

Afterwar

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Those Departed Days...

Mars sat in the middle of the lens. A bespeckled red dot against the black of space. Arthur studied the image many times over the years. Tonight it reminded him of the eye of Satan himself, peering back at the Earth from hell instead of the heavens. Leaning back, he took up the pencil lying next to a ledger. Both sat on a small easel. His pocket watch lay open on one side. On the other, with great care and perfect handwriting, he recorded an observation:

Friday... 6 January 1905... 10:45 pm... Mars appears normal.

The large telescope moved with the stars. A slight hum from electric motors filled the cold air of the observatory. A wool coat covering a cardigan kept him warm during the vigil. Seated upon a raised area moving with the scope, he again scrutinized the image, bringing it into focus with the knob on the eyepiece. He made out the faint, thin brown lines crossing over the surface and a small, white smudge atop the red disk.

“Rather nice to not have to move your seat with the scope.”

Arthur turned as the echo of Ford’s voice faded away. He watched Ford approach, hands in the pockets of his own wool coat, unlit pipe in mouth.

“Pity it took a war to get it,” Ford added.

Arthur rubbed his eyes. “Indeed.” A slight cloud of condensation sprang from his mouth with each breath. “Now all we have to do is find a way to keep the inside of this building warm!”

Both men let out a laugh. Ford removed his pipe, then spoke. “At least Parliament was gracious enough to fund the installation of this observation deck and those fancy electric motors. One day we’ll figure out how to encase this entire observatory with glass. A glass dome will be next. That ought keep you warm on these winter nights.”

Arthur chuckled and nodded, thankful as well. “I’m certain one of our future contemporaries will find a way to observe the stars without exposing the scope or themselves to the elements.” He went back to the lens.

“How’s Mars looking tonight?” Ford asked, shuffling around a bit below the rotating deck.

Arthur again focused the lens. Above him stretched the long, brown colored cylinder, coming to an end sixty-feet above them within the cavernous dome and a mere ten from the open roof. He spoke as Mars came into focus. “Not much to tell, I’m afraid. Earth’s just beginning its orbit toward opposition with the devils. So odd now, though.”

Ford looked up and stopped. “How so?”

Arthur again scrutinized the image. “Knowing now that there *is* someone... something looking back at us.” He turned away to see Ford staring at him. “Gives us a different perspective of the whole thing, don’t you think? I recorded that Mars appears normal. Oft wonder if that word is the right one anymore.”

Ford nodded. “I venture to say the same is true for them. More so now.” He continued pacing, staring at the floor. “Now I wager they watch us even more keenly.”

Arthur looked back into the lens. “No doubt. Watching and wondering. Wondering what’s next.”

“Certainly we have something afoot for the next time they decide to show up,” Ford added, shaking his head. “Sometimes, I can’t for the life of me get the image of those vile creatures out of my head.”

Arthur spoke without looking up. “I have it on good authority, you know, that His Majesty is planning something for those red buggers.”

“Oh? Such as?”

“Don’t know rightly. Secrecy and all that hush–hush stuff. But my MP friend –he’s a former colonel you know—“

“Yes. You spoke of him—”

“—still has acquaintances in the Royal Army. He’s telling me there is much rattling about something or another involving the Martians.”

Arthur removed his pipe. “Hope it’s not just the usual hearsay and gossip. Been too much of that since the war, or just government trying to make us feel better, safer with a heap of poppycock.”

Ford smiled. “I hope not either, but I trust my friend has better contacts.”

A whistling suddenly filled the air. Ford turned towards the main entrance of the observation room. Adjacent sat several bookshelves and desks with various astronomical charts scattered about thereon. Next to all this a small stove. Steam rose from the spout of a kettle.

“Tea is ready,” he announced, heading that way.

Arthur looked up. “Not so much milk in mine if you would. Can’t keep it warm already in this damn chilly air.”

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Oma Er stood at the end of the table. Four of eight, thin limbs supported the large, reddish brown bulk of the Martian’s body. Two other appendages moved over an electronic writing pad held by its remaining arms. Above the center of the table, surrounded by similar creatures seated upon flat, backless chairs hung a holographic image projected from the ceiling. The three-dimensional picture of the Earth slowly rotated. Points of red lights dotted various parts of the sphere.

“Still nothing,” Oma Er hissed through a lipless mouth, the tongue allowing proper enunciation of their native language through the thin, Martian air.

“We must inform the *Lugal* of our opinion,” Sechu An stated without emotion from the other end of the table.

The others glanced towards Oma whose body gently looked downward, then back up again, indicating yes. “After seven full astral revolutions— no contact.”

