

First Tuesday in April

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The papers were full of it. Front page. Page two. Page Five. The Editorial. Even the cartoon, satirical as ever, had a caricature of the PM, snooty nose in the air, demanding of his staff, "What do you mean - 23rd?"

Who had leaked the information to the press, no one seemed to know. But there was no doubt that there would be a witch-hunt in the upper echelons of the public service. Where the list had originated was anyone's guess - government departments and military big-wigs alike denying the knowledge of even the existence of the document. As for confirmation of its contents - well, not a word either way was being uttered. Yet despite that, there seemed to be no question of the authenticity of the item - an ultra secret priority listing of key persons in the Western European Zone, (Great Britain) Sector to be evacuated immediately in the event of nuclear war.

The Prime Minister checked in at number 23. Preceding him was an admiral, just before him a field-marshal.

It was the top of the list that was causing the furor. Why an expatriate American film executive should head up the list, with the pencilled notation against his name: 'ultimate world priority - no cost too great', baffled the news hounds of Fleet Street. The leaked photocopies of the document showed the fourth word to be firmly underlined several times, and, scenting a mystery, the press descended in droves to a relatively unknown film studio block in outer London. There they were halted by the formidable Miss Ealand.

"Mr. Straker has gone to the moon," she informed them coldly. The fact that she was speaking nothing but the truth was completely lost on the media who often had to deal with sarcastic and obstructionist secretaries in pursuit of a scoop.

Mr. Foster, Number Three on the amazing list, made the mistake of exiting his boss' office at this precise moment. The vultures waved their ravenous microphones in his face.

"List?" he spluttered, as if this was the first he had heard of it. ". . . Who? What? . . . Nuclear war? Priority?"

Rarely had the press seen a more impressive display of feigned innocence and ignorance. They had to remind themselves tersely that Foster was a producer, occasionally a director and probably past master at acting. "Rubbish!" announced Number Three finally. "Don't know a thing about it." He turned his back dismissively on the press, and informed Miss Ealand with apparent unconcern, "If anyone wants me, I'll be in Antarctica. The . . . err, boss wants me to represent him to the . . . er, backers."

Then he looked up, smiled abruptly, and said, "Documentaries can really be a chilling experience." And he left. A cohort of the Fleet Street battalion charged in his wake.

The remainder of the press was just beginning to dwindle away when a junior reporter recognised the man with the barbed wire eyebrows striding into the room. "That," nodded Samuel Morris Jenkins of the 'Times', "is the President of the International Astrophysical Commission, and a former general of the US Air Force."

"Quite correct," the not-so-ex-general admitted at once. "I'm here to investigate this mess." He turned sharply on Miss Ealand. "Where's Straker?" he demanded officiously.

"Gone to the moon," she maintained with stoic fortitude.

"Expect me to believe that?" the general snapped.

Miss Ealand shrugged.

With the press hovering like hawks, Henderson had to be careful not to reveal too intimate a knowledge of the executive hierarchy of the studios. "Who can I speak to, then?" he asked bluntly.

Miss Ealand looked suitably thoughtful. "Well," she temporised, "Mr. Foster is unavailable. He's on his way to the Antarctic, regarding a documentary about saving penguins and other endangered species. I expect Mr. Freeman might be able to see you."

"And were would this Mr. Freeman be?" snapped Henderson.

"Rupert Square," smiled Miss Ealand airily, and waved the general out.

His progress was impeded by his unwelcome retinue. The only advantage it gave him was a short amount of extra time to think about how he was going to tackle and defuse the situation. No wonderfully ingenious idea occurred to him.

He wheeled into the Rupert Square set, and made absolutely certain that Alec Freeman knew something was wrong by stalking up behind him and barking, "Hey, you! Got any idea where I'd find some useless film exec going by the name of Freeman?"

The useless film exec in question jumped, did a double take as he recognised the voice, and turned, intending to give just as good as he had received. Affecting a plummy voice, he raised his hands artistically, and said, "Here, lovey."

The general showed no signs of startlement, and barely paused before pushing his nose into Freeman's face and insisting crisply, "Where? Not you?"

The unwarranted belligerent attitude gave Mr. Freeman cause to examine the gathering of notebooks, microphones, and recorders at the general's back. Mr. Freeman immediately decided that, in certain circumstances, a hasty retreat is the better part of valour. *Current* circumstances. However, before he could translate thought into movement, he was besieged. And, having only one course of action spring to mind, he took it.

