

THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE
CLOCKWORK
MAN

BURTON & SWINBURNE IN

THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE
CLOCKWORK
MAN

Presented by
MARK
HODDER



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Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228–2119

VOICE: 716–691–0133

FAX: 716–691–0137

WWW.PYRSE.COM

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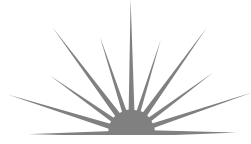
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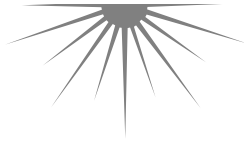
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Dedicated to

YOLANDA LERMA



One man's wickedness may easily become all men's curse.
—PUBLIUS SYRUS



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My thanks to Rohan McWilliam, whose excellent *The Tichborne Claimant: A Victorian Sensation* (Hambleton Continuum, 2007) provided a wealth of background material, song lyrics, and quotes for this story.

George Mann, Lou Anders, and Emma Barnes, you are legends. Mike Moorcock, there's simply no way to adequately thank you.

As in the previous Burton and Swinburne tale, I have taken great liberties with respected (and some not so respected) famous names from the Victorian era. To any descendants of those whose reputations I have toyed with, I offer my apologies and an assurance that this is intended as speculative fiction and very definitely not biography. The alternative history imagined within these pages is a place where the inhabitants of Victorian England encountered different challenges and opportunities from those they met in real life, and have thus developed into very, very different people. They are quite unlike their historical counterparts and should not be in any way regarded as accurate depictions of the people who really lived.

In particular, I would like to offer respect and admiration to the current generation of the Tichborne/Doughty family. They still live in, and struggle to maintain, Tichborne House, which is a massively expensive undertaking, especially in these economically troubled times. They also continue the tradition of the Tichborne Dole, donating flour every year during the Feast of the Annunciation.

IN WHICH A GHOST
DESIRES DIAMONDS

Sir Roger Tichborne is my name,
I'm seeking now for wealth and fame,
They say that I was lost at sea,
But I tell them, "Oh dear, no, not me."

THE MAN OF BRASS

A handsome reward will be given to any person who can furnish such information as will discover the fate of Roger Charles Tichborne. He sailed from Rio de Janeiro on the 20th of April 1854 in the ship *La Bella*, and has never been heard of since, but a report reached England to the effect that a portion of the crew and passengers of a vessel of that name was picked up by a vessel bound to Australia, Melbourne it is believed. It is not known whether the said Roger Charles Tichborne was among the drowned or saved. He would at the present time be about thirty-two years of age, is of a delicate constitution, rather tall, with very light-brown hair, and blue eyes. Mr. Tichborne is the son of Sir James Tichborne, now deceased, and is heir to all his estates.

—ADVERTISEMENT, NEWSPAPERS WORLDWIDE, 1861

Sir Richard Francis Burton was dead.

He was lying on his back in the lobby of the Royal Geographical Society, sprawled at the bottom of the grand staircase with a diminutive red-haired poet slumped across his chest.

Algernon Charles Swinburne, tears streaming down his cheeks, his senses befuddled with alcohol, quickly composed an elegy. It was, after all, best to strike while the iron was hot.

He raised his head, his hair fiery in the flickering gas light, and, in his high-pitched voice, proclaimed:

Wouldst thou not know whom England, whom the world,
Mourns? For the world whose wildest ways he trod,
And smiled their dangers down that coiled and curled
Against him, knows him now less man than god.

He hiccupped.

Beneath his hand, in Burton's jacket, he felt a flask-shaped lump. Surreptitiously, he began to wiggle his fingers into the pocket.

"Our demigod of daring, keenest-eyed," he continued, with a sniff. "To read and deepest—"

"Atrocious!" a voice thundered from the top of the stairs.

Swinburne looked up.

Sir Roderick Murchison stood imperiously on the landing.

"Keep your hands to yourself, Algy," came a whisper.

Swinburne looked down.

Burton's eyes were open.

"Atrocious behaviour!" Murchison boomed again.

The president of the Royal Geographical Society descended with dignity and poise. His back was ramrod straight. His bald head was shining. He passed portraits of the great explorers: James Cook, Sir Walter Raleigh, John Franklin, Sir Francis Drake—this latter painting was hanging askew, having been struck by Burton's passing foot—William Hovell, Mungo Park, and others.

"I'll not brook such conduct, Burton! This is a respectable scientific establishment, not a confounded East End tavern!"

Swinburne fell back as his friend, the former soldier, explorer, and spy—the linguist, scholar, author, swordsman, geographer, and king's agent—staggered to his feet and stood swaying, glowering at Murchison, his one-time sponsor.

"Alive, then?" the poet muttered, gazing bemusedly at his friend.

At five foot eleven, Burton appeared taller, due to the breadth of his shoulders, depth of his chest, and slim athletic build. As inebriated as he was, he radiated power. His eyes were black and mesmeric, his cheekbones prominent, his mouth set aggressively. He had short black hair, which he wore swept backward, and a fierce mustache and beard, forked and devilish. A deep scar disfigured his left cheek, tugging slightly at his bottom eyelid, and there was a smaller one on the right, each marking the path of a Somali spear that had been thrust through his face during a disastrous expedition to Berbera.

“You’re a damnable drunkard!” Murchison barked as he reached the bottom step. His narrow features suddenly softened. “Are you hurt?”

Burton snarled his response: “It’ll take more than a tumble down the bloody stairs to break me!”

Swinburne scrambled up from the floor. He was tiny, just five foot two, and slope-shouldered. His head, perched on such a diminutive body, and with its mop of carrot hair, seemed perfectly enormous. He had pale-green eyes and was clean shaven. He appeared much younger than his twenty-four years.

“Confound it,” he squeaked. “Now I’ll have to use the elegy for somebody else. Who died recently? Anyone noteworthy? Did you like it, Richard? The bit about ‘For the world whose wildest ways he trod’ was especially appropriate, I thought.”

“Be quiet, Swinburne!” Murchison snapped. “Burton, I’m not trying to break you, if that’s what you’re implying. Henry Stanley was better financed to settle the Nile question than you. I had little choice but to add the Society’s backing to that which he received from his newspaper.”

“And now he’s disappeared!” Burton growled. “How many flying machines have to vanish over Africa’s Lake Regions before you realise that the only way in is on foot?”

