Powell was that the river would suddenly burst forth into a stupendous flow once we were on the other side.

It is almost impossible for me to convey with words the sight that greeted my eyes. Ahead lay a desert that was more worthy of the name than any desert I had ever seen or heard of before. There was nothing but a barren featureless plain reaching all the way to the horizon—dramatic only because of the rich red iron oxide of its sandy soil. There were no trees, no rivers, no rocky formations protruding randomly, nothing to shield man or beast from the savage beating of the sun.

Such a stark opposition in nature I have never before borne witness to, as if the ridge of hills upon which I stood were the boundary line that demarcated the territories of heaven from hell.

As the sun was fast approaching its zenith, I took my sextant, almanac, and chronometer from my saddle-bags and took my readings. The heat of the day had cast a pall upon the landscape. No birdsong or breeze stirred the air, nothing save the constant droning of insects to break the silence. Thus I moved along the ridge, feeling for a moment that I was utterly alone in this world, taking my readings and gathering a sense of foreboding for the journey that lay ahead.

* * *

Terra Incognita

The expedition was strung out in a weary line. The ground beneath men and beasts was cracked and hard-baked. A dry red ochre, it crumbled to dust beneath foot and hoof. Above, the sky was a listless blue, pale and washed out, bleached by a sun that burnt white hot.

As always, Major Powell led the way, but he had abandoned his horse and now travelled on foot. Slowly a step this way, slowly a step that way, the course he charted departing in peregrinations from the expedition's preferred linear progression. In his hand he held a y-shaped stick, cut from a gum upon the hills they had recently left. It twitched frantically as he walked, possibly from the tension in his wrists or perhaps, Captain Aspley thought, from the underground river whose course Powell was certain he was divining with his

dowsing. When the twitching ceased suddenly, Powell turned this way then that, seeking the change of direction for the water he was sure still flowed beneath.

Surely, this was madness, Aspley thought, then cast a look at Sergeant McKenzie who rode beside him, fearing he had voiced those thoughts. But McKenzie it seemed had heard nothing or, if he had, felt in no need of a reply. He stared resolutely ahead, his eyes fixed upon a horizon that should have been sharp and clear, with the vivid redness of the desert contrasting so sharply with the bright blue of the sky, yet it was not. The certainty of it was completely lost in a savage heat haze.

A cry came from up ahead. Major Powell's strange dance had come to an end. He stood rigid. Just for a moment. Then he flung his dowsing stick to the ground and cracked it beneath the heel of this boot.

"At a guess, sir, I'd say," Sergeant McKenzie ventured, "that Major Powell himself now believes the river has run dry." And there was a smile upon his face that showed a man of his years and experience knew well the vagaries of those he'd served under.

"Aspley!"

Another cry from Powell. Aspley spurred his horse into a quick trot.

If Powell was angry at the loss of his river, he did not show it. Certainly, his face was a little reddened, like those of the others, but that was more from the scorching fingers of the sun than a flush of sudden emotion. “Telescope,” he said.

Aspley took the heavy brass instrument from its sling on his saddle and placed it in Powell’s hands. Powell tested the weight of it for a moment; then raised it to his eye and swept the limitless earth before them. He found nothing, as Aspley had predicted from their vantage point in the hills some days before.

“Well, Captain,” Powell said, “you’re the expedition’s intelligence officer, what do you suggest?”

Aspley gazed back towards the horizon they had left behind. The ridge of green hills could still be seen there as a thin blue line. There was fresh water back there, and game too. Survival was assured.

“What do the orders say?” His mouth and tongue were dry, and he knew as he heard his words he had given them an uncertain edge. There was the hope in his mind that the orders would tell them to return once the river had run dry, once it was clear, obvious, that there was no inland sea that sourced the Cremorne and other rivers that flowed to the coast. Indeed, even if that was the mighty goose they were chasing.

“Oh, the orders,” Powell said. “Yes, here they are. For what they’re worth.” He pulled a sweat-stained envelope from his pocket and handed it to Aspley.

Taking it, Aspley saw the black wax seal it bore had already been broken. He looked at Powell.

“Opened, but a moment ago,” Powell said. “Go on, read it.”

Aspley removed the folded piece of paper, opened it out, looked at the page. He turned it over to be sure. There was nothing written there. Empty and white. Both sides. The sun glared back from the page, forcing him to squint. The White Page. *Terra Incognita*. No further orders. Major Powell could decide to continue on into uncertainty or abort the expedition if he wished. Whatever Powell desired. That was its meaning.

“I need to know what we are seeking, sir?” Aspley said, his voice cold and dry as if he already knew Major Powell’s next command and feared to hear it.

“Like all good intelligence officers, Captain Aspley, you have a fear of uncertainty, a fear of never having enough information with which to make the best possible decision out of all the options that you may logically conjure up. Whereas I, like all military officers, know that the intelligence most often arrives too late, and instead a decision must be based on intuition, gut feeling, and whatever evidence might lay to hand.”

“Both you and I know, sir, there is no evidence to hand other than what our eyes tell us.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more, Aspley,” Powell said, bending down to study the sand and rocks at his feet. His fingers began to probe the soil until they seized upon something that lay embedded there. He rubbed and scraped at it, freeing it of the dirt that had entrapped it. Then he held out his treasure to Aspley. The look upon his face was one of humility and supplication. “Take this, brother,” he said, “may it serve you well.”

Aspley gazed down at Powell’s open palm. Upon it lay a seashell. Its mother of pearl interior glittered prettily in the harsh sunlight.

“Onwards, Aspley, onwards!” Powell cried, rising to his feet. “It is the inland sea we seek. Come, I can smell the salt of its waves already. Can’t you hear the mermaids singing?”

Aspley turned away and sighed.

* * *

The Journal of Captain Richard Aspley

7th July

Damn that bloody seashell that has sent us on this wild-goose chase. For ten days now we have traversed this stony desert plain. It is red, red, red to the horizon, as if we have left the Earth and set foot upon another planet whose wretched

terrain holds little life but dry scaled lizards and a weedy grass that makes the horses' bellies swell, and ants, mountains of them, crawling everywhere.

Yet Major Powell remains undaunted. He has that wild look in his eye, a fearless gaze set towards the horizon, the very same one he gets when he has been over-doing the laudanum, and a relentless zeal about his whole manner that brushes all argument aside.

Yet, perhaps these qualities of Powell's that I find most cause for concern are the very qualities which are needed for true leadership. The fact that true leadership may fail more often than not—resulting in a tragic loss of life—is perhaps entirely beside the point. For the successes are remembered and rejoiced in heartily, and when a monumental failure occurs then that too leads to rejoicing of a kind, for so dramatic and poignant does the failure become that those involved—albeit sadly perished—are worshipped as heroes for generations to come.

So we seek the inland sea. Yet I wonder in my darkest moments whether Powell was already in possession of that seashell and had kept it concealed among his khakis to reveal when there was nothing left to justify the continuance of the expedition. Now he drives us into increasing uncertainty, a

gambler who does not care to understand the odds of the game he plays.

8th July

There is nothing to say of the day, other than it is done. There will come a time in the next few days where we reach the point of no return, where the most critical decision will need to be made. To gamble beyond that is to take us most certainly to our deaths.

McKenzie and I together have kept ample records of our dwindling supplies, the condition of both men and beasts, and what would be needed for us to reverse our tracks back to the green hill country we left nearly two weeks ago, even if on hard rations; even if we must slaughter our beasts, eat their meat, and drink their thickening blood to survive. The line in the sand must be drawn soon.

It is my responsibility to make that decision. Powell will not make it. I am convinced he would rather perish—Oh noble death of grand and sweeping fame, he shall surely cry as he dies—rather than admit that his judgement was ever wrong. And what other purpose might I serve in my capacity as intelligence officer but to challenge Powell when his leadership has proven to be nothing but folly. My duty henceforth is to return the men to safety, so that they may, with the knowledge

and experience they have gained, better serve Her Majesty's Empire in the future.

10th July

Night brings a great coolness that is so welcome after the intolerable heat of the day, yet I could not sleep; too much the thoughts of what is before me were on my mind—the decision must soon be made. I left my tent and gazed upon the great starry sky. Perhaps fate has cast me here for this one thing, to gaze upon this sky at night, to be privy to all those wondrous suns in savage bloom. Do they have planets like ours circling in orbit? Do they have people on them such as I looking up at this sky, the huge immensity of it, at this very moment?

Then out of the darkness, Powell was there. So quiet, with such stealth, I did not hear his tread. He put his arm around my shoulders and drew me to him. "Dear Aspley," he said, "you were my chosen one. Give me a kiss upon the cheek before I sleep."

And such was the power in his voice, I reached my head up to plant a kiss, with cracked and swollen lips, upon his sunburnt cheek.

"All will be revealed," he said, "all will be revealed." And as he said this, he clasped me in his arms and hugged me to his breast, and I felt in that moment without a care or worry in the world. Like I was a child and my father had told me that there

was no challenge that I would not be able to overcome because I was the one to do it. One of the chosen ones.

So I imagined it, but I fear it is a silly dream I have had and nothing more. Go to sleep now I tell myself. Go to sleep, dear Aspley, there is much work to be done on the 'morrow.

* * *

A Line in the Sand

Captain Aspley rose shortly before dawn, saddled his skinny mare that was not quite yet a bag of skin and bones, and moved ahead of the rest of the party. He had not slept a wink the night before, but the air was chill and held a pleasant breeze that revived him a little as he rode.

Aspley did not go far, perhaps three miles or so from the camp. He dismounted, pulled the saddle from his horse to ease her burden, patted her and whispered softly to her, knowing that she was in dire need of water. He watched the sunrise but found no glory in it. Too soon it would begin its dramatic charge to its noonday zenith, there to beat mercilessly upon them once more.

