

The Happy Thistle

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A caber's toss from the North Circular Road in the insalubrious North London borough of Willesden stands The Happy Thistle Restaurant. Intended as the first in a nationwide chain of highland-themed eateries, no expense has been spared to convert the servery of a rambling disused Victorian bakery into a faithful reproduction of a Scottish bothy complete with peat burning griddle, stag's head and tartan tablecloths.

The kilted chef is a bumptious Scotsman who goes by the name of Groaty McTavish. His specialties include gastronomical twists on traditional Caledonian recipes such as Bannockbuns, Pickled Seaweed, Malty McOatshakes, Nutty McFruitcake, Loganberry Trifle and a variety of similarly mouthtempting delicacies. But all is not what it seems. The fact is that the fastfoodery is merely a front. The true purpose is to provide a lucrative income stream to fund the construction of a state-of-the-science laboratory in the cavernous basement. For behind the highlandish façade lies a labyrinthine warren of corridors leading to a sinister world of scientific malady.

The brainiac behind the operation is an enigmatic shadow who jealously guards his identity. The Professor, as he is known to those who profess to know him, has devoted his extraordinary genius to solving the greatest astrophysical challenge of the age - the creation of dark matter. As every

schoolnerd knows, dark matter is the key to unlocking the secrets of the space-time continuum and by this means, enslaving the world. In the furtherance of his malicious ambitions, The Professor has ploughed his life's ill-gotten gains into the purchase of the derelict bread factory and enlisted the services of McTavish to provide a veneer of highland respectability.

A creature of ruthless logic, the Professor is not a man to be trifled with. Nor is he a man to chance his arm. Rather, he seeks to eliminate ambiguity by reducing every parameter of uncertainty to quadratic equations, or to put it another way, to employ the methodology of empiricism for the avoidance of temporal doubt. Mathematical determinism, he maintains, governs the vagaries of life. To put it at its simplest - as he is loath to do - if $a + b + c = x$, should the value of a or b vary, by amending the value of c , x will remain constant.

And so it was with the bakery; a represented the cost of acquiring the derelict building, b the cost of renovation, c the cost of equipping the laboratory and x the available funds. Should any of the parameters change, The Professor could amend the others accordingly, thereby ensuring that the immovable constant - x - remained unchanged.

All well and good I hear you say, but to the Professor's bamboozlement all did not go entirely to plan. After months of sleepless nights puzzling why this should be so, he realised that he had failed to account for Value Added Tax and more to the point, the ineptitude of the firm of builders he had employed to realise his architectural ambitions. In their defence, it is only fair to point out that when he instructed them that the basement should be bombproof, he made no mention of nuclear devices. Lowering

the floor by eight feet and cladding the walls with several metres of reinforced concrete doubled the building costs. To cut to the chase, $a + b + c$ now equalled far more bitcoin than he could readily afford.

As the building costs spiralled, The Professor was left with no alternative but to borrow up to and beyond the hilt. Having no truck with banks nor they with him, in desperation he turned to The Proust Mob, a notorious East End firm of pawnbrokers and loan sharks. He had no choice. Without a laboratory he could not manufacture dark matter and thus enrich his coffers beyond imagination, but he could not fund the building work without borrowing eyewatering amounts of cash. As security, the Prousts demanded the deeds to the old bakery, four Cold Fusion nuclear centrifuges and a treasured domestic Hadronette Collider that he held in storage pending their installation in the new laboratory.

Doubts set in shortly after the restaurant opened when, after a slow start, trade hit a brick wall. No matter what McTavish tried – two Bannockbuns for the price of one . . . three for the price of one . . . ten for the price of one – the fastfoodery failed to titillate the tastebuds of the locals. It did not help that the competition was stiff. The area boasted every manner of cafes, trattorias and restaurants. Indeed, that was the very reason The Professor had been convinced that The Merry Thistle would be a rip-roaring success; he was confident that he had spotted a gap in the market. With so many exotic culinaries in the vicinity, a Highland-themed restaurant was bound to pack them in. After all, are not condiments the spice of life? Well, it seemed that Rabbie Burns was right – the best laid plans of mice and men gae aft awry. The Professor's certainly had.

