

Bulldog Drummond – On Poisoned Ground

Sample chapters by I.A. Watson

Chapter I In Which He Takes Badly To His Luncheon Being Disturbed

Captain Hugh Drummond crashed through the exclusive hotel's plate glass window and fell two stories onto the roof of a Citroen C3. The impact would have been bone-shattering, if not fatal, had Drummond not been cushioned by the assassin underneath him.

The man with the machine pistol lost all interest in killing the meddler, so Hugh borrowed his Steyr TMP, rolled off the car, and sprayed a short burst to eliminate the second gunman who was now leaning out of the shattered *fenêtre* of the exclusive Le Meurice hotel.

"I'm going to have to leave a specially good tip," Drummond noted to himself as the third and fourth killers jumped from the window to the first floor balcony and took position to fire again.

He ducked behind a gaudily-repainted metallic orange Porsche Cayenne. The demobilised soldier wasn't a big fan of non-military SUVs and the colour displeased him. If any of the vehicles parked on the Rue de Rivoli was going to get shot up he would prefer it was this one.

Bullets slammed into the vehicle, shattering the windscreen and shredding the bodywork. Street traffic screeched to a halt. Pedestrians scattered for cover.

Hugh thumbed the Steyr *Taktische Maschinenpistole* to single shot and put down another of his pursuers with a neat double-tap just above the line of the bulletproof jacket, just like he'd been taught. The last of the men who'd interrupted his lunch dived off the hotel frontage and landed on the pavement behind a rather nice vintage Bugatti that Drummond had no intention of shooting up.

Although most of the road traffic had ground to a gridlocked halt, four motorcyclists still wove through the jam. That wasn't unusual for the streets of Paris, where suicidal bikers weaving between lanes were a constant menace, but these men all rode identical BMW R 9T Pures and all had the same style of mirror-faced helmet.

And all had calf holsters strapped over their riding boots.

Drummond rolled over the bonnet of the bullet-holed Cayenne five seconds before the place where he'd been crouching became unhealthily polluted with lead projectiles.

“Didn’t anyone tell you that this is Paris?” Hugh complained as he rose to take down the nearest rider with a pair of helmet shots. “It is considered very bad manners to try and kill a fellow before he’s finished his sorbet. Assassinations should be served along with the coffee and brandy, not before.”

The fallen rider tumbled to the road. His bike slid along until it was stopped by a metro bus. The next rider swerved round a taxi and mounted the pavement to flank his prey.

Drummond was ready for the tactic. The remaining man from the hotel attack was still on the ground in cover somewhere nearby. If Hugh concentrated on the bikers he was leaving his back exposed to the last of the sharpshooters. Best to shift the battleground.

Hugh vaulted the abused Cayenne yet again, relieved the dead biker of his additional ammunition clip, and retrieved the R 9T Pure. The retro-styled roadster was built to take a knock and its 110 hp horizontally-opposed twin engine restarted first time. Drummond leaped astride and swerved between traffic before his opponents could reposition themselves.

Rue de Rivali was wide and straight. Directly opposite Le Meurice behind high elegant railings was the Tuileries Garden and the Terrasse de Fuilliants. Drummond swerved left and powered off with the remaining three bikers in close chase. If he kept threading through the standing vehicles he could keep his opponents from getting a bead.

“But someone might end up getting caught in cross-fire,” he muttered to himself. It was a lot easier doing this stuff in a war zone without potential civilian casualties to fret about.

Only a hundred yards up the road was a gate into the Tuileries, and beside it a discrete stone stairwell went down into the Metro. Hugh considered taking the bike down the stairs and leading his adversaries on a thrilling chase through the Paris subway, but there were too many bystanders. Instead he hairpinned between the gates into the public gardens. On a warm summer’s day there were plenty of Parisiennes and tourists enjoying Catherine de Medici’s beautiful park, but they were less clustered than drivers trapped in their gridlocked vehicles.

Drummond swerved back in the direction he had come but on the park side of the railings, away from the Louvre end of the garden, towards the Place de la Concorde and the Arc de Triomphe. He abandoned the straight path of the Allée Centrale and tested his R 9T’s impressive acceleration on turf. The other bikers swerved round after him, spreading out to anticipate whatever direction he might run.