“I’m well aware of the problem, sir, and I’ll have you know that I warned Stanley. It was his newspaper that insisted he take rotorchairs!”

“Pah! I know the area better than any man in the entire British Empire, but you saw fit to send a damn fool journalist. Who next, Murchison? Perhaps a dance troupe from the music halls?”

Sir Roderick stiffened. He crossed his arms over his chest and replied, icily: “Samuel Baker wants to mount a rescue mission, as does John Petherick, but whomever I send, it shan’t be you, of that you can be certain. Your days as a geographer are over. It appears, however, that your days as a drinker are not!”

Burton clenched his teeth, tugged at his jacket, took a deep breath, paused, sighed it out, and all of a sudden the fight left him. He said, in a subdued tone: “Sam and John are good men. Accomplished. They know how to handle the natives. My apologies, Sir Roderick, I find it difficult to let go. I still think of the Nile question as mine to answer, though, in truth, I have a new and entirely different role to play now.”

“Ah, yes. I heard a rumour that Palmerston has employed you. Is it true?”

Burton nodded. “It is.”

“As what?”

“In truth, it’s hard to say. I’m titled the ‘king’s agent.’ It’s something of an investigative role.”

“Then I would think you’re well suited to it.”

“Perhaps. But I still take an interest in—well—sir, if you hear anything—”

“I’ll get word to you,” Murchison interrupted curtly. “Now go. Get some coffee. Sober up. Have some self-respect, man!”

The president turned and stamped back up the stairs, straightening Drake’s portrait as he passed it.

A valet fetched Burton and Swinburne their coats, hats, and canes, and the two men walked unsteadily across the lobby and out through the double doors.

The evening was dark and damp, glistening with reflections after the day’s showers. A chill wind tugged at their clothes.

“Coffee at the Venetia Hotel?” Burton suggested, buttoning his black overcoat.

“Or another brandy and a bit of slap and tickle?” Swinburne countered. “Verbena Lodge isn’t far from here.”

“Verbena Lodge?”

“It’s a house of ill repute where the birchings are—”

“Coffee!” Burton said.

They walked along Whitehall Place and turned right into Northumberland Avenue, heading toward Trafalgar Square. Swinburne began to sing a song of his own composition:

If you were queen of pleasure,
And I were king of pain,
We’d hunt down love together,
Pluck out his flying-feather,
And teach his feet a measure,
And find his mouth a rein;
If you were queen of pleasure,
And I were king of pain.

His tremulous piping attracted disapproving glances from passersby. Despite the bad weather and the late hour, there were plenty of people about, mainly gentlemen strolling to and fro between the city’s restaurants and clubs.

“Oh, bugger it,” the poet cursed. “I think I just sang the last verse first. Now I’ll have to start again.”

“Please don’t trouble yourself on my account,” Burton murmured.

A velocipede—or “penny-farthing,” as some wag had christened the vehicles—chugged past, pumping steam from its tall funnel into the already dense atmosphere of London.

“Hal-lo!” the rider exclaimed as he passed them, his voice rendered jittery

as the vehicle's huge rubber-banded front wheel communicated every bump of the cobbled street to his spine. "W-what's g-going on in the s-square?"

Burton peered ahead, struggling to focus his eyes. There was, indeed, some sort of commotion. A crowd had gathered, and he could see the cockscomb helmets of police constables moving among the top hats.

He took Swinburne by the arm. "Come along," he urged. "Let's see what the hullabaloo is all about."

"For pity's sake slow down, will you!" complained his companion, who had to match Burton's every stride with two of his own. "You'll render me horrendously sober at this pace!"

"Incidentally, Algy, in the event of my demise, perhaps you'd show a little more restraint with the god and demigod references," Burton grumbled.

"Ha! What a contrary fellow you are! On the one hand you seem obsessed by religions; on the other, repelled by them!"

"Humph! These days, I'm more interested in the underlying motivation—in the reasons why a man is willing to be guided by a god whose existence is, at best, impossible to prove and, at worst, an obvious fabrication. It seems to me that in these times of rapid scientific and industrial advancement, the procurement of knowledge has become too intimidating a prospect for the average man, so he's shunning it entirely in favour of faith. Faith requires nothing but blind adherence, whereas knowledge demands the continual apprehension of an ever-expanding body of information. With faith, one can at least claim knowledge without having to do the hard work of acquiring it!"

"I say!" Swinburne cried. "Well said, old chap! Well said! You hardly slurred a single word! You're eminently reprehensible!"

"You mean *comprehensible*."

"I know what I mean. But Richard, surely Darwin's natural evolution has rendered God undeniably defunct?"

"Indubitably. Which begs the question: to what falsehood will the uneducated masses willingly devote themselves next?"

They paced along, swinging their canes, their hats set at a jaunty angle. Despite the revitalising nip in the air, Burton was developing a headache. He decided to take a brandy with his coffee; perhaps it would numb the faint throbbing.

When they reached Trafalgar Square, the famous explorer plunged into the crowd and shouldered his way through it with Swinburne trailing in his wake. A constable stepped into their path, his hand raised.

"Stay back, please, gents."

Burton pulled out his wallet and withdrew from it a printed card. He showed it to the policeman who instantly saluted and stepped back.

“Beggin’ your pardon, sir.”

“Over here, Captain!” a deep, slightly husky voice called. Burton saw his friend Detective Inspector William Trounce of Scotland Yard standing at the base of Nelson’s Column. Two people were with him: a young dark-skinned constable and, curiously, someone who was standing absolutely still, concealed from head to toe by a blanket.

Trounce met them with a hearty handshake. He was a bulky but amiable-looking individual, short but broad, with thick limbs and a barrel chest, bright twinkling blue eyes, and a large upward-curling brown mustache. His heavy square chin accurately hinted at a streak of stubbornness. He was wearing a dark worsted suit and a bowler hat.

“Hallo, chaps!” he said cheerfully. “Been drinking, have you?”

“Is it that obvious?” Burton mumbled.

“You didn’t exactly cross the square as the crow flies.”

“We’re on our way to the Venetia for coffee.”

“Very wise. Strong, black, with plenty of sugar. This is Constable Bhatti.”

The policeman standing at Trounce’s side saluted smartly. He was slender, youthful, and rather handsome.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, sir,” he effused, with a slight Indian accent. “My cousin, Commander Krishnamurthy, was with you during the Old Ford affair.”