And now, unreasonably, in his opinion, the Prousts were demanding

their money back with three hundred per cent interest. Solly Proust made brutally clear that unless The Professor stumped up five million cash pound notes by the end of the month, the Proust Syndicate would have no qualms about foreclosing on the loan, auctioning the bakery, selling the nuclear centrifuges to a contact in Iran and taking one hundred and sixty pounds of flesh in grizzly interest. Nothing personal, Solly maintained, but business is business. He felt duty bound to make an example of the Professor to show others the terminal consequences of defaulting on a loan.

Not one to ever admit to having made a mistake, in no small part because so far as he was aware, he never had, The Professor blamed the banks and more to the point, the alien lizards who controlled them. He was determined to make them pay by nook or by cranny, a sentiment not shared by his Scottish henchman.

‘It’s nae on, Chief. It’s nae on at all,’ McTavish protested. ‘Kidnapping an innocent wee lassie is nae in ma job description.’

The Professor sat at the recreational table in the staff quarters of The Happy Thistle simmering like malignant gruel. ‘Kidnap?’ he snarled. ‘Humbug. We are merely borrowing Miss Clark pending a modest gratuity from her besotted stepfather in acknowledgement of our good intent. No harm will come of her as long as Sir Freddie does my bidding.’

‘But just look at the bonnie wee bairn.’ McTavish double-clicked The Eastminster Academy for Young Gentleladies website on his Mc-ayePhone and scrolled down to a photograph of the school hockey team. He pointed to a small pigtailed girl in the front row. ‘Hardly able tae tie

her aen shoelaces by the looks of her,' he said. 'I bet ye a muckle tae a mickle she's nae even alloowed oot on her own after dark.'

The Professor gave the picture a cursory glance. If truth be told - not his strongest suit - he was minded to acknowledge that his highland accomplice had a point. Sir Freddie Prendergast's stepdaughter, Katy Clark, looked the epitome of innocence - cherubic, it might perhaps be said - with her bunched blond hair, gap teeth, cheeky grin, pleated gymslip, bobby socks and sandals. 'Clever girl,' he muttered as he read the accompanying caption. 'Top of her class and winner of Eastminster Academy's annual prize for initiative, no less. I can see why her stepfather dotes on her . . . fool.' Loath though he was to admit it, he too harboured reservations but what alternative did he have? He needed an abundance of money in an abundant hurry and unless he won the lottery - unlikely in the extreme bearing in mind odds of one in forty-five million, fifty-seven thousand, four hundred and seventy-four to one - kidnapping the daughter of a billionaire banker was his only option.

Although sympathetic to The Professor's predicament, McTavish was reluctant. The fact was that he had not signed up for such depraved skullduggeries. The Situations Vacant advertisement in *The Pest Control Times* had been vague . . . *Ruthless Chef required for New Highland Themed Restaurant. Bed and board provided.* In desperate need of a job, he submitted a CV and to his delight his application was accepted by return. That night he packed a bin liner, borrowed a stolen bicycle from a squat mate and set off for the bright lights of London, blissfully unaware of the rocky road ahead . . . in every sense of the word. Or words.

Nothing if not pragmatic, McTavish accepted that having made his own

sleeping bag he would just have to lie in it. To cut a long ramble short, after debating the pros and cons, the ins and outs and the rights and wrongs of the matter, he was won over by The Professor's reasoned argument. After all, he had an anatomical desire to keep his kneecaps intact. And let's face it, a job is a job.

The very next afternoon, The Professor hacked into traffic control and disabled the Pelican lights in Eastminster High Street. With Sir Freddie's Rolls Royce clogjammed in trafficary mayhem, McTavish parked a stolen getaway car in a quiet cul-de-sac around the corner from The Eastminster Academy for Young Gentleladies. After donning a false beard, a white wig and an ankle-length McGabardine, he allowed himself a smug smile, confident that nobody would recognise him. Indeed, were it not for the distinctive strawberry birthmark on the dark side of his neck, he might not have recognised himself. He could be anyone he thought. And if truth be told, he was.