Their eyes, nor what made up their faces, showed any trace of fear or sadness, shame or blame. The news rendered and accepted like all other information given them or any native Martian, without passion or pain.

“Too many incalculable and unforeseen variables. A miscalculation of our genetic superiority,” Nag Lo stated, holding a tablet as well, tapping away upon the small pad below the equally small screen thereon.

“That more than made up for their primitive weapons,” another added.

“We lost eight-hundred fighters, twenty cylinders, sixty fighting machines, fifty utility vehicles and five flyers.” All listened silently as one read off the statistics with no hint of passion.

“Much time to replenish,” Sechu noted.

“The decision not to initiate wave two was valid,” another said.

“The *erinbala* are still strong. The additional loss of force would have weakened—”

“Nor would the *Lugal* permit it—”

“After our recommendations and analysis which remain no different now,” Oma stated as a simple matter of fact.

Oma then moved towards a large, rectangular window overlooking the city and Martian landscape. In the distance, an approaching windstorm slowly covered the low mountains, themselves hiding the dim, setting sun. Small pillars of dust rose from the level plain, each kicked up by vehicles carrying goods and material across this part of the planet. Lights began sprouting up along the avenues and buildings within the city beneath the window. “With diminished forces, the insurgent and dissenters take advantage of the situation.”

Nag spoke up. “To this point our control of that information has been successful...”

As Nag detailed the ongoing disinformation plan, one particular point of light upon the slowly turning map of the Earth caught Sechu’s attention. It beamed out from the largest continent on the surface, adjacent a blue, meandering line weaving towards the largest body of water upon the Earth. For a moment, Sechu’s mind imagined what it might look like, standing there amid the large, flowing river, surrounded by mountains and warm, wet air devoid of dust and sand.

Ceasing the emotion-laden thoughts, Sechu turned towards Nag.

“...we will assume Earthers are now looking back at us with equal intensity and as far as their technology permits.” Nag Lo concluded.

“Keenly watching us,” Sechu added.

Oma didn’t turn, still looking out the thick, glass window. “And now slowly drawing their plans against us...”

The large barn once housed a myriad of farm animals. Now, in its current state of disrepair, nothing more than a warehouse, abandoned long ago by the previous owners and occupants. The benign occupation of animal husbandry replaced by nefarious activities Percival Longfellow intended to stop.

He stood afar, near the closest patch of trees, scrutinizing the structure. Peeking from around the tree providing him cover, he took in the entirety of the building: where the main doors were, each shuttered window on each floor, the stable adjacent. This drew more scrutiny. Slowly he counted the number of horses: a total of eight. That meant at least as many men. Then he noticed two more limbered up to a not so small cart, devoid of cargo or persons.

Turning, he looked around the other side of the tree, readjusting the flat derby on his head so as not to interfere with his sight. The long, tan, unbuttoned toggle coat covering his slender frame made no sound brushing against the bark. Glancing at each boarded window, one caught his eye. Some of the wood there was missing. But it was on the second floor. Percival cursed his luck. He'd have but one chance. And he needed to catch them red handed.

The clatter of opening doors within the stables broke his thinking. The sounds of men conversing rang through the cool air. Standing motionless, he strained to make out the faint bits of conversation. They spoke English no doubt, but he couldn't make out their words.

He didn't move until the sounds of their laughing on and off about something died off.

Once the air became silent, he produced a pocket watch from his vest, covering the slight blue light emanating from each number with his other hand. A small, red light slowly made its way clockwise around the edge of the face, keeping accurate pace of each second it tracked.

Later than he thought. Not much more daylight left. He made a quick decision.

Picturing himself moving up the side of the dilapidated building, he replaced the watch and produced black leather gloves from his coat pockets, ones to minimize the number of splinters finding their way into his flesh.

Donning the gloves, drew in a short breath, then darted towards the barn.

In mere seconds, he was there. Without pausing, he scaled the side of the barn, moving carefully but quickly. Once on the ledge of the upper window, he hoisted himself in, squeezing

through the narrow opening between two vertical boards. Halfway through, the toggle coat caught itself onto a large splinter. A cracking noise shot through the air.

Undeterred, he flung himself through and onto the floor.

On the level below, one of two dozen men there heard the noise. Nailing a wooden crate shut, he paused mid swing. The short, round, bearded man glanced at the loft area above. A wooden floor running the length of the barn once held hay and other fodder for the long gone animals in the pens below. This obstructed his view. Knowing the structure was old—he and his comrades heard many a creak and crack coming from the old wood—curiosity got the better of him. He sat the hammer down upon the crate and took a step towards the wall.