He was referring to the recent battle that Burton, Swinburne, and a great many Scotland Yard men had fought against the Technologists and Rakes. Those two normally opposed groups—the one dedicated to scientific advancement, the other to anarchistic revolution—had banded together to try to capture a man from the future who’d become known as Spring Heeled Jack. Burton had defeated them and killed their quarry.

“Krishnamurthy’s a thoroughly good egg,” Swinburne noted. “But commander? Has he been promoted?”

“Yes, sir. It’s a new rank in the force.”

Trounce added: “They’ve made him head of the newly formed Flying Squad, and deservedly so. I don’t know anyone who can handle a rotorchair the way Krishnamurthy does.”

Burton nodded his approval and looked curiously at the silent, motionless blanket.

“So what’s happening here, Trounce?”

The detective inspector turned to his subordinate. “Would you explain, please, Constable?”

“Certainly, sir.” The young policeman looked at Burton and Swinburne and his dark eyes shone with excitement. “It’s marvellous! An absolute wonder! Practically a work of art! I’ve never seen anything so intricate or—”

“Just the facts, please, lad,” Trounce interjected.

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. This is my beat, you see, Captain Burton, and I pass through the square every fifty minutes or so. Tonight has been a quiet one. I’ve been making the rounds as usual, with nothing much to report aside from the customary prostitutes and drunkards—er—that is to say—”

He stopped, cleared his throat, cleared it again, and cast a pleading glance at his superior.

William Trounce laughed. “Don’t worry, son, Captain Burton and Mr. Swinburne have been celebrating, that’s all. Isn’t that right, gents?”

“Quite so,” Burton confirmed, self-consciously.

“And I wouldn’t mind celebrating some more!” Swinburne announced.

Burton rolled his eyes.

Trounce addressed Bhatti: “So it was business as usual?”

The constable nodded. “Yes. I came on duty this evening at seven o’clock and passed this way three times without incident. On the fourth occasion, I noticed a crowd gathering here, where we’re standing. I came over to investigate and found this—” He gestured at the concealed figure.

Trounce reached out and pulled the blanket away.

Burton and Swinburne gasped.

“Beautiful, isn’t it!” Bhatti exclaimed.

A mechanical man stood before them. It was constructed from polished brass, slender, and about five feet five inches tall. The head was canister-shaped, flat at the top and bottom, and featureless but for three raised circular areas set vertically in the front. The top one was like a tiny ship’s porthole, through which a great many motionless gears could be glimpsed, as small, complex, and finely crafted as the workings of a pocket watch. The middle circle held a mesh grille, and the bottom one was simply a hole out of which three very fine five-inch-long wires projected. They were straight and vibrated slightly in the breeze.

The neck consisted of thin shafts and cables, swivel joints and hinges. A slim cylinder formed the mechanical man’s trunk. Panels were cut out of it, revealing cogwheels and springs, delicate little crankshafts, gyroscopes, flywheels, and a pendulum. The thin but sturdy arms ended in three-fingered hands. The legs were sturdy and tubular; the feet oval-shaped and slightly domed.

“It’s a beauty, isn’t it?” Constable Bhatti breathed. “Look here, in the small of the back. You see this hole? That’s where the key goes.”

“The key?” Burton asked.

“Yes! To wind it up! It’s clockwork!”

“Bhatti, here,” Detective Inspector Trounce put in, “is the Yard’s amateur Technologist. Of all the policemen in London, he’s certainly the right chap to have found this contraption.”

“A happy coincidence for the constable,” Swinburne observed glibly.

“It’s my hobby,” the young policeman enthused. “I attend a social club where we tinker with devices—trying to make them go faster or adapting them in various ways. Great heavens, the fellows would be beside themselves if I turned up with this specimen!”

Burton, who’d started to examine the brass figure with a magnifying glass, absently asked the policeman what he’d done after discovering it.

“The crowd was swelling—you know how Londoners flock around anything or anyone unusual—so I whistled for help. After a few constables had arrived, I gave the mechanism a thorough examination. I must admit, I got a little absorbed, so I probably didn’t alert the Yard as quickly as I should have.” He looked at Trounce. “Sorry about that, sir.”

“And what is our metal friend’s story, do you think?” asked Burton.

“Like I said, Captain, it’s clockwork. My guess is that it’s wound down. Why it was out walking the streets, I couldn’t venture to guess.”

“Surely if it was walking the streets, it would have attracted attention before it got here? Did anyone see it coming?”

“We’ve been making enquiries,” Trounce said. “So far we’ve found fourteen who spotted it crossing the square but no one who saw it before then.”

“So it’s possible—maybe even probable—that it was delivered to the edge of the square in a vehicle,” Burton suggested.

“Why, yes, Captain. I should say that’s highly likely,” the detective inspector agreed.

“It could have made its way through the streets, though,” Bhatti said. “I’m not suggesting it did—I simply mean that the device is capable of that sort of navigation. You see this through here?” He tapped a finger on the top porthole at the front of the machine’s head. “That’s a cabbage in there. Can you believe it? I never thought I’d live to see one! Imagine the cost of this thing!”

“A cabbage, Constable?” Trounce asked.

“Babbage,” Bhatti repeated. “A device of extraordinary complexity. They calculate probability and act on the results. They’re the closest things to a human brain ever created, but the secret of their construction is known only to one man—their inventor, Sir Charles Babbage.”

“He’s a recluse, isn’t he?” Swinburne asked.

“Yes, sir, and an eccentric misanthrope. He has an aversion to what he terms ‘the common hordes’ and, in particular, to the noise they make, so he prefers to keep himself to himself. He hand-builds each of these calculators and booby-traps them to prevent anyone from discovering how they operate. Any attempt to dismantle one will result in an explosion.”

“There should be a law against that sort of thing!” Trounce grumbled.

“My point is that when wound up, this brass man almost certainly has the ability to make basic decisions. And this here—” Bhatti indicated the middle opening on the thing’s head “—is, in my opinion, a mechanical ear. I think you could give this contraption voice commands. And these—” he flicked the projecting wires “—are some sort of sensing device, I’d wager, along the lines of a moth’s antennae.”

Trounce pulled off his bowler hat and scratched his head.