"Oooh," he enthused, waving his directorial hands in overdone excitement, "publicity." He produced a simpering smile. "Now, gather round, kiddiewinkies," he called, gesturing wildly to his bewildered cast, "Everybody into the photo." He beckoned the assistant hairdresser over with a wink. "No. . . no. . ." he rattled on, "I can't accept even the teensiest excuse for shyness."

And to make his point, he flung his arm round Henderson, beamed floridly up the general's nose and with the grace of an expert attention-seeker turned them both slightly towards the photographers. Bulbs flashed obligingly.

"Cosy, isn't it, ducky?" Mr. Freeman asked the general, "Don't you just luuuuve it?" He fluttered his brows.

Henderson favoured him with a savage glare.

But Mr. Freeman was just warming up. "Let me tell you all about this simply super film we're making - this raw, pulsating drama of the human condition - this classic in the great tradition."

"Excuse me," interrupted a voice out of the correspondents, "Do you know, Mr. Freeman, that your name is at the top of a list of evacuees in the event of a nuclear strike? Why would that . . ."

Mr. Freeman, to his everlasting credit, did not choke or even blink as this news was divulged. "Oh, really, duckies?" he interrupted. "It's simply . . ." he paused for a staged breath, ". . . simply super that the government has finally seen the permanent cultural value of our

production."

"Whitehall claims to know nothing," volunteered Jenkins of the 'Sun'.

"Nothing?" Freeman asked innocently. "Really?" His face wore a puzzled frown for several moments before it broke into a dazzling smile. "Oh, Straker, Straker..." he intoned. "Ooh, you inky-dinky yellow rose of Texas, you . . ." He began to laugh. "You've done it again."

"Straker?" queried a telecaster at the front of the pack.

"What an absolutely splendid publicity stunt," remarked Freeman, angling his profile for another camera shot.

At the back of the pack, one journalist was not fooled at all by the performance. "Fascinating," said Johnno Fell of the 'Daily Mail' out of the side of his mouth to Sam Jenkins of the 'Times'. "I wonder where they hold branch meetings."

"Branch what?" asked junior reporter Jenkins.

"Branch meetings," repeated Fell, his mouth pursing thoughtfully. "Of the Vietnam Veterans Association."

"Huh?" queried Jenkins.

"Nuff ex-combatants on this lot to fill a whole squadron of mercenaries," muttered Fell.

"Seriously?" Jenkins thumbed his jaw quietly.

"Seriously," responded Fell. He sniffed, like a tracker dog finding a spoor. "Was in Nam in the middle sixties." He gestured obliquely towards Freeman with his elbow. "Remember him." Then his face regained its thoughtful expression. "Got a vague memory of a Straker, commissioned in the field as a colonel about that time." Fell shrugged. "Probably just a coincidence. Probably just a coincidence too that ex-general Henderson there had a personal aide by the name of Colonel Straker. Couldn't be the same man, now could it?"

"Well, now, I dunno," said Jenkins sarcastically. "It seems a bit improbable, doesn't it, that an ex-colonel in military intelligence with a degree in astrophysics who runs a barely profitable film studio, could also be the same man who will be the first whizzed underground when the bombs start falling?"

Fell's eyes glittered. "Astrophysics?" he questioned. "Hadn't heard that angle before." He smiled easily. "But it makes a lot of sense, for someone who worked on Project: Bluebook."

He shouldered his way through to the front of the crowd, muttering, "I can smell a cover-up coming on." At last he was directly in front of the unflappable Mr. Freeman, who was discoursing, much to General Henderson's relief, on the virtues and vices of publicity. Somehow he had got onto industrial espionage and was giving the press a piece of his mind. "It's just intolerable, duckies . . ." he was maintaining.

"Is Straker's trip to the moon," interrupted Fell loudly, "in connection with his research career in astrophysics, or for the purposes of military intelligence?" Fell leaned back, at ease with his facts. ". . . or simply checking out a new film location? Just which of his many hats is Straker wearing at the moment?"

Taken aback, Mr. Freeman covered his sudden blanché with a bright grin. "I hope it's a space helmet," he joked feebly, and flexed his eyebrows up and down, indicating his intention to take nothing seriously.

But Fell was undeterred. "Would you, or the General here, confirm," he went on confidently "that, of the two astronauts involved in the secret mission for NASA last year, he was the only one to return?"

"Astronaut?!?" A positive shriek of laughter greeted this patently absurd idea. Mr.