McTavish waited nervously for the telltale knell of the school bell that would spell the end of term and, quite possibly, the beginning of the end of time. As the clock struck four, he readjusted his beard, leant on his cromach and studied the jabbering crocodile of excited schoolgirls exiting the exclusive private school for young gentleladies. Adopting his most convincing smile, he accosted a small girl in a pleated gymskirt and an aquamaroon blazer tagged onto a crocodile of pigtailed schoolclones paving the gates. 'Hello, lassie,' he muffled through his false beard and offered her a fruity lollysuck. When she shrank back, he added a reassuring, 'Freddie sent me tae fetch ye.'

'Fred sent . . . you?' Katy turned up her button nose and looked at him

with an expression of derisory scorn.

‘Aye, he’s been called away on business,’ McTavish bluffed, then relaxed when Katy shrugged, hooklined and sinkered by his convincing cuddlyuncle act. He pointed round a nearby corner and said, ‘I parked the motor down yon alley.’

Casting prudence to the wind, Katy took McTavish’s hand and followed him to a battered Ford. ‘Got top marks for all me exams,’ she jabbered as she skipped along beside him swinging her satchel, ‘and a scholarship for initiative. Mam will be dead chuffed that head-teach kept her word.’ When they rounded the corner, she slowed down, looked around, frowned and asked, ‘so where’s dad’s Roller?’

‘In the menders having the dashboard waxed,’ McTavish said as he opened the hot-jalopy’s boot. ‘But look – Freddie sent ye a present.’

‘A pressy? For me? Oh goody. I love surprises.’ Katy clapped her hands, peered into the trunk and scratched her head. ‘What is it?’

‘Chloroform,’ McTavish growled and clamped a rag over Katy’s mouth. After an obligatory struggle, she slumped into his arms like a raggedy doll, out for the foreseeable count.

McTavish cast a wary eye or two around the deserted street, bundled Katy’s limp body into the trunk and rubbed his hands. ‘Time tae teck a wee trip, bonnie lass,’ he gloated. The trap was sprung; the spider had his fly. The tricky part was over. From here-on in, everything would be plain sailing. With a triumphant smirk, he scrambled into the driver’s seat, ignited the engine, engaged the gears, put his foot down on the gas and . . . nothing. Nonplussed, he brushed his bushy eyebrows out of his

eyes and squinted at the petrol gauge. 'Hoots mon, I dinnae believe it,' he groaned and slumped over the steering wheel with his head in his hands.

The Professor thundered, 'you are late,' as Groaty McTavish crept through the door of the Happy Thistle like a timorous wee beastie. 'Have you been drinking? Your breath reeks of Glasgow aftershave.'

'It's petrol, Chief,' McTavish said. 'Ran oot so had tae siphon some oot of a handy Lada.'

'Diabolis give me strength . . .' Tall, lean and wiry with a bulbous cranium befitting one of the greatest criminal meglaminds the world might ever see, The Napoleon of Crime jabbed a spindly finger in McTavish's face. 'Here am I, about to take over the universe, and you risk everything for the want of refined petroleum.'

McTavish hung his head and mumbled, 'sorry, Chief. I'm nae Einstein.'

'That, my dimwitted Groat, is clear for all to see, but I suppose that I must be thankful for small mercies.' The Professor unbuttoned his frockcoat, loosened his britches, sat down on a bothystool and tossed his top hat on the table. 'Einstein was an imbecile,' he said. 'He mistakenly assumed the dark energy equation of the state parameter to be $w\Phi:=p\Phi$. But as any retarded chimpanzee with half a brain knows, $\Phi+3H\cdot\Phi+dVd\Phi=Q\cdot\Phi$. You see, the moron failed to account for latent radiation so ignored the fact that $\rho_b=-3H\rho_b$, $H=-\kappa/2\rho_c+\rho_b+\Phi^2$. Can you believe it? And the lizards say that I am demented,' he said with a hollow laugh. 'Compared to Einstein, I am a paragon of sanity. You see, were he to have defined an effective equation for the dark components which describe the equivalent uncoupled model in the background, the secrets of the time space continuum would have stared him in the face.'

‘What a glaikit.’ McTavish shook his unkempt mop of ginger hair. ‘So what ye saying exactly, Chief? That this Einstein eejit disnae know his arse frae his elbow?’