“You there!” A loud, strong voice bellowed from behind.

The man stopped and turned back to see the boss staring at him.

“ ‘Taugt I ‘erd a noise, Gov,” he said.

Unimpressed, Victor took the pipe from his mouth. He stepped towards the partially nailed crate. Despite a lack of stature, he was stout, with a hard face covered with a trimmed goatee and handlebar mustache. As with most men in his position, he possessed a loud voice and constitution to use it.

“The only noise I want to ‘ear is that ‘ammer.” Smoke billowed from his mouth with each word. “All this is goin’ to get to the Orient in one piece!”

Stepping back towards the crate, the man brook no argument. Once there he returned to nailing the top shut.

Victor turned back also, watching over the beehive of activity around him.

Percival remained still until the unmistakable sounds of men and movement filled the air. He listened to the louder and softer voices from below, his body tenuously lying flat upon the wood floor. Satisfied his presence remained unknown, he made his way to the edge of the loft. He crept slowly forward all fours, his coat making a gentle brushing sound along the old wood, lowering himself closer to the deck as he drew near the edge. Just like a cat stalking prey.

A loud bang and crashing noise ripped through the air like a thunderclap. Percival froze and hugged the floor.

Victor and everyone else heard it as well. He turned. Those nearest him saw the anger on his face. A large rectangular crate now lay on its side, the top broke open.

“CAREFUL THERE!” he shouted, stepping towards the crate. “None of you blokes want to get paid... DO YOU!”

Shamefaced, those manhandling the large box to the awaiting cart hurried about correcting their mistake. Victor stood watching as his right hand man came up from behind.

“If they knew what that was, they’d be more careful,” Abraham said in a gruff voice. He dressed not much different from his boss. Although Victor’s were in slightly better shape, both wore drab, faded shirts and overcoats.

Victor shook his head reaching into the breast pocket of his vest for another match. “If the squidies didn’t kill ‘em with it, they’ll surely kill themselves movin’ it.” With a swipe along the edge of a nearby crate, he lit the match and restoked his pipe.

Percival remained motionless, pressed against the rough planks beneath him. Convinced everyone’s attention was back to their assigned tasks, he crept forward a few inches. Removing his bowler hat, he peered over the edge, surveying the entire area below. He noted the crates of various sized scattered about, most already nailed shut. Cloth and straw used to keep whatever therein in one piece obstructed the contents of others. Then he glanced at the large box open due to its fall. His eyes widened.

“Good Lord! Where on Earth did they get that!” he said in a low, shallow voice.

Long and cylindrical, punctuated by spherical objects every few feet along its length, an open cone sat at one end. Thick wires protruded from each orb. He instantly recognized the device pilfered from a fallen Martian war machine: a heat ray projector.

He watched as a small group of men manhandled the crate upright and placed the top back on. The noise of hammering again filled the room, each stroke driving in a large nail. Moving back on all fours, he gingerly made his way towards the outer wall. Commanding himself to be patient, the last thing he wanted to do was make too much noise and—

One of the planks under him gave way. That part of the floor had long ago lost its support below. Grasping about, he felt himself falling. His chest and hips scrapped against other loose planks as gravity pulled him downward.

Everyone below stopped and looked over, watching a blurred figure fall from the rafters accompanied by planks of varying size. It made a peculiar thud upon the stable floor. Old hay came down around it. Stunned, no one dare more, save Victor. He strode with purpose towards the uninvited guest.

Percival felt the wind leave his body as he hit the ground. Fortunately, the distance had not been too great. Still possessing enough strength, he rolled over, then slowly stood. He saw Victor approaching, unhappy to see him.

Victor stepped forward, reading his fists, believing the intruder easy prey after the fall. With what breath he could catch, Percival parried the first punch. He then delivered a strong left hook of his own squarely upon Victor's jaw, sending him to the ground. Not wanting to gloat, a hasty departure was now in order.

"*GET 'IM!*" the still prostrate Victor bellowed through his pain-filled mouth. Those stunned by the unexpected activity began moving.

Turning left, Percival saw his bowler hat directly underfoot. Picking it up, he made for the stable. No sooner had he donned it when another man proceeded to bar his path. The overweight man must have believed his girth would topple the much smaller intruder. No stranger to such a situation, Percival knelt as the burly man lurched forward in an attempt to grab him. Although still not fully recovered from the fall, he delivered a sound a blow to the attacker's stomach, sending this would be assailant stumbling forward, grasping his abdomen in pain. Seeing two more antagonists fast approaching, he stood back up.