When enough light was available, Aspley set his telescope upon his tripod and surveyed the horizon. Nothing and more nothing. It was what he'd expected, but still he had hoped that something different might be revealed out there, something that would lift the burden from his shoulders. The great dome

of the sky enclosed him overhead, so much fullness that even in these wide-open spaces he felt the claustrophobic pressure of it. So unlike the night sky that promised the riches of heaven and so many wonders out there, if they could but be reached. The daytime sky was different. Here is where you belong, it said, and here you shall remain. It reduced everything beneath it to complete and utter insignificance. There is nothing to be sought and, if you seek, nothing to be gained.

So be it, Aspley thought, and walked twenty paces back towards the direction of the camp. With the toe of his boot, he gouged the dry cracked earth until he had formed a line in the sand. This was the point of no return. The point beyond which the provisions that remained could not guarantee their safety.

So he stood there, on that line, waiting for Powell and the others to rouse themselves and break camp.

Aspley was without sleep. He had been seduced by the stars and other silly thoughts and so perhaps he nodded off a while as he waited on his line. But still he heard the singing as it came to him on the morning breeze. The words were meaningless, as so often happens when words are sung in song, more for the value of the voice as an instrument rather than any meaning that the words are meant to convey, but still the melody was there. Sung so sweetly, with a lilting edge to it. It

was a song that Aspley swore he knew, but yet could put no name to. He closed his eyes as it entered his ears...

...then found himself falling from his horse, wondering when he had re-mounted. He hit the ground with a dusty thump. He climbed to his feet, felt his arms and legs, found them all in working order. Taking the reins of his horse, he led it to the fountain in the forecourt. As the horse bent its neck to drink, Aspley thrust his head into cool water and sucked it into his mouth. Such blessed relief washed down his parched throat. It was a moment of pure physical joy. The thought crossed his mind that should he die just then he would be happy.

Aspley raised his head, pushed his wet hair back from his face and his spectacles back up his nose. He looked up at the heavy wooden doors that were locked between two great sandstone pillars and the steep steps that led to them. Now he heard the singing again and found his feet taking him across the courtyard and up the old worn steps. When he reached the top, the doors swung open before him. Inside was a quiet darkness that nurtured row upon rows of dusty bookcases. Aspley felt a thrill of excitement surge through him. Here surely lay all the information, all the secrets and intelligence that he would ever need.

A woman, draped in white robes, her face covered in a veil, glided like a ghost from between two bookcases. “I believe, Captain, this is what you seek.”

In her hands she held a book. She beckoned to him with one long hand to come see what she was reading. Aspley moved forward, took the book from her hands, opened it. There was no title page, just a lithograph that showed himself in the action of taking the book from the shrouded woman’s hands. The next page showed him standing next to the woman and opening it. The next showed him turning a page. The next was blank and the one after that, every page blank right to the end of the book.

“The future is always unwritten,” the woman said. She took the book from him and returned it to the shelves. Then she turned to him. Her fingers reached out to stroke his cracked lips. “Let me take you on a journey over the sands...”

Aspley felt the soft touch of her hand, smelt the sweet fragrance of so many flowers: honeysuckle, roses, frangipani... felt the longing that was sweeter than anything he had ever known. He looked through the veil into in her dark mysterious eyes. They were green, Aspley thought, green like the sea. “Aspley!”

Aspley startled, shook himself from his reverie. Powell on his horse towered over him. The leer on his face was a dangerous one.

“What is this?” Powell demanded.

“A line in the sand, sir,” Aspley said, willing confidence into his sleep-soaked voice. “It is the point of no return. If we cross it and continue, we perish. We have barely enough supplies to get us back to the hills.”

Major Powell dismounted, swinging quickly out of his saddle. “Aspley,” he said, “you are a fool. A splendid fool, I grant you. But, if you persist with this nonsense, you will cause me to do things that I would rather not do. The expedition shall move on and cross your line. We are too close now to give up the chase.”

“The provisions can not carry us further and guarantee the safety of the men,” Aspley said. “If we return now and use our beasts as we go I am certain that we shall survive. To live to fight another day for Her Majesty’s Empire.”

“And lose the prize,” Powell said.

“I pray that you look here, through the telescope,” Aspley said. “There is nothing out there. There is no prize. The desert beckons us to our deaths, nothing more.”

“Sergeant McKenzie, instruct your men to proceed across Captain Aspley’s line,” Major Powell said.

“Sergeant McKenzie, that order is withdrawn,” Captain Aspley said.

Sergeant McKenzie did not move, or at least not fast enough, for Powell in quick strides was by McKenzie’s horse. He seized the reins and levelled his Adams revolver at the Sergeant’s head. “Should I blast the sergeant’s brains to Kingdom Come? You know me, Aspley. I will do it. Sergeant McKenzie, you have your orders. Instruct you men to cross Captain Aspley’s line.”

Sergeant McKenzie did not flinch, nor choose to look at Powell. This clearly was not the first time he’d had a gun pointed at him. He stared dead ahead, locking his eyes on the horizon.

Bensen and O’Neill, high on the dray, grabbed their rifles and levelled them at Powell, waiting to see what the sergeant would do. Aspley sensed it, knew in that moment that he had only to give the command and Bensen would fire. O’Neill perhaps not. But he could issue that order and it would be over, done with and no one would blame him for saving Sergeant MacKenzie’s life. It had been witnessed by all that Powell was beyond all reasoning.

Aspley wavered for one second, maybe two, and then it seemed that the moment for giving the order had passed.

Mackenzie said in a steady voice, “Major, I will order the men to cross the line, but I first I ask a favour. Perhaps you would grant Captain Aspley the honour of gazing through his telescope, as he requested.”

Powell seemed to hesitate for a moment, then moved his head slightly, effortlessly, a barely perceptible nod. He holstered his gun, turned, and walked to the telescope. He bent himself to it and looked but for a moment; then he rose and there was nothing to hide the look of delight upon his face.

“Well spotted, Sergeant,” he said in an excited voice. “Captain Aspley and I would have done well to remain mounted. Clearly, the perspective is better from up there. Sergeant McKenzie, please do me the honour of leading the expedition across Captain Aspley’s line.”

Aspley stood there on his line. He understood little but that the world seemed to have shifted around him. Everything had changed and so he must too, but just for the moment he could not move; did not wish to move; did not even care what Sergeant McKenzie had suddenly spied nor what lay through the eye of the telescope. He wished to be other than where he was. He wished to hear the song again that had been sung to him in his standing sleep, to smell that sweet womanly skin that smelt of such fragrant flowers.

Major Powell came and put his arm around his shoulder. “It was well-played, Aspley, well-played indeed. And I thank you for that. Indeed, I will admit to you and myself as well, that within another day or two, I would have supported your decision to turn back. And admit too that you would have been the one to make it, and force me to agree. I, of course, would have tried to bluff my way and failed, but...”

“The world has turned,” Aspley said.

“For the better,” Powell said, slapping Aspley on the back. “Come with me. Please take my hand.”

Powell’s hand was stretched out before him now. Aspley took it—they shook in a firm dignified manner—then he turned as if in a dream and walked to the telescope. Through it he saw another expedition, a train of half-a-dozen camels, heavily laden, with a lone rider on the lead beast, looking for all the world like some nomad who had ridden out of another desert entirely. It could not be, Aspley thought. But it was.

* * *

The Lone Rider

A shot rang out, splitting the air apart. Aspley heard the whiz of the bullet as it passed, saw a little puff of dust and debris kick up into the air where it cut a neat slash across the epaulette of Major Powell’s khaki jacket. He imagined how many yards further the bullet would travel before losing its

momentum and dropping to the earth. Powell waved his hand in the air, bringing the party to a halt, and instructed his men to hold their fire. Then he spurred his horse and charged towards the lone nomad at a fast gallop.

He was either mad or had the luck of the gods on his side, Aspley thought, pulling his pistol from his holster and giving chase. No further shots were fired and Powell reared his horse up, perhaps fifty feet from where the camel train and its mysterious rider stood their ground.

Powell slipped from his saddle. He pulled his shirt from his body quickly to reveal a scarred and muscular torso beneath. Taking his ghurka from its sheath, he turned to the nomad and waved it in the air. The challenge was issued, and the grin on Powell's face told Aspley that he relished the moment. Single-combat. A military man with a skirmish before him. Aspley could understand the sense of being that it gave Powell, and Powell being Powell would be convinced that he could not lose.

The nomad tapped his camel gently on the shoulder. The beast eased itself to its knees to allow its rider to dismount. The stranger pulled the desert scarf from his head to reveal a face tanned and freshly shaven and a pair of deep grey eyes. His features marked him as a racial brother of Powell's. Either that or a Pakthun warrior, Aspley thought. The nomad removed his

loose white shirt. His torso was as lean and muscular as Powell's, yet without a single blemish. He stood there for a moment, studying Powell; then, seeming to make a decision, he went to his camel and drew a long-bladed knife from his saddle bag. It was a *chora*, Aspley knew. A Pakthun weapon, almost two foot of deadly steel.

The two men approached each other carefully. Powell moved to the left and so did his opponent, and around they went slowly, steadily, their eyes flickering and intense, the muscles in their bodies taut. Powell kept hefting his knife from right to left hand and back again as he moved. His opponent held a steady grip, the tip of his *chora* moving as he moved to be always pointed at Powell's throat.

Aspley had his gun at the ready. In terms of an analytical assessment of the situation, the wisest and most logical path he knew was to shoot this lone rider while the man's mind was otherwise engaged. Certainly, it was a not a noble course of action, but a noble course of action was not of his concern at the moment. However, the smile that Powell wore on his face told Aspley that the major was enjoying himself and that if he were to fire his gun and spoil the major's fun, then he would live to rue that decision. Of course, he could just shoot Powell instead and be done with it. But the nomad was an unknown. Perhaps the best outcome, Aspley mused, would be for Powell

to be killed and the nomad immediately shot afterwards. Two birds with one stone, and the expedition could retrace its steps as Aspley had fully intended when he drew his line in the sand.