From a distance came the irritating discordant wail of French police cars. The historic heart of Paris was well covered with security cameras these days. A major terrorist incident like a gunfight outside one

of the capital's oldest and most exclusive hotels would provoke a speedy armed response.

Hugh made a note to apologise to the French nation for the desecration of their flowerbeds. He curved off towards the Bassin Octagonale, the great eight-sided fountain at the western end of the park, then slid round to drive directly at one of the three gun-toting riders. The tactic caught the killer off-guard. It was much harder to aim and fire at a mad rider playing chicken at 75 miles per hour.

The bikes crashed into each other beside the fountain. The unfortunate assassin reacted too late and was hurled away with the wreckage of his ride. Drummond timed his leap from the saddle perfectly, splashing down into the Bassin to mitigate his speed.

The other riders approached, but now Drummond was in the water, behind the lip of the octagonal basin, obscured by the fountain's eight twelve-metre water sprays. He took out a third rider with a single head-shot – Hugh was conserving ammunition for his borrowed Steyr. The last rider skidded and came off his vehicle, scrambling for cover behind a group of panicked tourists around a pastry cart.

A shot splashed into the water too near Drummond for comfort. It came from the remaining member of the crew that had broken into a private hotel room to enliven Hugh's luncheon, who had cut on foot to take a sniper's vantage behind a pedestalled statue of some French nymph in classical robes.

Drummond abandoned his water-filled foxhole. He kicked aside a couple of the sun-loungers ringing the fountain and sprinted for cover behind one of the monuments towards the Place de la Concorde. The huge white marble montages would be proof against the 9x19mm rounds the Steyr SMPs sprayed after him.

The original hotel assassin came from cover and hurled a black pineapple-shaped missile. Hugh recognised the Yugoslavian M75 hand grenade at once. The notorious devices had a fuse time of 3 to 4.4 seconds before 38 grams of plastic explosive detonated, spraying 3000 2.5mm steel balls over a kill zone of fifty metres. Vast numbers of them had been sold off to criminal gangs after the fall of Yugoslavia, often for less than the price of a can of lager.

Drummond hurled himself behind the statue's sturdy plinth base. He hoped that the previous gunplay had already warned civilians to take cover. The grenade peppered a pair of nudist gods and a cupid with shrapnel.

He acted in the second after the explosion, while the echo was still booming across Paris. He rolled out from cover, sighted, and took down the grenade-thrower, then dropped to one knee and shot out the petrol

tank under the remaining bike-mounted assassin. Another explosion blossomed up from the Tuileries Garden.

Nobody was left at the patisserie cart to take Hugh's money, so he helped himself to a crêpes suzette, left a twenty euro bill, and settled down to finish his lunch while the armed response unit scrambled.

"If it helps to clarify things," Drummond encouraged M. Brissaud of the French police force, "it was his fault."

The smart-suited diplomat to whom Hugh Drummond pointed managed an embarrassed wince. He showed a security pass to a suspicious officer from the Prefect of Police that got him past orange tape and serious armed men in body armour, and joined Hugh on the rear bumper of a crime scene investigation van.

"Your fault, m'sieu?" M. Brissard asked. The new *Anglais*' credentials proclaimed him to be Mr Toby Sinclair VC, a Third Secretary B3 attached to the British Embassy, a special assistant to the Minister. That made him not only diplomatically immune from prosecution or even rigorous questioning but also politically significant.

"Not at fault," Sinclair replied in perfect French, "but I do bear a certain responsibility for loosing Captain Drummond here on the unsuspecting Gallic populace."

"You know this man who shot up the Tuileries and Le Meurice?"

Drummond, who was not very fluent at any language except English, picked up on the name of the historic \$2500-a-night hotel where he had been ambushed. "Le Meurice? Very good beefstake. I recommend the chef's special sauce."

"Captain Drummond did not carry any firearm. Talk to your crime scene investigators at the hotel. He merely went there for a private dinner with the lady whose room was invaded – although she rather thought he was me, whom she had been deployed to lure there to a quiet little political assassination. Her passport claims she is from Singapore, but she's actually North Korean. Ask her when she wakes up."

"Wakes up?"

"Captain Drummond did not react well to attempts to inject him with a hypodermic of poison. He rather hit her with the sweet trolley. At that point, as far as we could tell from the wire he was wearing, a number of assailants with Austrian machine pistols emerged from an adjacent suite. The management is quite distressed."