The first, much taller man raised a hammer-filled hand. Not slowing his stride, Percival continued forward. The man brought the hammer down directly at his prey. Percival raised both of hands, stopping the man's arm just above his own head. He then planted a foot into the assailant's crouch, instantly sending the opponent howling downward. With adrenaline now running his emotions, he peered towards the back of warehouse, seeing his escape route nearly clear, the sounds of shouting and cursing not altering his focus. He strode towards a crate, preparing himself to leap over it and to safety.

A blow to his back stopped him cold. The shock instantly took the life out of his legs. Robbed of mobility, he fell to his knees, then forward onto his hands. His hat once again found its way onto the floor. The plank used across his back fell next to it. Feeling himself manhandled upward by men grasping his arms, he readied what fight remaining within. Drawing in a breath to replenish his strength, he saw Victor. Next, he felt the man send a single punch to his stomach.

Stunned and overpowered, Percival slumped forward. Two men prevented him from collapsing as Victor grabbed his chin.

"And 'u might you be?" he nearly shouted.

Percival stared Victor down, noticing a hint of blood running from the side of his mouth and a slight bruise to match.

“Come on...” Victor drew back his free arm, reading another blow. “You forget ‘ow to speak!”

Percival remained quiet, catching his breath.

“Oi! I rememba him.” Victor turned. A skinny fellow dressed in an old gray coat stood a few feet away, pointing at Percival. “This is the bloke I was goin’ on about!” he said approaching Victor. “Came ‘round the docks last week askin’ all those questions.”

Victor turned back and released his hold on Percival. He stepped back, all the while glaring at their guest, noting his gray eyes under light brown brows, themselves set above a medium, angular nose within a narrow face. With a slight smile he wiped away blood running from his mouth. “And ya didn’t leave your calling card.” He punched Percival on the chin. “There’s mine.”

The blow sent a cracking sound throughout the barn. Percival spat out some blood, still restrained by the two men.

“Forgive me Mr. Endicott,” he said, then spat again. “I was told you were indisposed.”

Victor’s eyes grew wide. “Right smart one you, Mister whoever you are!” He turned to Abraham behind him. “Fetch my pistol. In my coat.” Abraham went to carry out the command. Victor turned back. “Sorry we won’t be getting better acquainted.”

Percival smiled. “Pity. I was looking forward to some tea. It is about that time—”

He felt a blow to his back from one of the men holding him.

“Parents taught you no manners!” the man said.

“Fathers a Vicar if you are curious,” Percival replied in pain but with pride.

Victor smiled back. “A Vicar. Well then. He can say a few words for you after they fish you out the ‘Tems.”

Back with the pistol, Abraham held it out grip first. Victor took it.

“Now then...” He took a step back and readied the gun. “When I’m done, throw ‘im into the wagon...” The two men holding Percival kept their grip, but stepped slightly to the side, giving their boss a better a shot. “We’ll dump him once we get to London—”

A crashing sound burst out from the other end of the barn catching everyone’s attention.

The man closest turned and saw six men coming through the main entrance, all save one dressed in dark uniforms. More gushed in behind them.

“BOBBIES!” he shouted, turning to run.

Everyone save Victor scattered, including those holding Percival.

The sounds of ‘*Stop*’ and ‘*Get them*’ filled the air, along with curses from Victor’s men. Percival didn’t wait for Victor to regain his composure. He leaped towards some crates nearby. Victor turned back and fired twice. Both bullets missed, striking the wooden wall beyond.

A handful of stunned men made their way to the stable. Upon swinging open the double doors they froze. Outside stood a dozen soldiers, each pointing their Enfield rifles level at them, an officer aiming his own pistol as well. Stopped mid stride, Victor’s men slowly lifted their hands.

Within the barn, police chased the other men down. Some surrendered without a struggle, others engaged in a *mêlée*, fruitlessly fighting off their arrest.

Crouched behind a large crate protecting him, Percival peeked around, catching a glimpse of Victor heading toward the far end of the barn, here and there dogging any attempt at apprehension. One young police officer presented no challenge to Victor’s well-worn knuckles. Percival sprang up and gave chase. Darting around the crates scattered about he played catch up, eyeing Victor the whole time. Beyond, he saw another small door near the corner.

Victor paused and turned. Seeing Percival in pursuit, he raised his pistol. He fired one round, again missing the mark as Percival dashed to the left. Without hesitation he continued his run to the door and freedom.

Percival raced along a line of old stables and behind crates piled near them. Here and there he saw the top of Victor’s head over the boxes as kept pace with the now lone quarry.

Victor saw the door just ahead of him. Nearly out of breath, only a few feet separated him from freedom. He did not see Percival leap out from behind one of the crates.