‘What I am saying, my ignoble Groat, is that $\rho_c + 3H(1+w_c, \text{eff})\rho_c = 0$, $\rho_\Phi + 3H(1+w_\Phi, \text{eff})\rho_\Phi = 0$. Pretty damn obvious, I would have thought.’

McTavish’s nod suggested that a mickle had just dropped, needless to say a pecuniary illusion. The truth was that for all his innate tenement-savvy, he was quadratically challenged. ‘Aye, with ye the noo, Chief,’ he bluffed, keen not to show his astrophysical ignorance. ‘So, this Einstein glaikit gan and put the decimal point in the wrong place. What an eejit.’

‘Decimal point, you say? Decimal point?’ The Professor sat bolt upright and glared McTavish in the eye. ‘What did they teach you at school, dolt?’ he railed, shocked by his highland henchman’s rank ignorance. ‘Had you been listening, you would realise that Einstein’s theory of relativity has a fundamental flaw. He failed to account for the negative gravitation pull of dark matter.’

‘So the laddie was constipated?’

‘That is by the bye. Dark matter, my mentally challenged minion, is the basic building block of the universe. It is all around us. Follow me to my laboratory and I will prove it.’ The Professor led the way down a double-decker stairway to the bowels of the old Bakery, pushed open a steel-clad door and shuffled in. He swatted a hand at a naked filamental element dangling from the ceiling by a tangled wire and said, ‘now, turn off the light and tell me what you see.’

McTavish flicked a switch and looked around. 'Nothing, Chief,' he said as he peered into the abyss. 'It's pitch black.'

'Precisely. That is because we are surrounded by dark matter.'

'I dinnae understand.'

'Of course you don't. Nobody does,' The Professor said. 'The greatest minds of this and every other age have failed to solve the ultimate puzzle of physics. Fools. The answer has been there for all to see since before the dawn of time. Take a look at this . . .'

'What?'

'Turn on the light, you dolt. Now, what do you see?'

'You mean that deepfreeze with a funnel bolted on top?'

'A deepfreeze? A deepfreeze, you say?'

'With a funnel on top.'

'That, my dimwitted henchman, is a Dark Matter Time Projection Chamber. The only one of its kind in existence. My life's work. It can condense atomic molecules into dark matter briquettes.' The Professor broke into a calculating smirk, knotted his fingers and clacked his bony knuckles. 'In simple layman's terms, it will enable me to create synthetic black holes infinitesimally smaller than a pinprick but with the mass of a star. It is the Holy Grail of physics. Whoever controls dark matter will rule the world.'

'And that'll be us, Chief?'

'That, my annoying ginger friend, will be me. Master of the Universe

and all beyond. I and only I hold the key to producing sufficient energy to fuel the process. See that?' The Professor pointed a spindly finger at a wall-to-wall bank of floor-to-ceiling pipes, dials, meters, thermostats and rheostats. 'All very mundane, I hear you say. Typical of what one might find in any run of the mill domestic nuclear fission laboratory. But as you are no doubt aware, even a modest nuclear reaction capable of generating sufficient energy to power a time projection chamber requires immense pressure and will generate temperatures of millions of degrees. Enough to reduce North London to a toxic wasteland.'

'What - yae mean worse than it is the noo? Yaer kidding.' McTavish masked his scepticism behind a semi-toothless smile. 'Gie me the nod afore ye turns on them nuclear jibby-jobbies and I'll meck mesself scarce.'

'Have no fear, my tartan terror. You see, I have solved the holy grail of cold fusion. Did it at nursery school, actually, but nobody took me seriously.' The Professor shuffled over to the time projection chamber and tapped an aperture above the subliminal velocity display. 'This is where you will insert the Queridium while I watch on from a safe distance. Coventry, perhaps, or Manchester.'

'Queridium?' McTavish asked casually, not wanting to display more rank ignorance than needs be.

The Professor's eyes glazed over and he stared unseeing into the mists of time. 'Indeed,' he said. 'Queridium is the rarest element in the galaxy. When cooled to a temperature of absolute zero and ionised in a bank of negative-gravity ColdFusion centrifuges, it produces unadulterated pure energy without harmful side-effects such as lethal radiation, gamma rays

or noxious smells.'