The scene-of-incident officer glanced at the man sat beside the diplomat. Both *Anglais* were around thirty years of age, both fit, both confident. Drummond was the taller and broader of the two, but also by

far the cruder-looking, with a Saxon face and a spread out boxer's nose. Sinclair walked with a limp and carried a cane; it was possible that his right leg was prosthetic. The two Englishmen knew each other, were trusting comrades. Even now they sat looking not at each other but in different directions, covering the other's back.

"You claim that Captain Drummond..." Brissaud struggled with the strange foreign name, "was the subject of a murder attempt?"

"Well, *I* was," Toby Sinclair clarified. He rapped his cane on his leg, proving the policeman's supposition that the limb was synthetic. "I'm not quite as quick on my feet as I used to be, so Bulldog here kindly agreed to meet my date for me. I'm not sure how he convinced her he was me; I mean, would you mistake us? *I* don't look like a shaved ape. But he does have a winning smile and twinkly blue eyes that seem to work on ladies' underwear. Anyway, Miss North Korea went for the kill but got smacked with dessert. Everything Captain Drummond did thereafter was survival and self-defence."

"Bulldog?" Brissaud frowned and groped for a translation. "*Bouledogue?*"

"Hey now," Drummond interjected, "Don't you go translating me into French. I won't have it!"

"A nickname," Sinclair explained to the policeman. "When he gets his teeth into something he won't let go – even when it's too big for him to handle and all common sense says to back off."

"We have eight dead men here," M. Brissaud objected.

Hugh caught that. "But the *right* dead men," he insisted. "Le mort hommes de plus good, oui?"

Sinclair patted his shoulder. "Leave the taking to me, eh? Just like old times. By the way, I'm sorry about the idiots with Steyrs. We had no idea that the lady had back-up of that magnitude or stupidity."

"Don't worry, T.S. It livened up my day. A dazzling seductive spy-girl with a hypo of goop is pretty good, and a bike chase through Paris is just jam on top."

"Well, it helped prove we're on to something about the weapons embargo-dodging. It'll be a problem for Interpol now."

"I'd be fine to go hit some more assassins."

"Sorry, Bulldog. I'll be waving my passes and spiriting you off to the Embassy shortly, and then H.M. Government will be giving you a free ticket back to Blighty. Our Continental partners sometimes object when we shoot up their national monuments because you're bored."

"It wasn't because I was bored," Hugh objected. "It was because I didn't get to finish my lunch. North Korea owes me gateau. I shall be sending a note to the Supreme Leader about it."

“Do not invade North Korea,” Toby Sinclair instructed him firmly. “Your work here is done, Hugh. Your grateful nation thanks you – again. And sends you home – again. Unless you’ve changed your mind about joining me at the F.O., the Diplomatic Corps?”

“The Foreign Office has far too many desks and far too many rules, T.S. Can you really imagine me working for any agency with ‘Diplomatic’ in the title?”

Sinclair failed to suppress a shudder. Drummond continued with his lament. “Everyone wants me to sign up. Dare wants me troubleshooting his international business deals. Algy wants me driving his sports cars. Bangbang wants me running his security consultancy. But I’m just not the settling down type.”

“You have a different definition of settling down than most men, Bulldog.”

M. Brissaud still had a significant number of questions regarding a major incident in the centre of Paris, starting with, “Who are you, Captain Drummond?”

“Who is this Captain Drummond?” the man who was currently calling himself Arthur Franklyn enquired as he looked at the front page of *Le Monde*.

“There’s a piece about him on page two,” the woman who breakfasted beside him answered. Her passport proclaimed her Edith Franklyn, and she was indeed his half-sister, but Franklyn was but a *nom du voyage* suitable for their present travels. “A British ex-soldier. Royal Loamshire Regiment, rose to the rank of Captain, served almost eleven years before being demobilised.”

“And he was able to take out two units of Ryanggang’s Special Forces School? Alone?”

“He did. I like the look of him. Ugly men always make the best lovers.”

Franklyn folded the paper and set it aside. “I’ll commission a dossier on him. There’s more to him than meets the eye, more than the press has reported. But for now we must not keep our guests waiting.”