“So let’s get this straight: someone drops this clockwork man at the edge of the square. The device walks as far as Nelson’s Column, then its spring winds down and it comes to a halt. A crowd gathers. According to the people we’ve spoken to, the machine got here just five minutes or so before you arrived on the scene, Constable. And you’ve been here—?”

“About an hour now, sir.”

“About an hour. My question, then, is why hasn’t the owner come forward to claim his property?”

“Exactly!” Bhatti agreed. “A babbage alone is worth hundreds of pounds. Why has it been left here?”

“An experiment gone wrong?” Swinburne offered. “Perhaps the owner was testing its homing instinct. He dropped it here, went back to his house or workshop or laboratory or whatever, and is waiting there for it to make its way back. Only he didn’t wind the blessed thing up properly!”

Burton snorted. “Ridiculous! If you owned—or had invented—something as expensive as this, you wouldn’t abandon it, hoping it’ll find you, when there’s even the remotest chance that it might not!”

Spots of rain began to fall.

Trounce glanced at the black, starless sky with impatience.

“Constable Hoare!” he shouted, and a bushy-browed, heavily mustached policeman emerged from the crowd and strode over.

“Sir?”

“Go to Saint Martin’s Station and hitch a horse to a wagon. Bring it back here. On the double, mind!”

“Yes, sir!”

The constable departed and Trounce turned back to Burton.

“I’m going to have it carted over to the Yard. You’ll have complete access to it, of course.”

The king’s agent pulled his collar tightly around his neck. The temperature was dropping and he was shivering.

“Thank you, Detective Inspector,” he said, “but we were just passing. I don’t think there’s anything here we need to take a hand in. It’s curious, though, I’ll admit. Will you let me know if someone claims the thing?”

“Certainly.”

“See you later, then. Come on, Algy, let’s leg it to the Venetia. I need that coffee!”

The powerfully built explorer and undersized poet left the policemen, pushed through the throng, and headed across to the end of the Strand. As they entered the famous thoroughfare, the drizzle became a downpour. It hammered a tattoo against their top hats and dribbled from the brims.

Burton’s headache was worsening and he was starting to feel tired and out of sorts.

A velocipede went past, hissing loudly as the rain hit its furnace.

Somewhere in the distance a siren wailed—a litter-crab warning that it was about to disinfect a road with blasts of scalding steam. It was a waste of time in this weather, but the crabs were automated and clanked around London every night, whatever the conditions.

“It’s a good job brass doesn’t rust,” Swinburne observed, “or this weather would be the death of the clockwork man!”

Burton stopped.

“What is it?” his assistant asked.

“You’re right!”

“Of course I am. It’s an alloy of copper and zinc.”

“No, no! About it being a coincidence!”

Swinburne hopped up and down. “What? What? Richard, can we please get out of this blasted rain?”

“Too much of a coincidence!”

Burton turned and took off back in the direction of Trafalgar Square.

“We’re already too late!” he yelled over his shoulder.

Swinburne scampered along behind him, losing ground rapidly.

“What do you mean? Too late for what?”

He received no answer.

They raced into Trafalgar Square and rejoined Trounce and Bhatti. The latter had managed to open the uppermost portal in the machine’s head and was peering in at the babbage.

“Oh, you’re back! Look at this, Captain!” he said, as Burton reached his side. “There are eight tiny switches along the inside edge of this opening. Maybe they adjust the machine’s behaviour in some manner? Each one has an up or down position, so how many combinations would—?”

“Never mind that!” the king’s agent snapped. “Tell me the route of your beat, Constable!”

“My beat?” Bhatti looked puzzled.

“What’s happening?” Trounce asked.

Burton ignored the detective inspector. His eyes blazed intently.

“Your beat, man! Spit it out!”

The constable pushed his helmet back from his eyes. Rainwater trickled down the back of his uniform. “All right,” he said. “From here I proceed along Cockspur Street and around into Whitcomb Street. I walk up as far as the junction with Orange Street then turn right and keep on until I reach Mildew Street. I turn right again, at the works where they’re shoring up the underground river, enter Saint Martin’s, and foot-slog it back down to the square.”

“And that takes fifty minutes?” Burton demanded.

“When you figure in all the alleyways that I poke my nose into, the shop doors that need checking, and so forth, yes.”

“And places of note on the route? Places you check with the greatest diligence?”

“What’s this about, Captain Burton?”

“Just answer the confounded question, man!”

“Do as he says, lad,” Trounce ordered.

“Very well. There’s the main branch of the Bright Empire Bank on the corner of Cockspur; the Satyagraha Bank is on Whitcomb; Treadwell’s Post Office is on Orange Street, with SPARTA just opposite—”

“Sparta?”

“The Swan, Parakeet, and Runner Training Academy.”

“Ah. Continue, please.”

“The League of Enochians Gentlemen’s Club is at the corner of Mildew, with the works on the other side; then going down Saint Martin’s, there’s Scrannington Bank, Brundleweed the diamond dealer’s, the Pride-Manushi velocipede shop, Boyd’s Antiques, and Goddard the art dealer. That’s it. There are plenty of other places, of course, but those are the ones I make a special point of checking.”

“Trounce, take Bhatti and follow the route from the Cockspur end,” Burton directed. “Algy and I will take the opposite direction, along Saint Martin’s.”

Trounce frowned, held out his hands in a shrug, and asked: “But why? What are we looking for?”

“Can’t you see?” Burton cried. “This bloody thing—” he struck the brass figure with his cane and it clanged loudly “—is nothing but a decoy! Whoever dropped it off in the square knew it would fascinate Bhatti, knew he’d pore over it obsessively before summoning help from the Yard, and knew that a fair amount of time would pass before he returned to his beat!”

“Hell’s bells!” Trounce shouted. “You mean there’s a crime in progress? Come on, Constable!”

He shoved bystanders aside, ordered a nearby police sergeant to guard the metal man, and raced away with Bhatti toward the end of Cockspur Street.

Sir Richard Francis Burton and Algernon Swinburne made their way to the edge of the square and pressed on through the rain to Saint Martin's.

Adrenalin had sobered them but Burton's headache was intensifying and a familiar ague—a remnant of Africa—was beginning to grip his limbs. It was an oncoming attack of malaria, and if he didn't get back to his apartment soon to quell it with a dose of quinine, he'd be immobilised for days to come.