Powell and his opponent sprang at the same time. Their knives clashed in the air, flashed in the sun. Blow deflected blow. It was clear to Aspley that both men were skilled in close-fought combat. They turned into their landings, so that when their feet touched the ground they faced each other once more. Powell sprang again, swinging his ghurka in a big long-arm slash. The nomad hunched his back and sucked in his stomach. Powell's knife came within a quarter-inch of cutting his flesh. But as Powell's long wild stroke followed through, the nomad punched the hilt of his knife down upon Powell's wrist. A shudder shot up Powell's arm. His fingers spasmed. The ghurka fell from his grasp. Then, too fast for even Aspley to say how it happened, the point of the nomad's *chora* was pressing into the soft flesh beneath Powell's chin.

Aspley sweated with his finger on the trigger of his revolver. Powell swallowed, then said, "Good lord, Anderson, am I never to best you? What in all heaven's name are you doing here?"

"The same as you I presume. Simply following Her Majesty's orders."

The man called Anderson removed his knife from Powell's throat, slapped him upon the back, and laughed heartily. He motioned to the camels and said, "Thought you could do with some supplies."

Aspley returned his gun to its holster, his head swimming. He could make no sense of anything anymore, he decided.

"Captain Aspley," Powell said, turning to him. "I'd like you to meet Akaela. Allow me to introduce Major Patrick Anderson."

Aspley turned to jelly as he slid from his horse. His legs were shaky beneath him, but he tried to hide it as he took a few careful steps forward. Akaela! The Lone Wolf! The legend himself! He held out his hand, mumbled something. What, he was never really sure of, but he recalled it as, "It is a great honour to meet you." But it might have been, "Dear god, I nearly shot you."

Anderson took his hand in a gentle grip and touched him on the shoulder. "Well met, Captain Aspley. Your gun was upon me all the time. I wondered if you would shoot, whether Powell had finally decided to best me by foul means not fair. I'm glad that was not the case. I congratulate you, Captain, on having the nerve to stay your gun until you had enough information to act upon."

“I...” Aspley said, lost for words, but Powell mercifully intervened.

“Captain Aspley, please bring Sergeant McKenzie and his men up.”

* * *

The Journal of Captain Richard Aspley

11th July

Having brought up the men as instructed, I found Powell and the Lone Wolf deep in conversation. Following introductions all round, an exchange was made. The horses and the oxen were placed in Major Anderson’s charge. The camels and the supplies came to us. McKenzie and his men re-configured the dray and one of the camels was harnessed to it, and all of us in the next hour or so were taught to ride our own camel. It was not as easy as some may have imagined, nor as difficult as I myself thought. Whatever tension had existed seemed to be broken in that moment, as we all struggled to mount the beasts and bend their stubborn natures to our wills.

“Ships of the desert,” Anderson said to us. “I am sure you will hear that expression tossed about often in the future, but remember you heard it from me first.”

He winked at me then continued: “They hold water well, and these ones are well-wetted.” Then, having said this, he

beckoned me to follow him as he led his lone camel, with our raggedy horses and oxen tethered behind, out into the desert.

“Major Powell speaks highly of you, Captain Aspley. You are a credit to the Black Flag,” he said as we walked.

His words surprised me. I felt that I had done nothing but foolishly challenge Powell and been proven wrong. I did not know what to say.

“With hindsight, perhaps you were wrong on this occasion,” he said, as if reading my thoughts, “but you did not know you were wrong and used all the intelligence that was at your command to make the decision that you did. It was your role to do that. There will come a time when Powell needs you more than he needs you now. You must make yourself present for him when that time comes. Will you promise me this?”

I found it hard to believe that Powell would ever really need anyone, but this was Akaela to whom I spoke, and I assured him that I would be present for Powell when he needed me.

Akaela looked at me with his deep grey eyes, and I knew then why he was called The Lone Wolf. They were full of sadness, yet full of joy as well. He said to me, “Give me your spectacles. Why do you wear them?”

I hesitated for a moment. “I need them to see,” I said. But I took them off all the same and handed them to him. The bright harsh day before me turned into a murky blur of red and blue.

Akaela took my spectacles, then spoke like a doctor to me. “Close your eyes for a moment. I will touch them only briefly. There will be no pain, just a slight heat, perhaps a little discomfort.”

He placed his fingers on my eyes. I felt a firm pressure. A gentle warmth flowed from his fingertips. “Open your eyes,” he said.

I opened my eyes to see him grinding my spectacles beneath his boot, saw it clearly, saw it sharper than I’d seen anything in many, many years. I somehow managed to mutter my thanks, then watched with these new bright and shiny eyes as he gave me the salute, mounted his camel, and rode into the desert.

When I returned to camp, Powell said to me, “He’s a remarkable man, isn’t he?”

It was the very first time I’d seen humility in Powell’s eyes. Lost for words, I merely nodded. Then Powell looked at me strangely. “You appear to have lost your spectacles, Captain.”

“Not lost,” I said, “I gave them to Akaela.”

Powell nodded his head, and I knew from the look in his eye he understood. “He saved my life once,” he said. “Remind me to tell you about it some time.”

Here I have stated the facts of the matter as I witnessed them. My journal should end here for this day. I am conscious, however, that I have explained nothing about what happened; merely described it. I think that is the way it must be. There is no explanation that I can give. None of this can be true. I would have believed none of it, unless it had happened to me, and it would have been just another drunken myth the Black Flag boys talk about when they find themselves together in one of the far-flung watering holes of Her Majesty’s Empire. But I can see, oh yes, I can see, through natural eyes once more! The Lone Wolf is a remarkable man.

17th July

This afternoon we reached the ragged line of hills which had been spied yesterday and made our slow climb to the top. The camels had to be led carefully; they seem to have a natural fear of heights and displayed all the stubbornness of their brutish nature. As we approached the top-most portion of the ridge, spindly trees began to appear, then taller bolder trees with the undergrowth growing thicker, then once at the summit a line of magnificent white gums demarcating some *de facto* border of nature.

As it was before, so it is again. Behind us lay a red, hot desert stretching its great rusty flatness to the far horizon. Before us lay a green and plentiful land, almost a savannah of wild grass, bordered by high hills stretching off to east and west. And beyond those grasslands, through the telescope, perhaps a day and half's journey away, a shimmering line of deep blue rose to meet the pale blue of the sky.

It was a mirage. I almost managed to convince myself that it was, but I knew deep down that Powell was about to claim his prize.

* * *

Intermission: “Wind Sonnet” by Christopher Thackery Powell

Come feel the wind, my dear fellow
Doth fiery tempest scorch your brow?
That remembers yet a breeze more mellow
A force of nature; Aye, it blows its damnedest now!
But rest assured, the wind is not our foe
Indeed, methinks, it is the best of friends
Think ‘what if?’ the wind, it failed to blow
The lives we live, would reach their bitter ends!
Now, on that frosty day when you were born
The angels, their heavenly wisdom not remiss,
Blew your first sweet breath that very morn

Such fresh and sacred wind; Oh, fragrant, fragrant bliss!
The wind thus now, it knows your name
Calls to you, 'Come, dear fellow, let's play the Game!'

* * *

Part II: The Burden of the Sea

Major Christopher Powell stood on a red sandy beach, gazing out upon a vast blue sea. His Adams was out of its holster, and he took occasional pot-shots at a flock of seagulls that swirled above the shore.

A short distance away lay the latest addition to the expedition: a small boat, barely large enough for two men and a week's worth of provisions. McKenzie and the men had spent the last four days building it, crafting its beams from the forest of gums that covered the plains beyond the shore. Given the circumstances, it was roughly hewn, but Powell had deemed it seaworthy enough. Aspley believed that the truth of that remained to be tested. Next to the boat were the mast and sails that had been faithfully carried in the bottom of the dray these past four weeks.

Captain Aspley had his eye glued to the telescope. It was trained on a distant speck across the waters. He rubbed his eyes. "It appears to be a small island with a building upon it. Of course, it cannot be. It is merely some rock that is naturally fashioned so."

“So it cannot be a building,” Powell said, “because that would be an aberration, would it not? The colony we have left behind is the standard by which we measure our reality in this dominion? I challenge you, Captain Aspley, to think again and reorientate your thoughts. Think of the length and breadth of Her Majesty’s dominions. Think of the wonders that we have found in all the so-called heathen lands. Should this one be any different? Some ancient stronghold perhaps, long-forgotten and stored with treasure? Who knows what wonders await us.”

Yes, there were wonders, Aspley thought, as his hand moved to adjust the spectacles that were no longer there, but he could only continue to play his part in this game as best he knew how: a straight bat down the wicket.

“It would seem unlikely, sir,” he said. “We have seen no evidence of an ancient civilisation so far. All available indications suggest that this land has lain in isolation for a very long time, the growth of all the great civilisations passing it completely by. Still it is worth exploring, sir; we can only increase our knowledge by doing so.”

“Oh, I’m so glad you agree, Captain,” Powell said. Turning quickly and taking aim, he fired a single shot from the Adams and reduced a circling seagull to a puff of feathers. “I have in mind to discover a treasure before I leave this place. So I prefer to remain optimistic. Besides, does it not strike you as strange

that this sea is ringed by a desert that should not be crossed? And the sea itself rings yonder edifice? There is a treasure out there, Aspley, that does not wish to be found. But we shall find it. Sergeant McKenzie and his men shall explore the coastline while you and I take a little voyage.

“Call the sergeant up, please, and arrange for the boat to be loaded.”

* * *

The Journal of Captain Richard Aspley

21st July

There was disappointment in McKenzie’s eyes as he received his orders. He would have gladly traded places with myself, I’m certain. I confess I felt some reluctance at that moment. McKenzie had supported me, as he had supported Powell, and I wondered what Powell and I would do with each other without McKenzie around. But I remembered the Lone Wolf’s words and I would be true to them, be present for Powell when he needed me.