Edith nodded to the Maitre D. Apart from serving staff, the Franklyns were the only people in the large breakfast room at the most exclusive remaining tourist hotel in Mosul. Indeed, apart from their guests and retainers they were the establishment’s only residents. Nobody else wanted to visit the war-ravaged Iraqi city from which Islamic State troops had been so recently expelled at such bloody cost.

The three men who had gathered there to meet the Franklyns could not have been more different from each other. The first was a smart-looking businessman in a Saville Row three-piece suit unsuitable for the brutal heat, but he gave no sign of discomfort. He was flanked by two attractive female companions in short white dresses, shocking in a nation where women were usually required to be swathed in black from head to toe. It wasn't clear if the ladies were mistresses or bodyguards or both.

"Victor Savvich!" Edith greeted the man, rising to kiss him on both his cheeks, but not the lips he presented to her. "How is the wife?"

"In St Petersburg," the Russian replied with some satisfaction. Viktor Filchenkov was a rising star in Russian hardline politics and he preferred to travel with a different entourage.

"Do give her my love, won't you?"

Edith turned to the second visitor, a dour-faced Chinese man in cool white linens. "Koh Zhenkai," she greeted him, then glanced at the huge hulk of a retainer who stepped two paces behind him. "You brought a date too, then?"

The Taiwanese businessman did not appreciate humour. "This is Gǔ Cāng," he introduced the giant. "He discourages disrespect."

"Gǔ Cāng," Arthur Franklyn interjected. "That means 'Barn'."

The third visitor was a Black man in designer American casualwear, with expensive gold cufflinks and a Cartier watch, all in exquisite taste. He had come alone. He didn't need security other than the pistol and knife under his leather jacket.

"Edie," he hailed Franklyn's sister. "You're still looking fine."

"I know," the young woman preened. "And you're still looking rich. How much more are you worth per minute these days, Mad?"

Nugent Madison II shrugged. "Bout \$700," he judged. "Maybe more. Who counts?"

"You do," Franklyn suggested. "Otherwise you wouldn't be here. Any of you." He gestured to the only table laid out for breakfast. "Come and sit. It's time to tell you what your investments bought."

The visitors took their seats, in the deserted hall of the deserted hotel in the decimated city, and frightened waiters attended them with excellent food. The view over the Tigris to the shelled Old Town was both beautiful and heartbreaking.

Franklyn waited until Filchenkov, Koh, and Madison had been served and the hotel staff had retreated beyond earshot. Victor Savvich's angels and Koh Zhenkai's Barn hovered close but did not have seats at the table. Franklyn sipped his coffee and made his report.

"One year ago, you each ventured half a billion dollars for a good cause. You wanted a new business opportunity and I undertook to find it for you. Now I have."

Filchenkov raised his hands in a 'tell me' gesture.

Franklyn took another sip. "Change brings profit. Disruption means opportunity for those who are ready, those who know it is coming." He gestured to Koh. "You want to establish a stranglehold over the world's financial sector. That's a problem for you; Brexit hasn't destabilised the London stock exchange the way many hoped it would and the British national credit rating remains robust."

He passed to Madison. "Your plans for shifting your extralegal activities into Europe have been relatively unsuccessful. Without a major upheaval, the old firms will continue to control drugs and weapons supply routes, the sex trade, protection and fraud networks and the rest."

The American crimelord nodded. "There's no room while all the pigs are hogging the trough. Some need to be butchered."

"And you, Mr Filchenkov, and your energy cartel, and your political allies, would certainly prefer if internal issues kept NATO and the European Union from getting in the way of your long-term expansion plans."

"We heard this one year ago," the Russian pointed out. "That is why we made funds available to address the situation."

"And now the solution is at hand. I propose the destruction of the United Kingdom."

Edith raised a brow. "But I like Harrods," she objected.

"We must all make sacrifices," Franklyn told his sister. "What I intend, gentlemen, is actually the destruction of London. A strike at the capital, the heart of England, at a time when Parliament is in session, when the royal family is at Buckingham Palace, when the joint military chiefs and senior civil servants are all assembled. Eight million deaths, more than a tenth of the UK's population. What happens then?"

Koh Zhenkai looked interested. "It would be the end of the City," he considered, referring to the world's largest financial market. "It remains in London from the days of empire two centuries ago. It would not return there today. There would be economic war between the New York and Tokyo stock exchanges, and more. And if Britain defaulted on its national debts then the World Trade Bank would be in crisis. There might be global recession. Much opportunity."