“VICTOR ENDICOTT!” he shouted, reaching under his toggle coat.

Victor stopped. He turned and saw Percival lifting his arm, holding an odd looking pistol. He raised his own. Percival squeezed the solid trigger within the guard straight back. The device let out a slight thumping sound.

Victor felt a warm pulse of air squarely assault his chest. A whooshing sound wisp past him. His body shot backwards, hitting the old wooden wall opposite with a dull thud. Through

the haze rising from the stunpistol, Percival watched Victor's hat and gun fall away. His body then fell limp upon the floor. Two officers shot towards the now incapacitated Victor. Another plain clothed officer walked up behind.

"I see you couldn't wait for the rest of us, Percival."

Percival lowered the stunpistol, removing the small, compressed and still warm air cartridge from the handle. "That was the plan, Mr. Thomas. Unfortunately, a loose floorboard altered my intentions."

Thomas stepped around as Percival holstered the weapon. "Quite the pistol you have there."

"We may not have figured out those heat rays, but we did learn a thing or two from the Martians. Of course, these little cylinders don't shoot out that black smoke they used. We prefer our criminals alive and talking. Save them for the rope."

"Endicott there wouldn't fancy your weapon of choice either way. And I believe this is yours?" He handed Percival a bowler hat as two officers dragged Victor off.

"No doubt." Percival took the hat and placed it properly on his head. "And thank you. 'Tis my favorite."

Percival turned. Still feeling the pain from the fall and fight, he limped and winced slightly, making his way to the middle of the barn. All around, police officers and soldiers continued rounding up Victor's men. Mr. Thomas followed behind, watching Percival climb onto a moderately sized crate. Once atop, he placed his hands upon his hips in a semi-theatrical pose. His impeccable English accent and voice rang through the air.

"Your attention please!" Percival began. "In the name of his Majesty King Edward the Seventh, I place you all under arrest for violation of the Martian Machine and Material Act of Nineteen Hundred."

Mr. Thomas looked around. "I wager we have quite the haul here."

Percival lowered himself off the crate. "Your wager is correct, Mr. Thomas. They even possess part of a heat ray assembly."

Thomas' eyes grew wide as a bearded officer approached.

"We bagged the lot of them," the officer told Percival. "And the Captain outside rounded up a few more trying to flee a foot."

“Thank you Constable. We will have our hands full taking all this back to London.” He turned. “Mr. Thomas, I would say we have much to do cataloging all their ill gotten merchandise.”

“We do,” he responded. “But your presence is requested elsewhere.”

A look of confusion came over Percival. He watched Thomas reach into his coat, produce a small telegraph and hand it over. “Your presence is requested elsewhere forthwith.”

13 January 1905

My Dear Sister Beth,

Time does not permit me to correspond with you, mother and father each in turn, so I have decided to pen a short letter to yourself. And besides, Ma Ma would simply have you read aloud any letters from me as a matter of fact; and Pa Pa’s duties as the shire’s Vicar grants him little leisure time.

I arrived in London this morning, summoned here by His Majesty himself King Edward for what I was told a matter of no small consequence. As I made my way by motor coach to Buckingham Palace, I was greatly impressed by what I saw. Having not been to London in some years, I was able to see the rebuilding efforts that have taken place since my last visit. A goodly number of the building brought down by the invaders have been renovated, and although there are still some areas containing great heaps of rubble, many other structures are in the midst of repair or being rebuilt with vigor. The scaffolding encased around the facades are full of masons, bricklayers and other laborers. I even chanced to see several buildings constructed with steel beams, allowing them to reach greater height than previously.

In the afternoon I was admitted into the King’s presence, whereupon His Majesty and myself, along with Home Secretary Lord Salisbury and Lord Kitchner had the most delightful tea and cakes. The subject of our parley, I dare say, was quite in opposition to the laxity of afternoon tea! Once again I find myself in special service to King and Country, beyond that which I am already tasked –willingly I may add– to perform.

As in the past, I must refrain from any particulars. I know neither you nor our parents bear any malice towards me for the cloak and dagger occupation in which I am frequently engaged. But I can assure you, and I feel this with all my being, that the endeavor upon which I am to embark will go far to avenge the great wrong wrought onto our civilization. Although the footprints my soon to be colleagues and I leave behind may be small, I see following us a great multitude, all as eager as myself.

Please extend my love to Ma Ma and Pa Pa. I do pray that her garden is and shall remain as colorful as I oft remember it, due in no small part to her tireless efforts! And let Father know to add me to the prayers he renders each night in your presence before retiring. I will write again as soon as time permits.

Your Loving Brother,

Percival