Before McKenzie and the men departed, Powell produced a bag of gold nuggets and spilled them on the beach. “It is never a successful mission unless you return with some loot, is it now? For you and the men, Sergeant. Explore the coastline for a week and then return to this point. Should we not be back, cross the sands once more and return to the Colony. You’ll be

successful gold-diggers returning from the fields. Make sure you enjoy yourselves. Women and drink, and plenty of it. It's all yours to spend, as you wish."

The gold glittered so prettily on those red sands. Thousands of pounds worth, I am sure. It was returned to its bag quickly.

Sergeant McKenzie saluted and he and his men departed. A strange moment passed as I watched them ride off. I thought it was a foolish thing Powell had done. It was beyond doubt that McKenzie could be trusted to do his job. Benson and O'Neill though, the look in their eyes; they knew what the gold was worth and they had never known such money in their life.

Then, before I had time to think anymore, Powell said, "They deserve a reward. They have it now, and a goal in sight. McKenzie would not have picked them unless he could trust them. And if they cannot be trusted, then he falls on his own sword. Besides, he'll have a word with them. Let them know this is Black Flag business, and if they can keep their mouths closed when they need to they might have a certain future.

"Now, Aspley are you with me, dear chap?"

I assured him that I was, but I wondered what treasure he hoped to find that was beyond the gold already in his possession.

"Ever sailed before, Aspley?" Powell asked.

I confessed I had not.

“Take rudder then,” he said, “I suspect steering will come naturally to you.”

* * *

The Future is Unwritten

The journey started pleasantly enough. With the wind in their hair and smell of sea salt in their nostrils, there was once more the feeling of a grand adventure commenced. Their small craft glided over a flat and calm sea. Powell worked the sails skilfully to capture the angle of the wind to their advantage, and with such little swell in the waves, Aspley found the steering of the craft as easy as Powell had suggested. Overhead, fluffy white clouds stretched themselves into fantastic shapes, and the sun, which had scorched them in the desert, seemed to have lost some of the fierceness of its heat.

Aspley had estimated it would take them perhaps a full day's sailing to reach the island, provided the wind did not drop and leave them wallowing in the doldrums. But by midday, it was clear that a storm was coming in. The clouds had massed together and grown steadily darker as the day had worn on. At the same time, their destination appeared no closer than it had upon the beach. It was an optical illusion, Aspley decided, perhaps to do with leaving the land behind and all points of reference now being from the level of the sea, in a

similar way that the moon always looked much larger when it was closer to the horizon.

Soon the wind began to blow more strongly, and Aspley found himself battling with the rudder as the swell rose. “Perhaps it would be wise to lower the sails until the storm has blown over,” he said, but found his words whipped away by the wind. A lightening strike ripped the sky apart. The air shook with the quick thunder that followed. Then the rain plummeted down in great greasy drops that hit the boat and the two of them with the force of stones.

The swell surged, lifting the boat high into the air, ten feet at least, and Aspley felt his stomach turn with the sudden ascent. “Hold fast, hold fast!” Powell cried. For a moment they teetered on the peak of the wave, then they were down the other side, sliding into the deep trough below. Like some great green beast the sea twisted and churned around them. Aspley gripped the rudder tightly. Powell clung to the mast. The boat rolled in the swirl, first one way, then another. The thought crossed Aspley’s mind that everything was relative in life and perhaps a slow death in the desert beneath the midday sun was preferable to sudden drawing of a lungful of seawater. It was as he thought this that he heard the singing again. It was the same song that he’d heard when he stood his ground upon the line.

But now Powell heard it too. “You hear that, Aspley,” he cried. “You hear that, don’t you? Who is it that sings to us so sweetly? Sings songs that can be heard above this tempest and challenges us with this storm?”

Aspley did not answer. He saw the monstrous wave that rose behind Powell, Powell who stood there with that wild look in his eye, his pupils gleaming with a golden fire. “Dear god,” Aspley cried as the sea rose beneath them and they were lifted towards the heavens. How high, Aspley wondered, how high, then found himself looking at the bottom of the wave so very far below. The boat slipped from the crest, fell through the air and hit with such a mighty crash that its timbers splintered with the impact. The seawater rushed over them, swirling and sucking at them, pulling them under.

Aspley opened his eyes beneath the water. Powell was next to him, sinking fast, the weight of his Adams dragging him down. His eyes were closed, his body limp. Aspley could see the light of the surface above. He kicked towards it, struggling against the suck of the sea, the overwhelming claustrophobic weight of the water. He shut his eyes, wishing in that moment, of all things, to be sitting at his desk, bathed in the deep humidity of Kalicut as a punkah whooshed overhead, playing with those oh-so-precious paper secrets of the Empire. Yet it all meant nothing, nothing at all, and it wasn’t so much the secrets

that he wished for but his wooden chair and desk itself, because it was there he had felt most safe and in complete control of his life. His chest tightened, his lungs swelled with pain. He wanted one more breath, just one more breath was all he asked, and after that perhaps another, but the air above was still so far away...just one more breath...

* * *

Apsley spluttered as the air plunged into lungs. He coughed violently, once, twice, expelling seawater in a great gurgling eruption. Then he breathed slowly, steadily, breathed in clean fragrant air. He was surprised to find himself standing steady on his feet, so surprised that he swayed and almost stumbled. His clothes were wet, soaked right through. A pool of seawater gathered at his feet. He could taste the brine in his mouth. Before him there was a set of white marble steps that lead to a raised platform. To his left and right, white marble walls, cut through with glittering gemstones, curved around him.

He turned slowly, expecting that behind him he would find an entrance, a doorway, his mind searching for explanations. He had been washed ashore on the island, and in a daze, a delirium, had stumbled from the beach and into this building. But there was no entrance behind him. The curved wall continued, smooth and unbroken. His eyes followed it upwards

where it rose to perhaps forty or fifty feet above, there to form a domed ceiling, translucent and glowing from the force of the sun that shone through.

A sudden panic rose to Aspley's throat. He had no idea where he was or how he had come to be there. No explanations to soothe the rushing of his frantic mind. But then his intellect cut in. Reason, lovely, lovely reason, told him, in all its wisdom, that wherever he was it was preferable to where he had been, preferable, dear god, yes, to the horror of sucking seawater into his lungs.

Testing his body, Aspley placed his foot on the first step. Then he raised himself onto the second, then the third, counted ten steps to the top of the platform, pleased that his body was obeying and he had not drowned.

At the top of the steps he gazed across a beautiful blue pool. Among purple lotus flowers, the body of a naked woman floated. Her skin was creamy white, save for the rosy pink of her nipples. Long black hair fanned out in a snaky halo around her head. Her chest rose and fell in a deep sleepy rhythm. She looked so calm, so peaceful, as if she was forever cocooned within sweet and pleasant dreams.

Aspley sat down at the edge of the pool, trailed his fingers in the cool water. *Who are you? What are you doing here?* He whispered these questions to himself as he watched her. She

was so beautiful, so serene...then he heard the song, the song that he had heard on the boat, the song that he had heard as he stood on his line in the desert. And he knew. This was the woman he had met in the library, who had shown him the book and told him that the future is always unwritten.

Aspley was filled with a sudden desire to plunge into the pool, to swim to her. The fancy crossed his mind that he was somehow living in a fairytale and that he could awaken her with a kiss. He even had a theory in his head that he wanted to discuss with her. The future was unwritten, how right she was. But, what if you had all the information you needed about everything that was happening, and you knew from past events that the patterns of history and of human lives unfold in certain ways, might it not be possible then to predict the future. If everything of the past and the present was known, then surely what was to be the future would follow naturally.

Aspley cupped his hand in the water to raise it to his lips.

A hand shot up, seizing his wrist.

Aspley looked down at the long slender fingers that grasped him so tightly. He had never felt such strength before. A head of black hair burst through the surface of the water. An immaculate white face followed, and he found himself gazing into eyes that were the colour of the sea. His first thought was a

silly one. *A kiss it seems is not required.* And he knew it but could not stop himself from thinking it.

“The thought itself was enough,” she said.

Aspley was lost for words. He reached out to touch her face, felt his fingers touch her skin. *So soft, so beautiful.*

“Colonel Richard Aspley,” she said, “why do you disturb my dreams? Besides I have not given you permission to drink.”

“I’m a captain,” Aspley said. “Not a colonel.”

“You are a colonel now. I have decided it. I ask you again: why do you wish to disturb my dreams?”

“I belong to the Black Flag. Only the queen can grant me a promotion,” Aspley said.

“And she has. Look in your pocket.”

Aspley looked down at his clothes. They were dry now.

“Aspley!”

Powell’s voice.

The grip on his hand released. Aspley saw her floating on the pond, once more asleep. Once more he was dreaming, he thought. In the desert and in the sea. It was all dreams. There was nothing that he understood as the real world anymore.

“Aspley!”

Aspley turned. Powell stood against a white wall. Water was pouring from his clothes, as if he had just been plucked out of the sea. His face was swollen plump and as white as a sheet.

Powell tried to say something more, but a great gush of seawater shot from his mouth, stealing his words. He fell to his knees, slumped forward. His head cracked against the cold marble floor.

Aspley rushed to him. Powell's eyes opened briefly, but there seemed no life behind them. His lips quivered. Bubbles frothed in his mouth. He had breathed too soon, Aspley thought, rolling Powell over and pushing his weight down upon his back. More seawater flowed from Powell's mouth. Once, twice, three times, Aspley squeezed the green water out of him.

Then there was nothing more to do. Powell lay empty and still. His chest did not rise. He did not breathe. Aspley turned him over and stared at the dull death upon his bloated face.

*The angels, their heavenly wisdom not remiss
Blew your first sweet breath that very morn*

The words of Powell's poem floated into his mind. *The angels blew your breath.* Aspley took a great breath and filled his lungs until they were near bursting. He squeezed Powell's cheeks to force his mouth open, then placed his lips over Powell's. Oh, sweet kiss, he imagined Powell saying, oh divine and mysterious wind. Aspley exhaled with all the strength in his body, watched as Powell's chest rose and fell. He waited. It did not rise again. Aspley took another breath and breathed it

into Powell. Powell's chest rose, then fell, but still he did not breathe.