"Take out the whole civic infrastructure?" marvelled Madison. "No country could get back up quick after eight million deaths. Hell, I bet Scotland and Ireland and, what's the other one? Well, I bet they'd be quick to break away anyhow. A broken nation, the wealthiest parts gone, collapse of law and order, the rule of the gun? The rule of the guy who thought to bring the guns?" He swore in admiration. "Franklyn, you deliver the goods!"

“It would punch a hole in Western alliances, rupture NATO,” Filchenkov predicted. “Especially if there was doubt about what nation was to blame for the damage. A false flag operation? It could set Europe against the US. Or the US versus China? Yes, I can see some possibilities if such a wonderful occurrence were to pass. But can it? There are many safeguards. What method...?”

“That’s what I’ve been planning,” the man calling himself Arthur Franklyn promised them. “How best to kill a city of nine million people? How to kill the nation it belongs to? This is how I’ll do it.”

He spoke for fifteen minutes. He detailed in cold, precise steps how he would accomplish the largest single mass-murder in history.

When his guests were satisfied and departed, he arranged for every servant in the hotel to be slaughtered and the venue burned to the ground.

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Chapter II: In Which *The Times* Includes An Unconventional Advertisement

Demobilised officer, finding peace incredibly tedious, would welcome diversion. Legitimate, if possible; but crime, if of a comparatively humorous description, no objection. Excitement essential.

Captain Peter ‘Dare’ Darell set aside the morning paper and rubbed his forehead. “Bulldog? Do you remember that time in Cairo? After the thing with the knife-thrower and the monkey, and that bet with Algy about the belly dancer? And you made me promise that if you *ever* did anything as imbecilic as that again that I should take you into the desert and shoot you to spare humanity your ongoing stupidity?”

“I recall some kind of promise. But then, we had been drinking quite a lot. Egyptian beer has a way of sneaking up on a lad.”

“And trickling out of him, in Algy’s case. But you were pretty clear that you would like a heads-up when you were heading to Idiotville. Consider this advertisement your visa papers.”

“I’m bored, Dare. Bored! You can get excited about exchange rates and business contracts and things. Or you can scheme to get your brothers and sisters and cousins disinherited so you can play boy tycoon with the family billions. But I... I need to be *doing* something!”

“Translation: nobody has shot at you for almost two weeks, not since your attempt to irretrievably damage Anglo-French relations – and Toby’s career. I swear, Bulldog, you don’t get itchy shoulder blades when

a sniper's targeting you. You get restless when nobody is trying to kill you."

Hugh Drummond paused to consider his old friend's assessment. Dare had known him since their schooldays, long before they had made their separate journeys to Her Majesty's Royal Loamshire Regiment and the Special Air Service unit that it covered for.

"I might help people," Hugh argued. "There may be damsels in distress."

"They'll be distressed if they meet you," Dare shot back. "Bulldog, you can't just go putting mysterious adverts in *The Times*..."

"You can though. You just pay them £380 per diem plus the costs of the post office box, and then..."

"I mean, you can't just offer to go off adventuring with an entry to the Notices column. Especially with this offer to do crime."

"Really? Because plenty of people have sent in offers. I've set Denny and Mrs Denny to sorting them."

Dare felt for Drummond's long-suffering household staff. Denny had been a squaddie back in the Royal Loamshire days; he'd had plenty of experience as Bulldog's batman, but his wife generally had better sense. "Mrs D thinks this is a good idea?"

"No. Mrs D was glaring with every envelope she opened," Hugh admitted. "Why do you think I'm upstairs with you?"

Drummond and Darell were neighbours these days, residents of the same exclusive townhouse flats on Half Moon Street off Piccadilly, London. Drummond had the first floor, with the Dennys in the servants' flat below. Peter had the top floor penthouse. Their rooms were well situated for morning runs in Green Park beside Buckingham Palace and strolls to the Junior Sports Club in St James Square.

"I have no idea why you are upstairs with me, Bulldog. I assume it must be some kind of gypsy curse." Dare had actually helped Drummond outbid all other offers for the four million pound three-bedroom chambers he now occupied. "If the formidable Mrs Claire Denny can't deter you from your slippery slope then I doubt that I can help you."