McTavish nodded in a show of understanding, not that he did. Understanding was not much in his nature. 'Want me tae lift some, Chief? Tell me where it's stashed and I'll gan on the case.'

The man known as The Coffinary Boffin to those who called him that prodded a spindly finger in McTavish's chest. 'Dolt,' he snorted. 'There is but one source and one source only. A meteorite of pure Queridium fell to earth six years ago and is on display in the National Science Museum. Or it was.' He broke into a maniacal cackle and rubbed his hands together needlessly. 'Cunningly disguised as a cat burglar, I disabled the security alarms with an algorithm I cobbled together on the way over, climbed through a skylight, dangled from the ceiling by my hind legs, cut a hole in the display case with a laser, removed the Queridium with a pair of asparagus tongs, hailed a Hackney Cab and was home before the guards knew that anything was amiss. Imbeciles.'

Groaty McTavish masked his incomprehension behind a cautious smile. 'So yae tested this time projection jibby-job?' he asked.

'Pah. I have done the math so why waste valuable time I don't yet have?' The Professor's intemperate flick of a wrist suggested that McTavish might as well ask how anyone could know that the sun would rise in the morning without first experimenting to prove what was, in fact, a matter of fact. 'Whilst under lock and key for threatening to alert mankind to the pestilence of alien lizards governing our nation state, I calculated every possible variable to an infinitesimal degree.'

'Hoots mon - lizards are running the country?' McTavish gave the

Professor an alarmed look to end all alarmed looks.

‘Shhhh . . .’ The Professor pressed a finger to his lips, looked over both shoulders and glanced nervously at the door. ‘Walls have tympanums,’ he whispered. After peering into all four corners of the gloom, he mopped his brow and cleared his throat. ‘Take my word, my hairy highlander,’ he said. ‘My time projection chamber cannot fail. The idea is unthinkable.’ He gave McTavish a confident sneer. ‘But enough of this puerile banter,’ he said. ‘Did you imprison our angelic little turtle dove as I instructed?’

‘Aye. Trussed up like a haggis in the auld Grainstore. Tied her tae the barleycot like ye said. She will nae have a clue where she is when she comes tae her senses.’

‘You are quite sure that she did not get a good look at your face?’

‘Ye kidding? Didnae even recognise mesself with this wig and beard.’

‘Excellent.’ The Perverse Purveyor of Putrefaction as his dismembered psychiatrist used to call him, took an envelope from his frockcoat pocket and thrust it into McTavish’s hand. ‘Deliver this missive to Sir Freddie Prendergast’s townhouse post haste. There is a postman’s uniform in the cupboard under the stairs next to your sleeping bag. And be sure to wear gloves.’

‘Expecting snow?’

‘Fingerprints, you moron. DNA.’

‘Dinnae what?’

The Professor rolled his bulging eyes. ‘So help me. Here am I, with a brain the size of Uranus, trying to explain simple quantum mechanics to

a dim-witted Glaswegian with a tattoo of a spider on his neck.'

'It's nae a tattoo,' McTavish said with an injured look on his pockmarked face. 'It's a birthmark.'

'Do not give me that,' the Professor said. 'You were not born, you were quarried. Now off with you. I have important matters to attend to. This evening our little chickadee will star in her very own television show – to an audience of one. And then . . .' He rubbed his hands and cackled as was his wont when so mooded. 'I will deposit five million pounds in Solly Proust's thieving hands, retrieve my Cold Fusion centrifuges and an endless night of reckoning will be visited upon this and every other land.'

Groaty McTavish leant against the neon Nessie frontaging The Happy Thistle Restaurant and watched the traffic crawl by. As the starstruck pipistrelle of night cloaked its wings across the milkywayed horizon to presage the passage of another customerless day, he shuttered the reproduction barn doors and snuffed out the lights. To say that he was feeling glum would not be over-scotchegging the pudding.