“Live, damn you, live!” Aspley cried and thumped Powell upon the chest in his frustration. “I will kill you if you do not wake up. I will kill you and no one shall blame me because you are surely dead anyway.”

Aspley laughed madly at the thought of it. Killing a dead man! The sound of his laughter bounced and echoed off the walls of the chamber. It spun around and around until it had turned to a hum that rose to the top of the dome with a faint buzz like a distant swarm of bees.

Aspley thumped him once more. “Damn you!” he cried. Powell's chest rose. Aspley breathed deeply and placed his lips over Powell's once more. *I give you my breath. I will you to live.*

Powell's eyes opened. His lips moved. His voice came out in a croak. “I am a drowned man.”

“Not here,” Aspley said, “not here. No one drowns here.”

Then the song commenced once more. Words that Aspley didn't understand seemed to be telling him the story of his life. He turned his gaze back towards the steps, up towards the pool. “Wait,” he said to Powell, “I'll find some fresh water.”

Aspley turned in the grip of the song. *Nothing here is possible*, he told himself as he climbed the steps. *Powell and I*

are both drowned men. There is no reason for us to live, yet we do. Dreams, it is all dreams....

* * *

Colonel Aspley found himself sitting in a pleasant tearoom somewhere in one of Her Majesty's colonies. The table before him was immaculate with its white linen, china plates, and silver service. A glass of brandy glowed in its crystal goblet close by his hand.

He thought for a moment that he had no idea what he was doing there, that perhaps in his dotage he was finally losing his mind; then the whole reason for it entered his head like a thrust from above. He was there to meet a young lady that he had had some fruitful and intellectual correspondence with. At his age, it was a frivolity on his part. He knew that, but yet the correspondence had revealed that this young lady knew much about history, understood so much about the ins and outs of it and its relentless inexorable flow towards infinity.

Infinity? Such a meaningless word, Aspley thought. Nothingness would be more appropriate. For surely everybody was to die without ever knowing if it had all been worth the effort. Nothingness and meaninglessness. All difficult words, but this young lady seemed to understand them better than anyone he had ever communicated with before, perhaps better

than he understood it all himself. Clearly, Lady Clio Anderson was intelligent and mature beyond her years.

Then he saw her walking across the room, in silken grey, a smart little hat on her head and a fashionable veil covering her face, but even at a distance the veil could not hide the deep penetrating look from her dark green eyes. And a beauty to match, Aspley thought.

“So we meet again,” she said as she sat down. She offered her hand to Aspley. He took her cool white fingers and kissed them. Had they met before, Aspley wondered. He did not know, yet the look in her eyes was deeply familiar.

“A pleasure,” Aspley said.

“Colonel Aspley, I have a great favour to ask,” she said and winked at him.

That wink surprised Aspley. He had no idea what it meant, and he suddenly felt awkward sitting there, an old man with a beautiful young woman. “I am at your service,” he said.

“You must not let Major Powell kill me,” Lady Clio said. “You will do yourself and the world a great injustice. If I die, your Queen shall lose her Empire. Is that what you want? Not that I much care about your Queen or her Empire, but she is a means to an end at the moment, and I would prefer to have her alive and dominant than not. At least she brings some order to the world.”

Aspley's hand shook as he reached for the brandy. What nonsense was this; yet there was something in the back of his mind that told him that it was not nonsense at all. "Major Powell died many years ago."

He looked into Lady Clio's eyes, open so wide now that, for a moment, dear old Aspley felt that he had fallen through her pupils and into her soul. His head began to swim...

* * *

The Journal of Captain Richard Aspley...

...was enclosed within a waterproof tin, lying at the bottom of the sea. There to be encrusted by molluscs and crustaceans, upon which fish would nibble from time to time, and revealing nothing to anyone anymore.

* * *

Another Line in the Sand

Sergeant McKenzie did not move, or at least not fast enough, for Powell in quick strides across the sand was past Aspley and by McKenzie's horse. He seized the reins and levelled his revolver at the sergeant's head.

"Should I blast the sergeant's brains away to Kingdom Come? You know me, Aspley. I will do it. Sergeant McKenzie, you have your orders. Instruct your men to cross Captain Aspley's line."

Sergeant McKenzie did not flinch, nor choose to look at Powell. This was clearly not the first time he had had a gun pointed at him. He stared dead ahead, locking his eyes on the horizon.

Bensen and O'Neill, high on the dray, grabbed their rifles and levelled them at Powell, waiting to see what the sergeant would do. Aspley sensed it, knew in that moment that he had only to give the command and Bensen would fire. O'Neill perhaps not. But he could issue the order and it would be over, done with, and no one would blame him for saving Sergeant MacKenzie's life and returning the men to safety. It had been witnessed by all that Powell was beyond all reasoning.

Aspley wavered for one second, but not two. "Shoot him," he commanded. Bensen fired, then O'Neill too.

Two shots thumped into Powell's chest. Two red fountains sprayed, prettily in the harsh sunlight.

Powell turned slowly to look at Aspley. His arm dropped; his Adams fell from his fingers, thudding onto the red sand. A trickle of blood emerged from between his lips and ran down his chin as he spoke. "You think the Game is over, Captain Aspley? You are more fool than I thought. This Game, it never ends."

* * *

“That is how it happened,” Colonel Aspley said, remembering how he had buried Powell and turned the expedition back. They had retreated to the green hills and navigated their way down the Cremorne in a boat of their own making, with the sails and mast that had been stored away in the bottom of the dray.

He remembered too that horrible Black Flag Commission in Kalicut where he had been required to justify in absolute minute detail the decision he had made. It had not been a murder trial, but it had felt like it. And afterwards, all those years of guilt, without him ever really knowing if he had made the right decision.

“That is the way it might have happened,” Lady Clio said. “The way I wished for it, but my powers wane. Instead, I did what I could and plucked you from the sea. I called for you first, but you didn’t listen. Too busy with your work, too busy with your desk. Powell answered the call and brought you too. How fortunate that was for both of us. You must kill him now before he kills me. I’m offering you the future.”

Ah, yes. There had been the boat that crossed the inland sea. He had seen Powell hanging limp and dead beside him, sinking in the water, the weight of his silly gun pulling him down. “The future is unwritten,” he said, trying to make sense

of his memories. “You told me that yourself in one of your letters. No, it was in the library, wasn’t it?”

“I am giving you the chance to write it,” Lady Clio said. “Powell will not use the full twelve chambers against me. He will not risk his own life. He is foolhardy, but he will not face certain death. Eleven though will surely kill me, as it is meant to do.”

The God-Killer, Aspley thought, that was what the Black Flags boys had called the Adams revolver when deep in their cups. He had believed it idle talk; pure braggadocio.

Lady Clio leant across the table. “You saved Powell once... I gave you that choice and you carried out your duty. Now that you know more, you have another choice before you.”

“You could have left us in the sea,” Aspley said. “Powell was a drowned man.”

Lady Clio raised the veil from her face.

A soft sigh escaped Aspley’s lips. *Such radiant beauty. I saw you in a pool. Floating there, dreaming there. I interrupted your dreams and now....*

She winked at him once more. “Leave you in the sea? Now where would have been the sport in that?”

Suddenly, there was a commotion at the end of the room. Aspley looked up to see Powell burst through the tearoom doors, pushing the waiters aside as he entered.

“Ah, here is Major Powell now. You’ll excuse me for a moment,” Lady Clio said. “You and he have much to discuss, I’m sure.”

Aspley caught a rustle of grey silk in the corner of his eye as the Lady departed and thought for a moment that he heard the splashing of water as if someone had dived into a pool.

Now Aspley found himself lost between past and present as if time itself was swirling around him. *The dead man walks. It is but a ghost come to torment me in my senility*, but yet he remembered Powell’s dying words. “The Game, it never ends.”

Powell strode across the room, cutting a very fine figure indeed for a dead man. The brass buttons of his scarlet jacket shone brilliantly beneath the light of the tearoom’s chandeliers.

Colonel Aspley rose slowly, pushing his spectacles up his nose as he did so. Powell flipped a finger across the length of his elegant black moustache. He pulled a chair out and swung himself into it.

“My God, Aspley, what have you let her do to you? You look like you’ve aged fifty years. First she tries to drown us, now this?” Powell looked across the table. “Is that brandy you’re drinking? Give it here.”

Aspley sat down, pushed the glass across the stiff tablecloth. Powell drank the brandy down in one go.

“You’re dead,” Aspley said. “I saw Bensen and O’Neill shoot you in the desert. I saw you sinking in the sea.”

“Oh, yes, she’s given you two lives to play with, has she? Well, I didn’t get shot in the desert, and we did cross your line. It was a nice move actually, Aspley, a very clever move on your part. I suspect that if you hadn’t done what you did, then Akaela would have never turned up when we needed him. It really put the pressure on, and he only turns up when there’s a crisis. So good work, Captain. It got us the camels and the extra supplies and got us to where we are now.”

Powell reached across the table and tore the spectacles from Aspley’s face. “You don’t need these,” he said. “There were three times when the power was in your hands to end my life. Bensen would have killed me if you’d given the command. You did not. And then when I fought with Akaela, you had your gun on him and me. It would have been an easy decision to make. You did not shoot. And then when I was plucked out of the sea, you breathed life back into me. So I think, despite the lady’s wishes, you will not end it now.”

Powell leaned across the table and kissed Aspley on the cheek. “Remember, you were my chosen one.”

And with that kiss, Aspley found the years of guilt rising from his shoulders. *Powell was still alive!* He felt a great stiffness leaving his muscles, and he found himself feeling

invigorated, as if the energy of his youth had returned to him. He had not killed the major. And he could see, by god, he could see, just as Akaela had told him. He touched his face, traced fingertips across smooth skin.