They passed the police station and nodded to Constable Hoare, who was at the side of the road hitching a miserable-looking police horse to a wagon.

All along the street, gas lamps had fizzled out, their covers inadequate against the downpour. Only a few remained alight, and the deep shadows and streaming rain reduced visibility to just a few yards.

A little farther on, the two men came to Goddard's and peered through the night grille at the window behind.

"Good gracious!" Swinburne blurted excitedly. "There's a Rossetti in there and I modelled for it! I must tell Dante. He'll be over the moon!"

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was a founding member of the True Libertines—the most idealistic faction of the Libertine caste and a counterbalance to the notorious Rakes. He was also one of the "Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood," a community of artists whose stated aim was to produce works that communicated at a "spiritual" level with the common man; a direct challenge to the current trend in propaganda. Few people admired them. Rossetti and his cohorts were mocked and ridiculed by the press, which claimed the artists were appealing to a void, since common men—the working classes—lacked anything resembling a well-developed sense of their own spirituality.

Swinburne often socialised with the group and had posed for their paintings on a number of occasions. He was surprised that Goddard dared display the small, medieval-themed canvas, which depicted the poet as a flame-haired knight with lance in hand, mounted on a sturdy horse. Admittedly, the picture was half hidden behind a more commercial portrait of the late Francis Galton, who was shown wielding a syringe and smiling broadly beneath the words: *Self-improvement! It doesn't hurt a bit!*

The premises was quiet and dark, its door secure, the windows intact.

"Let's move on," Burton said. "No one's going to steal a Rossetti."

An old-fashioned horse-drawn brougham—they were still common—came clattering alongside, splashed water onto their trouser legs, and disappeared into the gloom. Oddly, the sound of its horse's hooves thundered on, seeming quite out of proportion to the size of the animal.

"A mega-dray," Swinburne commented, and Burton realised that his

assistant was right; the heavy clopping wasn't from the brougham's animal at all, it was from one of the huge dray horses developed by the Eugenicists, the biological branch of the Technologist caste. Obviously there was one nearby, though even as Burton thought this, the sound faded into the distance.

Boyd's Antiques, which was on the other side of the road, was, like Goddard's, locked up and undisturbed.

"Nothing happening here," Swinburne said as they walked on. "Great heavens, Richard, we're in desperate straits—we're both soaked, and not with alcohol!"

"Good!" Burton replied. "I thought I'd weaned you off the bottle."

"You had, but then you tempted me back! You've not been sober for more than two days since the Spring Heeled Jack hoo-ha!"

"For which I apologise. I think my frustrations over the Nile situation have been getting the better of me."

"Give it up, Richard. Africa's no longer your concern."

"I know, I know. It's just that . . . I regret the mistakes I made during my expedition. I wish I could go back and make amends."

A man hurried past them, spitting expletives as the strengthening wind turned his umbrella inside out.

Swinburne gave his friend a sideways glance. "Do you mean physically return to Africa or go back in time? What on earth's got into you? You've been like a bear with a sore head lately."

Burton pursed his lips, thrust his cane into the crook of his elbow, and pushed his hands into his pockets.

"Montague Penniforth."

"Who?"

"He was a cab driver—a salt-of-the-earth type. He knew his position in society, and despite it being tough and the rewards slight, he just got on with it, uncomplainingly."

"So?"

"So I dragged him out of his world and into mine. He got killed, and it was my fault." Burton looked at his companion, his eyes hard and his expression grim. "William Stroyan, 1854, Berbera. I underestimated the natives. I didn't think they'd attack our camp. They did. He was killed. John Hanning Speke. Last year, he shot himself in the head rather than confront me in a debate. Now half his brain is a machine and his thoughts aren't his own. Edward Oxford—"

"The man who leaped here from the future."

"Yes. And who accidentally changed the past. He was trying to put it right, and I killed him."

“He was Spring Heeled Jack. He was insane.”

“My motives were selfish. He revealed to me where my life was going. I broke his neck to prevent any chance that he might succeed in his mission. I didn’t want to be the man that his history recorded.”

They trudged on through the sodden rubbish and animal waste. Unusually, this end of Saint Martin’s Lane hadn’t yet been visited by a litter-crab.

“If he’d lived, Richard,” Swinburne said, “the Technologists and Rakes would have used him to manipulate time for their own ends. We would have lost control of our destinies.”

“Does not Destiny, by its very nature, deny us control?” Burton countered.

Swinburne smiled. “Does it? Then if that’s the case, responsibility for Mr. Penniforth’s death—and the other misfortunes you mentioned—must rest with Destiny, not with you.”

“Which would make me its tool. Bismillah! That’s just what I need!”

Burton stopped and indicated a shopfront. “Here’s Pride-Manushi, the velocipede place.”

They examined the doors and windows of the establishment. No lights showed. Everything was secure. They squinted through the gaps in the metal shutter. There was no movement, nothing amiss.

“Brundleweed’s next,” Burton murmured.

“Gad! I don’t blame you for wishing you were back on the Dark Continent!” Swinburne declared, pulling at his overcoat collar. “At least it’s warm there. A thousand curses on this rain!”

They crossed the road again. As they mounted the pavement, a beggar stepped out of a shadowy doorway. He was ill kempt and wore disreputable clothes. A profusion of greying hair framed his face, and it was quite apparent that he was well acquainted with neither a comb nor a bar of soap.

“I lost me job, gents,” he wheezed, raising his flat cap in greeting and revealing a bald scalp. “An’ it serves me bloomin’ well right, too. I ask you, why the heck did I choose to be a bleedin’ philosopher when me mind’s nearly always muddled? Can you spare thruppence?”

Swinburne fished a coin out of his pocket and flipped it to the vagrant. “Here you are, old chap. You were a philosopher?”

“Much obliged. Aye, I was, lad. An’ here’s a bit of advice in return for your coin: life is all about the survival of the fittest, an’ the wise man must remember that, while he’s a descendant of the past, he’s also a parent of the bloomin’ future. Anyways—” he bit the thruppence and slipped it into his pocket “—Spencer’s the name, an’ I’m right pleased to have made your acquaintance. Evenin’, gents!”

He raised his cap again and retreated to his doorstep, where the rain couldn't reach him.

Burton and Swinburne continued their patrol.