Why, he wondered, did no one stop for a takeaway temptation or pop in for a bracing jug of Thistle Tea and a crunchy Oaty Mctoasty? Was it the Gaelic menu, the jolly thistleman in sporran, kilt and tam o'shanter grafittied on the front door, the kerbside bollards, double yellow lines and no parking signs blocking the entrance, the tartan colour scheme, the bagpipied muzak, the prices . . .? He had turned his brain inside out and back again to no avail. To conjoin a word, it was unfathomless.

Weary after another do-nothing day, he withdrew to the recreationaly to watch The Professor pit his legendary wits against his laptop computer in a game of three-dimensional chess. Awestricken, he said, 'I dinnae ken how ye can do that, Chief.'

The pending Master of the Omniverse rocked back in his chair and clacked his bony knuckles. 'Simple, my dear Groaty. It is merely a matter of mind over matter. You see, to a run-of-the-mill genius like me, the perpendicular and the horizontal are one and the same. Granted, they enjoy a right-angular relationship but other than that they are identical.' He placed a bumper pack of cut price Handy-Pandy Brainwipes on the table. 'Horizontal. And now . . .' He flipped the packet on its end.

‘Perpendicular.’ He leant across the table and fixed McTavish in the eye. ‘If you had the wit to see beyond the end of your broken nose, you would understand that the horizontal and the perpendicular are dimensional siblings. To put it another way, spatial status is merely an anomaly of perception. A point of view, if you will.’ He chuckled when McTavish nodded in bemused incomprehension. ‘There you are. Without knowing, you have unwittingly proved my point.’

‘I have?’

‘Indeed you have, my good Groat. You see, to all intents and purposes, a nod is merely an inverted headshake. The difference is purely dimensional.’ The Professor pointed to a stream of complex code darting across the screen of his flip-top. ‘You must understand that computers have an inherent flaw. Artificial Intelligence is incapable of thinking outside the box, whereas I possess an infinity of mental algorithms I can employ to unravel indeterminate problematic complications no matter how incomprehensible.’

‘So how we gonna drum up trade for The Happy Thistle?’ McTavish asked. ‘We got maer puddings than I ken what tae do with.’

‘Pah - think I care about petty trifles?’ The Professor scoffed.

‘But Chief, the ‘lecky’s gonna get cut off any day the noo if we dinnae pay the thieving bastards.’

‘Well, place an advertisement in the Parish Magazine offering two bites of the loganberry for the price of one or somesuch. Use your imagination.’ The Professor gave McTavish a hardlong look and shook his head. ‘Maybe not,’ he muttered with a despairing sigh. ‘Just deal with it, will you? I

have bigger fish to fry.’ He cocked a thumb at the wallclock and broke into a sinister smile. ‘In exactly one hour, I will stream an online message to Sir Freddie Prendergast making clear that unless he accedes to my demands, his precious stepdaughter will suffer a slow and agonising death.’

‘Ye winded up the clock, then?’ McTavish asked, impressed by the Professor’s extracurricular dexterity. ‘Like I telled ye, it runs slow when the spring gans slack.’

‘Streuth . . . I knew there was something I meant to do.’ The Fount of Mellifluous Malice checked his pocket watch and shuffled up from his chair. ‘Make haste, my stout friend. We are due on air in five minutes. Did you purloin a suitable camera?’ When McTavish nodded, he patted his heart and let out a steep breath of relief. ‘That feeble flea-brain, Albert so-called Einstein, may claim that time is just a sequence of events,’ he said as he tucked his floptop under an arm and shuffled to the door, ‘but take it from me, a minute here or there can make a parallel dimension of difference.’

McTavish unlocked the humid Grainstore and turned on the light. His heart missed a flutter when he saw little Katy strapped to the barleycot with her arms and legs splayed like a bizarre human starfish. He was already having second thoughts about the kidnap-hostage scheme but bearing in mind the Professor’s parlous predicament and unhinged temper he could see no visible alternative.

When The Professor of Doom shuffled into the dank Grainstore looking for all the world like a malevolent undertaker in a shabby black frockcoat,

battered top hat, rimless glasses and spats, Katy Clark's eyes opened wide. Terrified, she thrashed about like a pinioned penguin trying to scream through the muffled gagging her mouth. Her every gap-toothed sob, her every thrash, her every flail was captured by a flimsy plastic video camera mounted on makeshift broomstick tripod.