Restored, Aspley looked up. Major Powell still stared at him with a hungry look in his eye. “She dreams the world, Aspley. Makes poodle-fakers of us all. It is time that we controlled our own destiny.”

* * *

Coda: In the Eye of the Future

Aspley turned to see Powell standing at the top of the steps to the pool. His skin was puffy and white. His legs shook beneath him. He looked like the drowned man he was, Aspley thought, but in his hand was the God-Killer.

“Major Powell, please put your gun aside,” Aspley said.

“She’s a goddess, Aspley. One of the last of the ancient empires. Hidden away in places they believed Her Majesty’s Empire would never reach. It is the quest we are upon.”

“She is beautiful,” Aspley said. “You can mean her no harm. She has done nothing to you. I saved your life. You told me this just now.”

“She tried to drown me, Aspley. She dreams the world in defiance of the Empire. There is only one queen now, the one

that duty calls you to. Stand aside, Aspley. Let the future begin.”

Aspley looked down at the sleeping woman. She did not stir. Was she a goddess? Once, they were drowned men. Once, he had lived another life, grown old. Another wonder? So be it. *I understood none of it before, so I must try to understand now.* “She is a sleeping beauty. Perhaps, I shall kiss her before she dies.”

It was subterfuge on his part. Had he not kissed her before, at least in his mind’s eye, and that had been enough, but Powell did not know it.

Powell laughed. His face looked hideous, but he was enjoying the game of it. “Oh, go on, kiss her then, Aspley. Please do. You are such a splendid fool. Go and kiss your beauty. By all means make love to her if she will have it.”

Aspley glanced at Powell, then slipped over the edge into the pool. He felt his skin crackle as he hit the water, as though he had broken through some barrier, and lightening danced all around him. He swam to her, took her head in his hands. “Show me the future as you promised,” he said. He kissed her lips and felt her hand rise up to seize him by the hair. She pulled him down, into the waters of the pool with her, and her words sounded in his mind. *Breathe, breathe the water. I*

promise you shall not drown. As Aspley went under, he heard Powell's laughter echoing above.

Breathe, breathe. Her words. She had promised him. He trusted her. He felt that he might love her forever. He opened his mouth with the full screaming force of his lungs. He inhaled the water, felt it surge into him, and knew she had given him the book she had promised. He saw his whole life in that moment and saw no end to it. The Empire that he knew had reached its peak. It would crumble and fall, in slow decline. Minor empires would rise up and fall again; then another Empire, the grandest that had ever been would come and he would be part of it. He could walk among the stars, if he wished. The same stars he had seen in the desert sky. It all belonged to him now if he but chose to kill Powell.

Aspley pulled himself out of the pool. Dripping wet, he stood there.

"Come away from her, Aspley," Powell said. "I granted you your silly wish, to kiss the sleeping beauty before she dies. Now the time for the killing has come."

"You'll need eleven chambers to kill her, fired simultaneously. Do you trust it to deliver your life at eleven? Like Adams trusted twelve?"

“You should be telling me that she knows so much, that I should not kill her, that the Queen needs her. That is what I expected of you.”

“Or perhaps you should use the full twelve chambers, just to be sure,” Aspley said. “As Adams was.”

“Aspley, you are bewitched,” Powell said. “A traitor to Queen and country.”

“I have tasted the future,” Aspley said. “She has granted me this. Come with me too.”

“Out of my way Aspley, get out of my way, damn you!” Powell cried. He fired at Aspley. One shot from the Adams. The bullet flew straight and hard, stopped suddenly, and fell into Aspley’s open hand.

“Give me your gun, Major,” Aspley said. “Why do you need it?”

“It is my duty, the Black Flag’s most precious duty,” Powell said, but his voice was weak and thin now. “I...”

Aspley tossed the bullet aside. “Give me the God-Killer.”

“...have seen a bullet stopped that way before. Major Anderson, Akaela...he saved my life...”

“A remarkable man,” Aspley said, easing the God-Killer from Powell’s hand.

“The man I always wished to be,” Powell said.

Aspley looked up at the dome of the opalescent ceiling, saw the great big eye shining there and all the stars beyond it. “I promised Akaela I would be present for you, Major Powell, when you needed me. Please look up, Major, look up, and see that we have won the prize.”

Powell looked up at that terrifying eye. His body began to shake, and Aspley knew that he too glimpsed the future, and now saw the past for what it was; a means to a much greater end. “We are all dead men walking,” Powell said, and fell to his knees.

Aspley let the God-Killer slip from his fingers. Its journey was over. “Come, breathe the water, Major,” he said. “There is much to do.”

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Geoffrey Maloney lives in Brisbane, Australia, with his wife and three daughters. He has had over one hundred short stories published in magazines and anthologies in the UK, USA, Australia, and Ireland. Tales from the Crypto-System, published by Prime Books in 2003, collects the best of his

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THE PROOF OF BRAVERY

by David Milstein

Archivist's Note: The following text was discovered by researchers from the American Society for the History of Mathematics during their survey of the 19th century archives of the Davidson College Historical Trust.

It may surprise those who remember that *l'Empereur* Bonaparte himself named me a Marshal of the Empire, Prince of Moscow, and *le brave des braves*, to hear that I have spent the three decades of my exile as a professor of mathematics. I teach at the embryonic college of Davidson, engendered by parochial ambition on the broad fertile plain of Carolina.

My students are all rude and indolent scions of plantation gentry whose interests lie entirely outside the field of mathematics and more reside in the mounted pursuits, both of game and of females, between which they hardly seem to differentiate. They judge me a dry old *tapette* and laugh at me behind my back as they whisper of their conquests. I envy them nothing in either equestrianism, I who ravished one hundred nymphs across Europe.

I foresee a war between the North and South of these not-so-United States; the hatred and contempt of the Yankee in my students intensifies year after year. Sometimes a perverse voice from within urges me to take up the marshal's baton here in the New World as well. Just so was my mentor General Moreau lured, and also pushed by his woman, back to the field of battle and then to the firing squad that awaited him. But I left my wife Aglaé long ago and have no woman to push me now. And I have already faced my firing squad, yes, and given them their order to fire.

I have always been able to see strengths and weakness at a glance and identify the various minimums and maximums of systems. That is my gift, as applicable in the classroom as on the field of battle. Like all things in this world given to us by *le mathématicien suprême*, war is but the graphical expression of an equation, comprehensible by those with the eyes to identify the variables and the brain to solve for their values.

As I see defeat looming for Carolina and the other southern states in a war to defend their property of Africans, so I smelled the putrefaction of the Bourbons and anticipated their demise. As I served the revolutionary committees, I sensed from afar the storm clouds that would unleash a rain of blood in the summer heat of *thermidor* to drown them.

The one man I met who was without flaw was Bonaparte. So we called him in those days, the humorless Corsican tough. I did not like him, but as I followed his career I could not help but love him. As he said, he always fought his battles with the same plan: hold the center, turn your enemy's flank, then charge and split them, whilst all the time intersecting them with parabolas of destruction from one's cannon.

Not only was he an unparalleled general. By enforcing the *système métrique*, he changed the way the world measured and weighed. As he gave order to the world of matter, so too did Bonaparte bring order to the rules of men, in the form of the *code civil*. Evenhandedness, clarity, fairness, justice, efficiency: so was his system of law.

Bonaparte was quite simply the greatest man in the world, the most modern and unafraid of grand scale. As I was the man who could factor, he was the master of integration. Together, we were two sides of a golden coin, and the world bowed down before us.

Time alone *l'Empereur* could not master. In the face of fierce resistance by the ignorant and superstitious, he gave up on the *calendrier républicain*. How much more beautiful and logical, to say "It is the month of wine, *vendémiaire*," than "It is the 7th month (when it is actually the 9th!), September." Or to say, "It is the month of heat, *thermidor*," instead of "It is the

month of Caesar Augustus.” But the day after 10 *nivôse*, on the tenth day of snow-month in the fourteenth year after the Revolution, we fell back into two-faced barbarity, the first day of the month of the god Janus in the Year of Our Lord 1806.

Perhaps that failure presaged the greater one to follow, when Bonaparte passed his zenith and began to descend. The triumphant system of the future was defeated by the forces of nature, by the catastrophe of our invasion of Russia in the Second Polish War and the subsequent mortification of our flesh. Though this happened in the days that the world remembers as the autumn of 1812, the prime of my life was in the Republic, and I will always order the days by the *calendrier républicain*, even in recounting its downfall.

I have seen Charles Minard’s graph of our campaign, and though there are those who esteem it as a triumphant scientific abstract and chronicle of the disintegration of *l’Armée*, simultaneously charting time, location, number of men, and temperature, I tell you that it is missing its most important component: the Z-axis of suffering. Said axis would be asymptotic, starting low but rising to the limit of all that is possible.

The point of inflection was the Battle of Moscow, or as the Russians call it, Borodino. Before that, it was a magnificent war. From the time we crossed the bridge over the Niemen at

Kovno with over four hundred thousand men, on the first day of *messidor*, the harvest season, our harvest seemed to be of victory. From Vilnius past Minsk, all the Russians could do was fall back. The waving rye-stalks of the fields and hawks circling a sky of purest blue live on in my memory as my high-water mark of that greatest feeling in life, anticipation.

My skills were at their height, and the Emperor was brilliance itself. By the time of heat in *thermidor*, when we bested them at Borissov, at Krasnoe, Smolensk, Dorogoboui, and Viazma, we knew the Russians were beaten. Beaten, I tell you, though they refused a decisive battle.

At last, in that glorious but cursed *fructidor* we bit into the poisoned apple of triumph. They gave us our battle at Borodino.

It was a strange battle. Some say we lost that day, but I was there and I tell you we beat them. We never lost a battle, but only the whole war. This time, though, they did stand and fight.

Five times I led my *cuirassiers* against them, and five times they repulsed us with heavy losses. Despite everything, as we marshaled for the sixth, I knew they would break. But in our moment of triumph, the finger of God touched the battlefield and struck me down, in the form of an incandescent piece of shrapnel that whirled out of a cloud of smoke and buried itself in my neck.