"What an extraordinary fellow!" Swinburne reflected. "Here's Brundleweed's. It looks quiet."

It did, indeed, look quiet. The grille was down, the window display was intact, and the lights were off.

"I wonder how Trounce and Bhatti are getting on," Burton said. He tried the door. It didn't budge. "It looks all right. Let's foot it to Scrannington Bank."

The cold wind battered them and the deluge lanced into their faces. They pulled the brims of their hats down low and the collars of their coats up high, but it was a lost cause.

Burton was shivering uncontrollably. Tomorrow, he knew, he was going to be in a bad way.

The bank loomed ahead. It was a big, dirty, foreboding edifice. The water had cut grey rivulets into its sooty coat.

Swinburne hopped up its steps to check the doors. They were closed and barred. He came back down. All the windows were shuttered.

"This isn't very inspiring at all. I think we're on a wild goose chase," he complained. "What time is it?"

"Nigh on midnight, I should say."

"Look around you, Richard. Everyone has disappeared. We haven't even seen an automated animal. Man, woman, and beast are tucked up in their warm, dry beds! So are criminals!"

"You're probably right," Burton replied grumpily, "but we should press on until we reunite with Trounce."

"Fine! Fine! If you say so," Swinburne replied, throwing up his arms in exasperation. "But please remember that—should another occasion like this arise in the future—being wet to the bone and frozen to the marrow is definitely not the sort of pain I enjoy. The sting of a hard cane, yes! The sting of a hard rain, no! What's that?" He pointed across the road to a fenced area beside an intersection. Beyond the low barricade, there was pitch darkness.

"It's Mildew Street," Burton answered. "Let's take a look. Those are the works where they're shoring up the underground river."

They crossed Saint Martin's again and leaned over the waist-high wooden barrier. They couldn't see a thing.

Burton pulled a clockwork hand-lantern from his pocket, shook it open, and gave it a twist. The sides of the device spilled light into the rain. He held it up over the fence, illuminating a muddy pit. The saturated ground angled

down to the mouth of a well, from which the top of a ladder projected. Streams of water gurgled over the slope and disappeared into the wide shaft.

“Look!” he exclaimed, pointing to a patch of mud at the top of the slope, just beneath a collapsed segment of fencing on the Mildew Street side.

“You mean the footprints?” Swinburne shrugged. “So what?”

“Don’t be a blessed fool!” Burton growled. “How long are muddy footprints going to last in this weather?”

“My hat! I see what you mean!”

“They’re recent. Some of them haven’t even filled with water yet.”

The two men moved around the barrier to the broken section. Burton squatted and examined the footprints closely.

“Remind you of anything?” he asked.

“It looks like someone’s been pressing flat irons into the mud,” the poet observed. “My goodness, those are deep prints. Whoever made them must have been very heavy. Ovals, not shoe-shaped. I say! The clockwork man!”

“Not the one in Trafalgar Square,” Burton corrected. “It had clean feet and these prints were made while it’s been standing beside the column. There were other clockwork men here—three of them—and less than fifteen minutes ago, I should think. Look who was with them!”

Burton moved his lantern. The circle of light swept across the mud and settled on a line of big, widely spaced, very deep oblong prints. Who- or whatever had made them obviously possessed three legs.

Swinburne recognised them at once. “Brunel!” he cried. “Isambard Kingdom Brunel! The Steam Man!”

“Yes. See how deep his prints are by the well? He obviously waited there while the brass men went down. I wonder what they were up to?”

Burton stepped over the fence’s fallen planks and turned to his assistant. “I’m going to have a look. You run back to that Spencer fellow. Give him another thruppence and ask him if he saw anything unusual around here, then come back and wait for Trounce and Constable Bhatti. Go! We mustn’t waste any more time!”

Swinburne raced off.

Burton crouched, lowering his centre of gravity to improve his balance on the slippery surface. He began to inch downward, bracing himself with his cane, holding the lantern high. The rain hissed around him. He wondered whether he was doing the right thing. Brunel and his clockwork companions were getting away—but from what? What had they been up to?

He’d covered half the short distance to the well when his feet shot out from under him. He slapped down onto his back and went slithering uncontrollably toward the mouth of the shaft, slewing sideways until his hip

thudded against the top of the ladder which, thankfully, was bolted to the side of the well. He felt his shoulders swerving over the sodden clay and was propelled headfirst into the opening. Without thinking, he let go of his cane and threw out a hand. It closed over a rung and he gripped hard as his body turned in the air, swung down, and slammed against the ladder. The force of the impact knocked the wind out of him and loosened his hold. He fell before catching another rung. Pain lanced through his shoulder. His cane clacked onto a solid surface somewhere below.

He scrambled for a foothold, secured himself, and hung on, shaking. An involuntary groan issued from his lips.

He felt weak and ill. Despite the cold weather, beads of sweat were gathering on his forehead.

The lantern went out.

Shifting to better secure himself, he gave the device a twist. It spluttered back into life and he lowered it past his knee, revealing a brick walkway not far below. A river flowed beside it, the brown surface heaving and frothing as it sped past.

Burton descended with water pouring around him from the pit above. He stepped off the ladder and flexed his arm, winced, then picked up his cane and flashed the light around, finding himself in a small section of newly built brick-lined tunnel. Farther down in both directions, it gave way to a soft-walled, insecure-looking passage which, for as far as he could see—which wasn't very far—had been shored up with timber.

The walkway ran alongside the river and disappeared into the darkness. On it, three sets of muddy oval-shaped footprints trailed back and forth.

He followed them.

The course of the river was by no means straight but the explorer felt certain that it remained more or less beneath Saint Martin's on its way to the Thames.

Moments later, he came to a hole cut into the wall on his left. Big lumps of stone were scattered around it and a pile of rubble blocked the path beyond. A glance at the ground assured him that the three mechanical men had passed this way, so he entered and stepped through a short stretch of roughly cut tunnel.

It broke through into the unlit and damp basement of a building, empty but for broken pieces of packing crates, a rusty iron bedstead, and an old chest of drawers. Smearred mud cut a channel across the dusty floor to an open door and up the stairs beyond.

Treading softly, the king's agent ascended. There was another door at the top of the stairs, which he opened carefully. His lantern illuminated what

appeared to be a workshop. There was a large safe in the corner. Its door had been wrenched off and lay, warped out of shape, on the floor nearby. The safe was empty.