"As a matter of fact, her system is proving most useful," Hugh insisted. "We have four piles: the scams and sales pitches, the lonely hearts, the tedious, and the unscrupulous."

"And which will you be keeping? The lonely hearts? Those damsels requiring distress?"

"Some did include photographs, though Mrs D has confiscated certain of them. But no, I am hoping for the elusive fifth pile, the exciting adventure offers. It's just that no such entry has yet appeared from the rather large mail-sack delivered by the Royal Mail this morning. It may have done by now."

“Well, do not let me deter you from your life of thrill-seeking and debauchery, old chap. When you have calmed down from your burst of newspaper advertising you can tell me what on earth you did to the Tuileries and whether I shall ever be able to stay at Le Meurice again. For now, I suggest you brave the death stare of your housekeeper and seek your ‘diversion’. Good luck with it!”

“You were far more interesting before you became a captain of industry, Captain Darell,” Drummond cautioned as he rose and left.

“And you were... no, I’ve not got anything. Blockhead.”

“Ass.”

With that comradely farewell, Hugh retired down the plush common stairwell and returned to his own rooms. His former orderly, pug-nosed now-balding James Denny, was still at the dining table classifying replies, but Claire Denny had retreated to the kitchen. The smell of kidneys and bacon were enhancing the atmosphere.

“Anything good yet, James?” the would-be adventurer checked. It was always James, never Jimmy or Jim or Jez; Mrs D wouldn’t stand for such abbreviation.

“Young widow in Chelmsford would like her boyfriend’s legs breaking,” the orderly offered.

“Too commonplace. I am not yet reduced to domestic disputes.”

“African émigré requires assistance securing his inheritance.”

“Again? That chap is just too careless where he abandons his millions.”

“Gent who has firm evidence that the royal family are lizards from the Andromeda Nebula.”

“God bless her reptilian majesty and the Space House of Windsor! Come on, James, I can tell from the glint in that roguish glass eye of yours that you have something better, a rose amongst the thorns. Stop tormenting your senior officer and let me see it.”

“There is one,” Denny owned. He passed over a plain white envelope with a neat handwritten address. Inside was a sheet of bonded writing paper.

Dear Sir or Madam, it began.

“Penned in a fair maidenly script,” Hugh observed. “A proper traditional salutation, with an equitable acceptance that my advertisement betrayed no gender. Open-minded and forward thinking. And written with fountain-pen, suggesting... well, I don’t know, but she owns a bottle of ink. Or cartridges, if she is of a modern bent. A 19th or 20th century girl, one or other.”

I can’t tell if your advertisement is a joke. I am just desperate enough to try it and gamble that you are serious. A person who could

induce the Times to print so extraordinary a personal notice must have some extraordinary quality, either as a prankster or a genuine dilettante.

“So few people use the word ‘dilettante’ now, James. We should try and bring it back into fashion. I may put it on my next business cards.”

“There’s a few words could be put on there, sir,” Denny muttered darkly.

In the wild hope that you are genuine, willing to face difficulty and danger for the fun of it, I have a problem for which I have no obvious remedy. Bluntly, someone is trying to kidnap me, or possibly kill me.

“Interesting, assuming she has not simply neglected her medication,” Drummond judged.

I began a new job four months ago, an executive role in a non-profit organisation that does a lot of good in the world. My predecessor vanished abruptly under odd circumstances and cannot be located. I was engaged by the Board of Trustees to get the house in order and troubleshoot certain contracts that had fallen behind deadline. The work is engaging and worthwhile, though requiring long hours and complete dedication.

“So no boyfriend or husband? Write on, dear heart!”

Two weeks ago, I was visited at home by a pair of men claiming to be from British Gas, warning that there might be a leak in the house. When I refused them entry until I had verified their identification passes with their employer, the men vanished while I was phoning. Then, one week ago, I was accosted by two different men in the car park as I returned to my vehicle after work. They tried to grab me, wielding knives, and to drag me into a waiting van. I sprayed one of my attackers with mace and put my heel through the other one’s foot, and fled. They might have followed but I also triggered my rape alarm, so they drove off. The police investigated but were unable to trace the van.

“Well now,” Hugh admired. “This is the rose, alright. Or an excellent confidence artist who can do a wonderful impression of a rose. Either way I am intrigued.”