As the charge moved on without me, I saw my life pass before my eyes. They all say that, because it is true. What else can one do when faced with eternity but turn away to review for a last time one's memories of the past? But throughout my reveries of my childhood, wife, family, and glorious career, I became aware of two most incongruous figures wandering about the battleground.

One was Russian, a noble of some kind by his marvelous clothes. His top hat was a sparkling white to match the lace collar peeping from beneath his splendid dark jacket, decorated like the night sky with silver stars across his broad chest. As they drew closer, I noticed the contrast between the great strength of his enormous shoulders and the diffident sensitivity of the eyes behind his spectacles.

The other was swarthy and slight, and his billowing cloak was of good quality but much used. I took him for a merchant Gypsy or perhaps a Persian or a Turk. As he drew closer, though, I saw by his hat he was a Jew.

"Tsk, tsk, look at this, Pierre," said the Jew. "What a splendid uniform this one is wearing! He must be a general. Might you be able to identify him for me?"

Pierre straightened his spectacles with his index finger, stooped, and drew out a corner of my cape to better examine me. He had the eyes of an elephant, enormous and wise yet

placid. “By his unique leopard cloak, I recognize him from the stories of my friend Prince Bolkonsky. This is Marshal Ney, bravest of Bonaparte’s generals.”

I spit out a mouthful of blood and managed to gasp a few words. “Sir, are you a doctor? Save me, I beg you!”

The Jew gave a low whistle. “The bravest? My, that’s brave. Monsieur Ney, I’m sorry, but you are most surely doomed. Your artery has been severed; you will be dead in but a minute. I would respectfully suggest you commend yourself to your God.”

“But Monsieur Lazarus, surely—” The big Russian cut himself short at a glance from his companion, and I sensed an opportunity, which I grasped as a man will at any straw to arrest his fall into the abyss.

“Sir, we French of the Empire are not like the Russians and their hunting dogs the Cossacks who persecute the Jews. I would aid you were our circumstances reversed.” I spat blood, and started again. “Do you know what the Emperor has stated of the Jewish people in France?”

‘I will never accept any proposals that will obligate the Jewish people to leave France, because to me the Jews are the same as any other citizen in our country. It takes weakness to chase them out of the country, but it takes strength to assimilate them.’”

The Russian turned again to his companion and said “Surely this is most fair-spoken, Monsieur Lazarus? Must you not also be interested in his qualities as an exemplar of bravery?”

“You are a gentleman of quality, sir,” I said, “and I beg the name of those that rescue me so I might suitably reward them later.”

He frowned but tipped his white top hat and inclined his head. “I am Pyotr Kirilovich, Count Bezukhov. If it were in my power to help you, I would. But the kind of help you need can only be supplied by my companion, who I once again implore on your behalf.”

“Let me think about it, Pierre.” The Jew leaned over me and spoke more gently. “It is very fine that you and your Emperor don’t hate my people. You don’t know how rare that is. I would like to do you a favor, but I’m not sure which way that cuts upon this question. What I can do for you, you may not thank me for. Tell me one thing, Monsieur Ney: would you want to go on living if you lost what meant the most to you?”

I drew shuddering breath to reply. “The surgeon’s knife is no stranger to me, and I am ready for whatever sacrifice may preserve my life. Even if I am to be a cripple, I want to live to witness the coming triumph of France and the new day of reason and glory just dawning.”

I sensed it was too late, whatever medical genius the Jew might possess. I felt my soul leave my body. I floated up out of the cloud of smoke into the breezy sunlight above, so high I saw the plain and beyond it the forest, and beyond it rivers, mountains and the curvature of the Earth. It was wonderful. I was suffused in light, floating in radiance like a warm bath, dissolving into the light of the world that is to come.

Then I heard words but in a different voice, as in a dream, “So be it.” All went dark.

Then I woke up, and a medical officer was standing over me saying “Sir, you are blessedly lucky, I see no serious wound.”

There was no sign of the mysterious stranger and his burly companion, and no sign either of that shard of metal and the gaping hole it had carved in my neck. I lived, though I had died, and I wondered at the meaning of the stranger’s words.

I learned that the rest of the day had been a stand-off, after which the Russians retreated. So we declared victory. We advanced and conquered the great oriental capital of Moscow, city of onion-domes and Asiatic mystery, waiting for the official surrender and victor’s tribute which were never to come.

The *calendrier républicain* has twelve months, each with three *décades* of ten days. At the end of *fructidor* came in the last five days of the year the festival of *sans-culottides*, for the

sans-culottes, the common man without (for him unaffordable) trousers, whose violent passion for a change of circumstance had given us our revolution and Republic. Their five days were named for their prime qualities (as judged by the poets Chénier and Fabre d'Eglantine, who came up with the names of days): Virtue, Genius, Labor, Opinion and Rewards. A sixth complementary day, added in leap years, was named Revolution. I respectfully submit that the poets erred in omitting Intoxication from the list. I know not on which of those days our *sans-culottes* set fire to the city, but I know they did so.

Though in our histories we blame it on the fleeing Russians, I saw hundreds of our drunken troopers making bonfires of unoccupied houses for the sheer exuberant pleasure of watching them burn. The China-Town in particular I recall they burned most excitedly, because in a few of the structures were stored the fireworks for which the Chinaman is so justly famed. They set fire to whole streets of mandarin architecture five centuries old, in anticipation of the moment when the flames found these fireworks' storing places and the resulting brilliant rainbow explosions so reminiscent of the celebration of the storming of the Bastille.

By the *jour du raisin*, the day of the grape and the first of the New Year after the equinox, Moscow was half-consumed by

the conflagration. Too slowly in the smoky delirium of our pillaging occupation of *vendémiaire*, the month of the vine, did it dawn on us that the fire was a pox, destroying the available supplies as a fever consumes the flesh.

Even worse than fire was the hatred of the poor. When we defeated the Russian army, we drove away our best friends in a thousand kilometers. The Russian officers all worshipped us; in fact, they spoke better French than our *sans-culottes*. They would have taken our surrender, and fed and clothed us like Samaritans. But in our enthusiasm to crush them, we had delivered ourselves into the hands of hardened former serfs, and worse, the Cossacks summoned by the Tsar from the wilds of Siberia, who had barely heard of France and thought nothing of slaughtering us like beasts.

At dawn on the first day of *brumaire*, the month of mist and fog, the Emperor gave the general order for an evacuation of the city. Confused like a hibernating animal smoked from its den, *l'Armée* stepped unprepared once again out into the fog of war.

The line of carriages on the road west stretched for ten kilometers. I abandoned the very fine goods I had accumulated over *vendémiaire* and rode through the mud alongside the road. I saw some make the same calculus and live. Many others

stayed in line with their new treasures, cursing those in front of them, and were never seen again.

Though we named our seasons for the climate of our sweet mother France, Mother Russia has her own time and nature. What is time of mist in France is in Russia the time of starving, frostbitten death. At the midpoint of *brumaire*, on *jour du dindon*, the day of the turkey, great dark-gray clouds raced from the east and dumped half a meter of snow in an hour as we trudged, our numb feet tracking blood into the slush with every step.

Behind the storm came bitter cold. The men wearied, discipline waned, and alongside the road were cast aside the supplies we would so desperately need in days to come: extra shoes and spare soles, bags of biscuits and flour, even muskets and ammunition.

As the afternoon faded into night, at first only a few, then more and more, once-proud members of the great *Armée* lay down to die in the snow. Unless they were senior officers, or had very good friends, no one stopped to pick them up. Sometimes not even then.

We reached Smolensk after three days of such conditions, exhausted, miserable, and with few supplies. The horses died by the hundreds of hunger and cold. Without horses, we would not be an army but a band of lemmings leaping over a precipice

into the endless void that is the steppe. So we fed them with the thatched roofs of any huts we found and slept roofless and shivering inside.

The third night from Moscow Bonaparte summoned me to his quarters. His toilet was still immaculate, and he sipped from fine china a pot of tea.

“Ney, you are my favorite, and my champion, and I need you to do what no other man would dare to do. You must be our shield and cover our retreat. You may pick the best ten thousand men.”

I was a good Marshal of the Empire, and I said what such men say to their Emperor. “It will be done tonight.”

His smile was brittle as he acknowledged my submission to his will. I think we had both thought of each other as friends until that moment. Perhaps it had even been so.

The Emperor and the remains of *l'Armée* waited five days for us to draw off the pursuit and then dashed west towards Vilnius, while we that same damned night plunged off east into the maw of the wilderness, so beginning of the month of frost. In that *frimaire* rearguard action I believe we found the frozen plain they say is at the very heart of Hell. We fought without sleep, without food, without shelter, without ammunition, without hope. We fought in the mist, rain, wind, frost, and snow that drifted to many times our heights.

When a horse would no longer move, we ate it, slicing open its entrails and eating them quickly raw if no fire was handy, for otherwise they congealed into a mass of ice. The roads were glass, and the barrels of our muskets burned us as if white hot.

I saw my men, who had been the cream of the III Corps, gladly take impossible risks, charging well-fed, well-shod Cossacks with plentiful ammunition with nothing but the bayonet and stock of the musket frozen in their hands, barefoot and starving. I admired them for their courage. I envied it. Because I had lost what I most cared for: the calculus of risk, and in its disregard, of bravery. That *frimaire*, I learned that nothing could end my life.

As our numbers dwindled every day, I had to fight hand to hand myself, and many times I was worsted. I was frozen, burned, crushed, bombed, slashed, stabbed, buried alive, torn apart by dogs, shot, whipped, raped, beaten, and hanged.

But though many times I died, I did not stay dead. Every time I fell, I rose up again the next day, like our Lord and Savior, like Lazarus. Those of my men who retained the capacity for thought found me uncanny and lost their regard for me. Some said *le rougeaud* drank blood or had no blood but frozen ice in his veins. Many knew the truth, and most sensed it. I was no longer human.