He passed through to a hallway and entered the next room, which he found was at the front of the building. He recognised it at once. He'd seen it through a security grille. It was Brundleweed's—the diamond dealer's shop.

He returned to the safe and examined it.

"Emptied out!" he said, softly. "But why would Brunel—the most lauded engineer in the Empire—steal diamonds? It doesn't make sense!"

The public believed that Isambard Kingdom Brunel had died from a stroke in 1859. They regarded him as one of the greatest Englishmen ever to have lived. Little did they know that he'd actually retreated into a mobile life-maintaining mechanism, and, from it, still directed the Technologists' various projects.

"What the devil is he playing at?" Burton muttered.

There was nothing further he could do here—and the longer he remained, the farther away the Steam Man and his three clockwork assistants would get.

He turned and ran back the way he'd come. It took but a few moments to reach the ladder and climb it.

Someone called to him as he poked his head out into the rain: "Burton! Burton! Hurry up, man!"

"Trounce? Is that you? Give me a hand, will you?"

"Wait there!"

He squinted through the downpour, saw figures milling about, sliding down the slope toward him, and was surprised when Spencer the philosopher emerged from the rain.

"Hallo, Boss! Reach up an' we'll 'ave you out in a jiffy!"

"Hello, Mr. Spencer! Here, grab the end of my cane!"

He extended his stick toward the vagrant, who clutched it tightly.

Burton clambered up and gripped Spencer's wrist. He saw that the beggar was held by Trounce, who in turn was held by Bhatti.

Swinburne, who wasn't holding anybody, was jumping up and down on the other side of the fence, screeching: "Don't let go of him! Don't let go!"

The chain of men pulled Burton up out of the pit, over the fallen fence, and onto the pavement.

"By Jove!" Trounce observed. "You're a sight!"

Burton looked down at himself. He was caked with mud from top to toe. He felt as bad as he looked, but, ignoring the ache burrowing through his bones, he twisted off the lantern, thrust it into his pocket, and reported his

discovery: "It's a diamond robbery. They tunneled into Brundleweed's from the side of the underground river."

"Strewth!" Constable Bhatti gasped. "Old Brundleweed took a big delivery a couple of days ago. The crooks must have made off with a fortune!"

"And they're heading west!" Trounce declared.

"How do you know that?" Burton asked.

"Mr. Spencer saw them!" Swinburne revealed.

Burton turned to the vagrant. "Explain!"

"There were one of 'em whoppin' great pantechnicons parked here, Boss. One of the ones what's drawn by the jumbo dray horses. I didn't see nothin' goin' on, but it galloped off at a rare old pace just a few moments afore you arrived."

"We heard it!" Burton confirmed.

"And it passed us on Orange Street!" Trounce said. "Heaven knows where it is now. We'll never catch up with it!"

"Are you joking?" Burton cried. "How can we miss a horse that size? It's a veritable mountain!"

"True, but a fast-moving one that might have headed off in any direction by now!"

The king's agent turned suddenly and started to race away along Mildew Street.

"Follow me!"

"What? Hey! Captain Burton!" the detective inspector shouted after the retreating figure. "Damn it! Come on, Bhatti!"

The two policemen took off after the king's agent. Swinburne followed, and behind him came Spencer, who'd decided to stick with the group in the hope that another thruppence might be forthcoming.

They dashed into Orange Street, and Trounce hadn't gone far before he spotted Burton ahead, hammering on a door and bellowing, "Open up in the name of the king!"

The detective inspector recognised the building. He'd checked it just a few minutes before: SPARTA, the automated animal training centre.

In a flash, he realised what Burton was up to.

"This is the police!" he hollered officiously. "Open the door!"

He heard a bolt being drawn back.

Swinburne and Spencer arrived, panting.

The portal opened slightly and an eye was put to the crack.

"I was asleep!" a female voice protested.

"Madam, I'm Detective Inspector William Trounce of Scotland Yard. These are my associates and we need your help!"

The door opened wider, revealing a young woman clad in dressing gown, nightcap, and slippers. Her face was strong, oval-shaped, brown-eyed.

“What do you mean?”

“Have you any trained swans on the premises?” Burton asked brusquely.

“Yes. No. That is to say, not fully but six are close enough. Trained, I mean.”

“Then I’m afraid we must commandeer four of them.”

“Five,” Spencer corrected.

The woman looked astonished, her eyes flicking from Burton to Trounce and back again.

“Please, ma’am,” Trounce said in a softer tone. “This is an emergency. You will be compensated.”

She stepped back. “You’d better come in. My name is Mayson, Isabella Mayson.”

They entered.

Miss Mayson lit an oil lamp and held it up.

“Merciful heavens! What happened to you!” she gasped upon noticing Burton’s mud-encrusted clothing.

“Would you mind if I explained later, Miss Mayson? There really isn’t any time to spare.”

“Very well. This way, please.” She lifted an umbrella from a stand and led them along the passage. “I’m afraid you’ll have to pass the parakeets to get to the swans.”

Bhatti grinned and said, “We policemen are used to a little abuse. I take it they’ve not found a solution to the problem yet?”

“Through this room, gentlemen. The cages are beyond. No, Constable—um—?”

“Bhatti, Miss.”

“No, Constable Bhatti, they haven’t. Wait a moment.”

She stopped at a door, fiddled with a key ring, located the appropriate key, and fitted it into the lock.

“Brace yourselves,” she advised, with a wry smile.

She opened the door and they all stepped through.

Insults exploded from the stacked cages encircling the room: “Piss-guzzlers! Cheese-brains! Stench-makers! Cross-eyed baboons! Drooling fumlbers! Flush-faced sots! Blubberous flab-guts! Witless remnants! Boneheaded contortionists! Sheep-tickling louts! Maggotous duffers! Ugly buffoons! Slime-lickers!”

It was a deafening roar, and it didn’t let up for a moment as they traversed the long chamber toward the door at its far end.

“I’m sorry!” Miss Mayson shouted at the top of her voice. “Take it on the chin!”

Swinburne giggled.

Messenger parakeets had been one of the first practical applications of the Eugenicists' science to be adopted by the British public. A person only had to visit a post office to give one of their birds a message, name, and address, and the parakeet would fly off to deliver the communication. No one but the Eugenicists knew how the colourful little creatures found the addresses, but they always did.