Freeman scratched his jaw, and with a genial smile asked: "Have you ever thought of being a script writer, lovey? You're wasting your talent elsewhere." He beamed then, and fluttered his hands. "But I'm not complaining," he went on rapturously, "all this free publicity is simply . . . suuuuuper! Simply gorgeous." His smile reached truly sickening proportions. "Do you know that I haven't even told you all the name of my film?" He gazed around and caught the eye of the assistant script editor, tow haired lad named Peter, who looked as if he'd be more at home in front of a computer screen than holding a script. In fact, he was. Lieutenant Peter Harper would have much preferred to be exactly a hundred feet under his present position, and the look he caught from his superior officer could not be misinterpreted.

Harper, the colonel was thinking, if you don't remember this code, you'll be cleaning barnacles off Skydiver's periscope for the next decade. But his face showed nothing of that cold thought. It was beaming solidly, smiling fondly and his mouth was saying, "It's a lu . . . uve. .lly film, called 'Doctor Doolittle and the *Magic Meteor* . . ." He directed a glare at Harper, before resuming his over baked simper, ". . . a marvelously compelling psychological thriller . . ."

Harper, to Freeman's annoyance, did not seem to have captured the message at all - he was deep in conversation with the construction manager, and completely oblivious to the situation. The direct approach. "Harper," Freeman yelled, "Get your carcass over here"

"Yes, si . . ." The lieutenant came within a handspan of saluting. But his fingers glided on suddenly into his hair, and slicked it back. The respectful word, 'sir', which was burning the tip his tongue, changed abruptly to 'Uncle Alec'.

Harper pushed his way through the bloodhounds, managing by his bouncing entrance to mask the disappearance of the construction manager. He stepped fearlessly into the role that he thought Freeman required of him. However, he had mistaken the colonel's intentions.

"This is wonderful, Uncle Alec," he nodded. "It fits perfectly into the plot - and so current . . ." He cast bright appealing eyes at the colonel, who had not the slightest clue how to respond.

"Plot, dear Nephew?" he asked, swallowing with unease.

Fell glared at both of them. Cameras flashed. General Henderson looked as if his day was going from bad to worse. Colonel Freeman knew it was plummeting to disaster.

"Yes," said Harper with a perfect touch of shy diffidence. "In the scene where Doctor Doolittle goes to Whitehall to try and convince the world that the threat of the magic meteorite . . ."

Freeman was absolutely sure his heart had stopped at the same moment his breathing ceased. He was only under the illusion that he was still alive, and that blockhead Harper had not only failed to send for reinforcements, but had entirely misunderstood the code.

He finally managed to get his speech centre operating again. "How so, Ducks?" he inquired.

"The old April Fool's Day' joke scenario," nodded Harper vigorously, and smiling brightly, "With a twist, of course. . ."

"Ahhh, of course, I see ..." said Freeman smoothly, when he didn't see anything of the kind. But he could see that Harper had a good idea where he was going.

Harper was scratching his head, allowing for the press' collective consciousness to absorb those three little words - those three *fatal* little words

"It will require' some revision of the script, Uncle," he said, shaking his head slightly as if debating the value of such an exercise. "There'll have to be a whole new scene where good

Doctor Doolittle realises that the documents which were leaked to the news media in the first place were nothing but a joke. And, of course, the love interest will have to point out how ironic it is that the villain didn't ever bother to check the documents, but convinced of their legitimacy, tried to use them to take over the world. The villain, naturally, will have to gnash his teeth, realising how stupid he was to fall for such an obvious trick. An April Fool's Day Joke." Harper smiled cautiously, and raised his eyebrows in an anxious question. "Like it?" he asked.

Freeman was no longer acting. He looked as ecstatic as he felt. "Love it," he exclaimed, patting Harper on the shoulder. Then, remembering to overdo it, he hugged his 'nephew' violently, and batted his eyelashes. "Oooh, a simply rather marvelous idea!"

"I thought you'd appreciate it," said Harper in a low mutter. "We need to waste another minute or so, Uncle dear," he added with a wink.

The press was looking a little befuddled. The idea was slowly dawning on them that Harper's scenario might be closer to reality than they might wish. Fell might have his suspicions, but they would be more than difficult to prove. The construction manager was pushing his way through the crowd of the press. "Mr. Freeman," he coughed. "I've been sent with a copy of the original, so you can reply without ignorance."

Freeman looked dubious as, with a tight nod and a cocked eyebrow, Lieutenant Louis Giles thrust a sheaf of papers into his hands. "The title," hissed the lieutenant under his breath.