As for me, the niceties of calculating limits had been my defining passion; now I found I had transcended the limit of death, and my life as a soldier lost its savor and its meaning to me. I was despondent. Nonetheless, I fulfilled our mission.

When it was found out that the Cossacks had seized the bridgehead at Borisow, I led the dire revenant of my *cuirassiers*, a few hundred skeletons riding skeletal horses, back out of the wilderness in time to save *l'Empereur*, who was trapped like a fat rabbit on the east bank of the Berezina, and the rest of the army from complete annihilation.

We rode out of a blizzard and cleared the bridge. Few of the Russians would stand before us, our appearance by that time being exceedingly grim. Our withered bodies animated by sheer will, we kept on riding until we stumbled into the French camp. My men fell on their faces by the soup-fires, but I walked straight into the Emperor's tent, knocking down the guard who challenged me and surprising the Emperor in the midst of playing a music-box while drinking a cup of cocoa.

"Ney," he exclaimed. "You are indeed *le brave des braves*. Someone, bring me a crown for the Prince of Moscow!"

I almost forgot to kneel for my crowning, distracted by my fruitless search for the greatness that had once been so evident to me in the person of Bonaparte.

Bonaparte made a beeline for Kovno but left half the men behind. I witnessed the calamity in its entirety. Soon after *l'Empereur* and his guard crossed, the Russians brought hidden batteries of mortars to bear on the tightly packed crowd of French stragglers. These miserable men were caught between cannon fire and the icy flood. There was a great panic of overturned wagons that blocked the way, and within minutes twenty thousand men were cut down where they stood or swallowed up by the river.

On the road any man with fire was subject to immediate attack by abominable snow-men, their faces horribly disfigured and blackened by frostbite, who would attempt to slay with their numb and decaying hands anyone who stood between them and warmth. Such undead stragglers became a greater menace than the Cossacks.

In Vilnius our men finally found beds to lie down in, but few ever got up again. The Cossacks came in the night and slaughtered Frenchmen in those beds like veal calves in their pens, too weak to put up any fight. I too was stabbed in my sleep, waking up with a sickle in my chest and a bearded savage with foul breath chuckling at my gushing blood. I woke up alive again, alone in an abattoir.

The last border of Russian territory was the bridge at Kovno. There was no order by then; the Emperor had passed

on with his Guard days earlier. Fools fled over the bridge with no thought of what might come after, that the Russian Bear might chase them further than the very threshold of its den. As the Russians came on, I grabbed a torch and the reigns of a powder-wagon.

Though I was shot many times, my sapper's charges went off most satisfactorily. The Bear roared from the far side, but a tiny fraction of our original strength did manage to get home.

The English and those treacherous Prussians soon joined the Tsar in dismembering the Empire like a team of butchers working on a steer. Bonaparte became a desperate gambler chasing his losses; the other Marshals saw it too. In *germinal*, sprouting time, the Emperor gave the order to march on Paris itself, to wrest it back from our enemies. As he spoke visions of Moscow burning filled my head.

“But of course, why not?” I said. “The conquest of great capitals is something we excel at, as evidenced by our triumph in my own principality of Moscow.”

Bonaparte sucked in his breath, but the other Marshals nodded their heads.

“Go on, my brother, you speak for the rest of us in this matter,” said Belissaires, a good chap.

I stood up. “Bonaparte, it is over. You know it. Paris cannot burn. We must make terms.”

His eyes so protruded from their sockets I feared they might burst like overripe fruit. “The army will obey its Emperor!” he said.

I put my face right in his, so he could not help but look into my eyes and see within the horrors of my *frimaire* that are forever frozen and reflected there.

“The Army will obey its chiefs,” I said, and thought it was done.

L’Empereur was put away in Elba by the royalty of Europe like an embarrassing wedding gift stuffed into the back of a china-hutch, and they brought back the Bourbons, as inbred and imbecilic as ever. I was landed and given a peerage as a reward for my rebellion.

I rode round the perimeter of my lands, seeking the shape of my new life. My thoughts were always of my monstrous transcendence of the human condition. I could no longer endure the society of my wife, or any woman. In my heart, as in Hell’s, was a howling, frozen abyss.

I awoke one day from a laudanum stupor to the frenzied banging of the Kings Men upon my chamber door. I was taken before the Chamber of Peers and told that Napoleon had fled Elba and was now an outlaw. Louis XVI himself asked me what might be done. I smiled at the powdered fop, a useless relic, and said: “I will bring him back to you in an iron cage.”

At home, a letter waited for me. Bonaparte wrote he would receive me as after the Battle of Moscow. The letter was dated 17 *ventôse, le jour du doronic*, the flower also called Leopard's Bane. I laughed until I cried.

I met Bonaparte at Auxerre and fought by his side until we were bested at Waterloo by that Mason's trowel Wellington. I was killed five times that day; I tried my best. But the thing Lazarus did not explain to me, or at least what I failed to understand, was the full price of his gift.

Without the incentive of avoiding death to sharpen my judgment, I'd lost my skill to sense the high and low extremes. I could no longer pick the weak point in the line to charge and break a pike square. I howled my fury to the sky and stalked the field till midnight with my saber, when someone at last dragged me away, insensible, to await my arrest and conviction for treason.

Why did I go back to *L'Empereur*? Because while I did not like him, I could not help but love a man who would overthrow the powdered, arrogant idiots. Yes, he was a vain thug, an overproud bully with a heart of tin. It's just that we live in such a limited world. Those limits, indeed, are what define us. If it was not so difficult to be great, or even good, men would cease to try.

In the cold dark heart of the next *frimaire*, on *jour du cèdre*, the day of cedars, soldiers took me to the Luxembourg Garden to carry out the sentence of the Chamber of Peers. I spoke what I hoped would be my last words.

“Soldiers, when I give the command to fire, fire straight at my heart. Wait for the order. It will be my last to you. I protest against my condemnation. I have fought a hundred battles for France, and not one against her ... Soldiers, Fire!”

I think now that my search, our search, for rationality above all else was over-narrow, if not fundamentally misguided. After all, what am I now but a spirit or ghost? Such a figure as all the spiritualists and charlatans claim walk among us. And so I do. But cannot matters of the spirit still be susceptible to logic and thought, and so to mathematics, the natural language of these? So I have spent my life since in such work.

But now my work is at a good ending point, and I am tired of teaching these stupid boys who could not solve a multivariable equation if their lives depended on it; which it will, if the battle between states is brewing here as I suspect. It takes math to aim cannon.

Furthermore, I have seen questioning looks from long-time colleagues at my appearance, which is unchanged in age since the field of Borodino; most pointedly from a most

unlikely amateur hagiographer, the dour Scotch Headmaster. I unguardedly confided my true name to him after an evening of talk and drink. He is a curious man, with much lore of forgotten saints that, though it would have been ridiculous to me when I wore the leopard's cape, now seems intriguing as I wear the scholar's mantle.

But he hungers for more knowledge of me and sometimes hints at what he may have guessed. I should do well to depart before he subjects me to questions I would not answer.

Other actors may also be at work backstage in this play that is my life: spilled corn that draws the dove will also call the crow. Rumor must somehow have spread. I have recently received a letter "in the strictest confidence" from a Professor at a certain New England University, asking for an interview and hinting at some special knowledge I might be able to impart with regards to secrets of longevity. The request fills me with dread. I seek knowledge of myself, but I have no desire to impart that knowledge to others or to wait here until caught like a prize beast in a trap and find the raven's beak probing the secrets behind my eyes.

The man suggested we meet in what I still call *fructidor*, my favorite time of year, the time of anticipation. But by then I will be gone, gone from Carolina and this afterlife of scholarship.

My inquiries after the Russian Count Pyotr Bezukhov, whose name I borrowed, have been so uniformly fruitless that I now believe this “Count Pierre Kirilovich Bezukhov” to be an entirely fictional creation. Nevertheless, my thoughts have returned to Russia, as the stories I hear of bearded holy men who live there for hundreds of years have piqued my interest. Perhaps I can meet them and inquire of my brief acquaintance Monsieur Lazarus.

I have long considered his words and those of his fictitious companion, and in combination with datum I have drawn from my own experiences I have concocted the following set of scarcely-creditable inferences. First, that Monsieur Lazarus at least is just who he names himself to be, the man raised from the dead by Christ.

Second, that he is an immortal, alive some eighteen hundred years afterwards, or at least that he returns to life from death, as the hunting stick of the Australian savage does when thrown.

Third, that he was somehow given the power to raise the dead as he had been raised (this I know as fact beyond a doubt). Fourth, that his rationalist sensibility is such that he experiments with his situation and by resurrection assembles of the dead a menagerie of outliers, persons that reflect the limits of various aspects of the human condition.

Fifth, as motivation for this, that he is attempting to derive the nature of Almighty God from the admixture of the above specimens, as the Creator can be conceived of as the integral of man.

Beyond this, I shall give up mere verbal constructions of these speculations. However, as a reward to you, the student or scholar who has bothered to read this note so far, I bequeath an epistemological proof I have composed, along the lines of my conjectures above, for the existence of God.

Accepting that such a belief is susceptible to logical demonstration requires much bravery. An existent God is the author of the miraculous Olympian machine that is the world – but a machine which, like Zeus, is sustained through the consumption of infants and innocence. Though poor Bonaparte, a Prometheus who could not as I do re-grow his liver, was then wrong when he said I was, today I prove I am the bravest of the brave.

Archivist's Note: The proof mentioned in the text was unfortunately missing.

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COVER ART

“Tower of Babel,” by Zack Fowler



Zack Fowler is an environment artist who has worked for computer gaming studios as a Lead Environment Artist and a Level Designer. His main focus is in 3D environment art, but he also works on environment concept art, high-poly 3D modeling, texturing, materials lighting, and event scripting. See more of his work at <http://www.zackfowler.com/>.

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