He read on: Since then I have thought on three occasions that perhaps my car was being followed, though it may have been my imagination. I noticed an appointment on my calendar to meet a new charitable donor but when I rang to verify the meeting found that he was unaware of any such arrangement. My house was burgled yesterday but I was not at home.

The police tell me that, contrary to what we see on television, they do not have personnel to place on watch on every potential threat without better evidence than I can offer. There is nothing to link my attackers in the car park with the fake gas men – they were certainly not the same

people – or with what looks like an opportunistic break-in to steal my stereo and microwave.

I am becoming somewhat alarmed that I might vanish as did my predecessor. I have no idea why I might be targeted this way. I have no one to whom I could appeal for help in such an unusual circumstance as this. Hence my writing to an anonymous stranger who placed an unusual advert.

“Quite right,” Drummond agreed. “I should have placed my notice months ago, as soon as I was discharged, if I had known it would catch incidents of this quality. I’ll plough through a hundred widows in Chelmsford for one lady who stamps stilettos through her kidnappers!”

Mrs Denny arrived with a plate of bacon and kidneys, the sort of heart-calcifying breakfast that was certain doom to any man who didn’t use calories the way Captain Bulldog Drummond did. “She sounds like trouble,” the housekeeper opined.

“Indeed she does,” Hugh approved.

I don’t know you, the letter went on. Before I trust my life to a complete stranger I’d want to get a look at you, make a judgement. I’ll be at the Ministry of Sound nightclub on Thursday. Sit at the restaurant bar at 10.30pm and carry a copy of Lady Chatterley’s Lover – that should help me spot you! If you come and I like the look of you then I’ll make myself known. Otherwise, thanks for reading!

“The Ministry of Sound?” Mrs Denny enquired.

“Very big club at Elephant and Castle, love,” her husband supplied. “Started in the 90s – live gigs, three dance floors, three bars, packs in 5,000 punters on a weekend. DJs like Pete Tong and Paul Oakenfold. Not that I’d go to such places nowadays, of course,” he added quickly. “Dens of iniquity, oh no!”

Mrs D nudged him. “You just stay away from your old bad ways, my lad! No more trouble, that’s what you promised me. No more military police or actual rozzers a-knocking in the night.”

Drummond scooped a big mouthful of breakfast meats and reviewed his invitation. “I could potter along there tonight. The restaurant bar?”

“The place recently extended, sir,” Denny explained. “New dining venue, a fitness suite, business offices for rent at the back, and a state of the art recording suite. People rate the restaurant. It has Michelin stars and that.”

“Well, so long as I am not required to dance. I leave that sort of mission to Peter or Algy. And speaking of the Devil, would you please get me Lieutenant Algernon Everett Longworth on the telephone. I would have speech with him.”

“It’s before nine in the morning, sir. Lieutenant Algy won’t be up for four or five hours yet.”

“That’s what makes my call so enjoyable. I’m scooping up my kidneys and bacon and retreating to my study. Put the call through to the extension there, please. Excellent breakfast as always, Mrs D. When I’m on death row waiting for my last meal, this is what I’ll expect them to serve!”

“There’s no more death penalty in h’England now!” Drummond’s housekeeper objected. “Not but what they probably wouldn’t bring it back special-like for you.”

Hugh allowed his domestic support’s comments to shimmer off his back and found his seat behind his study desk just as Denny connected the requested call.

“Bulldog?” came a blurry voice. “Unless the British Commonwealth is about to explode and the United Kingdom is about to sink into the sea like the new Atlantis, why the deuce are you calling me at this ungodly hour?”

“I have enquiries in hand, beloved Algy, and the alternative to calling you was to switch on this blasted personal computer and attempt the internet. I decided it was best to leave such unhealthy pursuits to an expert. Kindly undertake some research for me.”

Algy Longworth vented a long string of expletives that characterised his former schoolmate and former commanding officer in an unflattering manner.

“Good grief, Algy!” Hugh responded. “Do you kiss your ex-wives with that mouth? How is the lovely Ophelia, by the way?”

“How should I know?” Algy answered sullenly. “The restraining order prevents me from asking her. Meanwhile, her solicitors would quite like half a million a year in alimony from me.”

“More than you pay Sonia but a little less than Tanya. You may wish to stop marrying girls before you go completely bankrupt.”