There was one problem.

The parakeets cursed and insulted everyone they encountered. Invariably, messages were liberally peppered with expletives not put there by the sender. Nevertheless, the system proved popular, especially as some of the birds displayed a rather amusing talent for creating totally meaningless words that, nevertheless, sounded insulting. These "new insults" were all the rage at Society events. Swinburne himself had recently been called a "blibbering chub-fluffer" by a parakeet delivering an invitation to a poetry reading at Lord Haverleigh's. He'd laughed about it for days. *You are cordially invited—you blibbering chub-fluffer—to an evening of stinking poetry and abysmal piss wine—*

The foul-mouthed birds demonstrated an issue that had troubled eugenics from the very start. Whatever modification the scientists bred into a species, it always brought with it an unexpected side effect. The giant dray horses, for example, had no control over their bladders or bowels and were overproductive in both departments. This had proven a serious problem in London's already filthy streets until the Engineering branch of the Technologists invented the automated mechanical cleaners, popularly known as "litter-crabs," to tackle the issue.

"Hag-kissers! Slack-jaws! Dirt-gobblers! Mumblebums! Dolts! Filthy blackguards! Bulging scumbags! Gusset-sniffers! Gibbering loonies! Puppy-munchers!"

Trailing behind Miss Mayson, the men reached the other side of the room. The young woman unlocked a door, threw it open, and ushered them through. The portal slammed shut behind them and she leaned against it, opening the umbrella. "That's quite enough of that, I think! My apologies, gentlemen."

They stood in a very spacious rain-swept yard beside a row of cages, each containing an upright wheel. In each wheel there was a dog—all greyhounds—sprinting at top speed. There must have been at least twenty of them, and the rumble of the spinning wheels drowned out even the noise of the rain.

The greyhounds were known as runners, and they formed the other half of the British Postal Service. Where the parakeets communicated spoken messages, the dogs delivered letters, racing from door to door with the mis-

sives held gently between their teeth. In fact, they were unable to *stop* running, and even when they arrived at a delivery destination they jogged on the spot until the letter they carried was taken. They were also voracious eaters, and any person using the service was obliged to feed them.

"They've just gone to sleep," Miss Mayson said, gesturing toward the animals.

"They run in their sleep?" Swinburne asked wonderingly.

"Yes, which is why I had the wheels put inside their cages. It's better than having them racing around the yard. The swans are over there."

She indicated the far end of the enclosure, where nine breathtakingly huge birds stood in high-roofed pens. Their heads were poised, about fifteen feet up, at the top of elegantly curved necks. Their beady eyes watched the group as it approached them.

"Don't worry. They're almost tame."

"Almost?" Trounce asked, doubtfully. "Somehow, I don't find that very comforting."

"If they were any wilder, they'd bite your head off before you could blink. They're aggressive by nature."

Trounce smoothed his mustache with his fingers.

"But four are tame enough to fly, yes?" Burton asked.

"Five," Spencer added.

"Yes, sir, though you might struggle a bit. They're a touch headstrong."

"Let's get them buckled up. We have to work fast."

Miss Mayson crossed to a shed from which she produced harnesses and big folded box kites. Then she picked up a long, thin wooden cane, returned to the pens, and used it to drive out five of the enormous white birds.

"Down!" she commanded, while slapping one of the swans on its side with the rod. It obligingly squatted, and, while Spencer held the umbrella over her, she showed the men how to attach the long reins to the base of the bird's neck, passing them over its back. Swinburne, who'd flown swans before, assisted her by buckling the ends of lengthy leather straps to its legs and clipping the other ends to one of the box kites which Burton and Trounce had unfolded.

While they worked, the king's agent instructed his companions: "Look out for litter-crabs."

"Why litter-crabs?" Trounce asked in a puzzled tone.

"I noticed that the end of Saint Martin's hadn't been cleaned," Burton responded. "Now I know why. The litter-crabs were tempted away from it by the mega-dray. You know how the contraptions tend to follow behind the horses, cleaning up the manure. I dare say they're still on its trail!"

“Good thinking, Captain!” the policeman exclaimed.

Miss Mayson helped Constable Bhatti into a kite. He sat on the canvas seat, slipped his boots through the stirrups, and took the reins. The woman showed him how to control the bird.

A few minutes later, all five men were in position.

Miss Mayson stepped back. “Half a mo!” she cried. “Wait there—I have an idea!”

She ran back along the yard and into the training centre.

“What’s she up to?” Burton grumbled truculently, but even as he spoke she reappeared and hurried over to them.

She held a small blue and yellow parakeet in her hand.

“All messenger parakeets are identified by a postcode,” she said. “This is POX JR5. She’s one of the new breed. As long as she knows you, she’ll be able to find you. She doesn’t even need your address. You can use her to communicate between the kites. She’ll keep up with the swans—she’s the swiftest of all my birds. Tell her your names!” She held the parakeet out to each of the men in turn.

“Captain Richard Burton.”

“Odorous thug!” the bird whistled.

“Detective Inspector William Trounce.”

“Ponderous buffoon!” it cheeped.

“Algernon Charles Swinburne.”

“Illiterate bum-pincher!” it cackled.

“Constable Shyamji Bhatti.”

“Nurdle-thwacker!” it squawked.

“Herbert Spencer.”

“Angel-faced beauty,” it crooned.

“My goodness!” Miss Mayson exclaimed. “Was that a compliment?”

Burton blew out a breath. “Please,” he said, “there’s no time for this!”

She gave a small nod and placed the parakeet on Burton’s shoulder. It hunkered down and he felt its little claws sinking into the soggy cloth of his overcoat.

“Good luck!” the young woman said, stepping back. “Constable, call in tomorrow and tell me all about it!”

Bhatti smiled and nodded. “Get yourself inside and dry off,” he advised. “Your slippers are wet through!”

Sir Richard Francis Burton snapped his reins the way she’d shown him. His swan stretched out its wings, ran five steps forward, and, with a mighty flapping, soared into the air. The leather straps of the harness uncoiled, snaked up after it, jerked taut, and his kite shot upward.

Thrown violently back into his canvas seat, the king's agent found himself rising at phenomenal speed into the sodden atmosphere. The rain pelted against his face. His swan spiralled higher and, when he glanced back, he saw that his colleagues were following behind.

The chase was on!