"Ahh," breathed Mr. Freeman, loudly and brightly, "let me see the offending document causing all this fuss." He grinned. "Old dragon-eyes Straker will take the whole thing in such good part. We haven't had a scandal in years, and now to have him accused of being a spy . . ."

"Nobody's made any accusation of that kind," cut in White of the 'Mirror' swiftly. The 'Mirror' had recently lost a defamation charge and was mighty sensitive to the issue.

But Freeman was no longer paying attention. He had had a good look at the title, and was already saying, "Yes, let's see, now . . ."

A PROVISIONAL REGISTER AND INTERIM LISTING
FIRST ORDER OPTION LINE-UP
Straker, Edward - <i>ultimate world priority No cost too great</i>
Freeman, Alexander - ''

"Let me see that ..." Fell of the 'Daily Mail' almost pulled the paper out of the colonel's hands. Over his shoulder, three reporters noted the first letters of the title, and groaned . . . very volubly. "We've been set-up," said Jenkins.

"Too right," breathed Fell, but he knew that not one of the other reporters knew who had really set them up. He stared at Freeman and Harper with undisguised anger.

"I luuuuve it," sighed Freeman, and began to forge his way through the crowd. "Script!" he shouted. "Oh, SCRIPT! Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

He was relying rather heavily on the fact that no one realised Peter Harper's position on the film crew to make his escape. The press watched his departure with something akin to relief.

"See you gentlemen, ladies . . . next time," smirked Henderson, and left in the opposite direction.

Peter Harper followed Freeman across the lot at a discreet distance. The colonel finally turned to allow him to catch up. "How the devil did you get the idea?" Freeman muttered.

"Sorry, sir, I was rattled," confessed Harper. "I apologise for the 'uncle' bit - and I'm sorry that the title didn't really fit, but it was all I could think of."

"Don't apologise, Lieutenant," ordered Freeman. "You were amazing. How did you get that document mocked up so fast?"

"Radioed Miss Ealand, and had Giles rush over and pick it up."

Freeman gave the young operative a searching glance. Rattled, indeed. If the boy coordinated that well under pressure, he deserved far more than computer line maintenance. "Well," he said aloud to himself; "I expect General Henderson will ensure that all copies of the leaked document will suddenly discover they should have read their missing titles, and that the source of the original leak was discovered, proving to the press beyond any shadow of a doubt, that the devious intention of the military in the first place was to entrap the spy in their midst with the now-obviously fraudulent document." He grinned, "But, as for the reporter with the facts about the boss and NASA . . ." His smile thinned to a thoughtful frown.

"Taken care of it, sir," said Harper helpfully.

"Yes?" An inquiring eyebrow was raised.

In the distance, Fell of the 'Daily Mail' was being approached by a slight blonde girl. "Pardon me," she said, glancing around nervously, "but could I speak to you, please?" Fell looked up with guarded interest. "There are some strange things going on around here," whispered the girl, "and I need to talk to someone who . . ." she paused. ". . . understands. Would you join me in a cup of *coffee*?"

* * *

Three hours later, Peter Harper, whose meteoric rise to producer was the talk of the studio, called to his cast, "Let's wrap it up!"

He went down to Mr. Straker's office, and then went down to Mr. Straker's other office, which was considerably further down than his public one, to report to Mr. Freeman on one Johnno Fell's state of mind.

But it was *Freeman's* state of mind that was the talk of the base.

"Where's Colonel Freeman?" Harper asked Lieutenant Keith Ford.

"Psychiatric," Ford informed him shortly. "Won't want to speak to him for a while. Jackson's giving him a whole series of tests."

"Why?" asked Harper.

"The Colonel's not well. Hysteria," Ford shrugged. "Stress. Gets to the best of us sooner or later. When a grown man starts calling his commander 'ducky' and the rest of us 'kiddiewinks' . . ."

Harper smirked. "So, the inky-dinky dragon-eyes put him on ice? He must be loving it."

"The inky-dinky dragon-eyes?" Ford frowned. "Have I missed something?"

"A vastly entertaining episode," Harper grinned. "Simply suuu. . . per!"

* * *

The following morning, Johnno Fell did not report for work. Nor the next day.

When he did turn up on the Friday, to discover his editor in a rather foul mood, it was with some bewilderment that he managed to get through the day. Friday?! No, it was *Monday*!

He was utterly convinced that he had nothing to answer for, because the two days he had taken off were the weekend. . . well, weren't they? Don't be ridiculous! How could he possibly have lost the best part of three days? Amnesia? Absurd!

Absolutely . . . absurd!