“It’s too early for you to start prodding my love life, Bulldog. Either go stick your head in a shower or tell my why you’re waking me up in the middle of the night.”

“To business then. I’m looking for a woman – reserve your wit, Algy, you need to keep what little you have – a woman who might be in a spot of danger. I don’t know who she is yet, or whether she’s kosher. I’m relying upon your technical wizardry to get me an ID.”

“You couldn’t just ask her?”

Drummond summarised the letter of application and its writer’s alleged circumstances.

“Well, I admit to being mildly interested, Bulldog,” conceded the former signals specialist from Drummond’s 21 (Mobility) Troop, G

Squadron of the 22nd Special Air Service. “Lets see... police reports of two-man assaults on a young woman in a car park, domestic burglaries, senior charity jobs four months ago... Got her!”

“By George, Algy, that might be a new record!” Hugh admired. “And what can you tell me about our mysterious heroine?”

“Phyllis Elizabeth Benton, known to her friends as Filly,” Algy summarised. “If you allowed yourself a mobile phone I could send you a photograph. It’s well worth looking at. If you like, I could rescue this one and you can take the next.”

“Get your own mystery damsel, Algernon. But tell me more about mine.”

“She’s Chief Executive Officer for Shoreline Conservation Trust. I have their website here, they’re a registered charity, been going since the ‘70s, doing good works for the environment, coastal erosion, protected species and the like. Turnover around six mill a year, run from donations and some government grant, looks like. She replaced a chap named Stuart McCloud last spring, after McCloud upped and vanished.”

“There was an investigation?”

“Yes. It’s still open, but... let me see, what can I hack that gives me more than press releases...? Ah, it looks like the investigation has concluded suicide and lost at sea, but there’s no proof. No further entries on the Approach and Action list. Looks like our boys in blue have made up their minds.”

“What about Miss Benton’s experiences?”

Tapped keyboard sounds came over the phone. “They’re taking the car park event seriously. They’ve checked CCTV, looked for the van, done a computer match for similar incidents in the police database HOLMES, all the usual stuff. I have copies of Filly’s statements here. Shall I e-mail them over?”

“Forward them to Denny. Anything different from what she said?”

“A lot more detail, all recorded in police-ese. Sounds like you have the headlines. No trace of the gasmen, either, but they were ethnically different from the car park maulers. No fingerprints from the break-in either, but then SOCO were only there twenty minutes; what can a Scene Of Crime Officer do with that?”

“So in summary, Miss Filly was telling me the truth as she knows it, someone may well be after her, and she wants me to do something about it? Is it my birthday?”

“It must be. None of us expected your asinine advert to do any good. Now we can expect gunplay and explosions all across London.”

“I won’t be taking a gun to this nightclub, Algy. Our beloved nation has those pesky gun licence and concealed weapons laws,

remember? We don't have a Ministry of Defence hunting license any more."

"You didn't have a gun on Rue de Rivoli either, Bulldog. It didn't limit the number of people you shot."

Hugh was becoming tired with his friends' general assumption that he would leap into danger and cause damage and mayhem. "Is there anything else I need to know before I go on my dream date, Algy? Forward any relevant stuff to Denny and he'll..."

"Explain the long words?"

"Work out what you meant as you slurred through your hangover."

Another voice came over the phone connection. "He's not hung over, Hugh. Just exhausted."

Drummond recognised that voice. "Tanya?" he asked Algy's second ex-wife.

"I have to go, Bulldog," Algy called hastily. "Good luck with the mystery girl."

"And good luck to you with the... Tanya," Hugh replied before the connection broke. Algy had an absolute genius for relationship disasters. But his love-life was never boring.

"I need a relationship disaster too," Drummond decided. "Denny, did Algy send over a picture of the fair Phyllis Benton?"

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London 2018: Upon his discharge from the military, Captain Hugh "Bulldog" Drummond finds civilian life dull, so he resorts to a newspaper ad appealing for adventure. Much to his surprise, he gets much more than he could have ever bargained for and soon finds himself battling an evil genius bent on destroying all of London. Facing this a threat he can't possibly overcome alone, he recruits his former S.A.S team, unique men with special skills that just might save the day. But the clock is counting down and the villains have plans of their own.

"Once you open page one, you will not be able to put this book down." - Ron Fortier



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