The Professor turned to McTavish with a fierce scowl. 'Was that the best you could do, harebrain?'

McTavish hung his head and mumbled, 'sorry Chief. Went thieving in Cricklewood, nae Hollywood.'

'Here am I, all but omnipotent, forced to make do with a plastic video camera pilfered by a ginger-headed moron with an unsightly spider birthmark on his neck.' Aware that the sands of time were trickling inexorably by, The Professor plugged the Peking Economy Gaming Camera into his laptop, logged onto Ransom.com and donned a sinister Micky Mouse mask. 'Pretend that you are frightened, my little cocksparrow,' he instructed Katy as she writhed about in uncontrollable fits of inconsolable tears. As the hands of his pocket-watch nudged eight, he took up position at the end of the barleycot with his arms upstretched like an Angel of Gloom.

'How good of you to join us, Sir Freddie,' The Professor said to camera in a deathly deadpan voice. 'As you can see, I have lined up a few minutes of wholesome family entertainment for your delectation.' He stepped aside to grant Sir Freddie an unfettered view of his sobbing stepdaughter. 'Please do not be alarmed. Little Katy will be quite safe as long as you follow my instructions.' He broke into a crooked Micky Mouse grin and

waved a spindly hand at his terrified hostage. 'Do not go the authorities. Do not inform the police. Do not leave the house. We are watching you every second of the day. Tune in to this channel at midday tomorrow and I will instruct you how to proceed. Until then, I bid you farewell . . . for now.' With that, the camera focused on Katy's tearbrimmed face, and the picture faded to black.

His demonic duty duly done, The Star of Television Screams ripped off his mask, turned to McTavish and clapped his hands. 'The lighting could have been better, but all in all I thought it went rather well,' he said modestly.

'Aye, Chief. Storming. A star is born.'

'Let us see what our little magpie has to say.' The Professor loomed over Katy flexing his fists. 'As long as you behave, my precious peafowl, you have nothing to fear,' he told her with a chilling insincerity in his voice. 'It is in my interests to keep you as alive as possible. But please forgive me, you must be feeling peckish.' He clicked his fingers. 'Groaty, a little nourishment for our guest, if you will.'

McTavish took a packet of Highland McOatcakes from his sporran, ripped off Katy's gag and forced a McOatie to her trembling lips.

'Fuck off, Spiderface. I in't eating that foreign muck.' Katy bit off the tip of McTavish's finger and spat it his face. As he staggered back clutching his hand at arm's length, she licked the blood off her lips, turned to the startled Professor, narrowed her baby blue eyes and hissed, 'you're dead, you are, when my mam finds out where you live. And she will.'

Groaty McTavish cowered on the naughty step of the recreational shielding his head in his hands. 'It wasnae ma fault, Chief,' he pleaded in mitigation. 'I was busy in the surgical cubicle.'

'Busy, you say? Busy? Pah. You would not know the meaning of the verb,' The Professor railed, a scant hare's breath from losing his legendary incendiary temper. 'The moment I turn my back, you let our hostage flee her cage like a gilded bird.'

'She chomped through the ropes.' McTavish fingered his bandage and winced. 'Then she made a bolt for the door while I was off gluing ma fingernail back on and picked the lock with a hairpin. Sorry, Chief.'

'Sorry? Is that all you have to say for yourself? You might at least apologise.' The Man occasionally known as The Manic Machinator of Misanthropy propped his elbows on the table and buried his bulbous brow in his hands. 'Hostage negotiations are due to resume at midday tomorrow. There is every chance that Sir Freddie's suspicions might be aroused if I inform him that his stepdaughter has popped out for a breath of fresh air.' He glared red-hot thunders at his co-conspirator in crime. 'This is another fine mess you have landed me in, dolt.'

Keen to make amends for his unintended slip of the knot, McTavish furrowed his brow and lapsed into thinking mode. After an inordinately long pause for thought, a rare idea snuck up on him. 'How's about I pretend tae be the wee bairn?'

'Unless my ocular senses deceive me,' The Professor said, 'you are twice Miss Clark's size and have ginger hair, sideburns and rotten teeth.' He

shook his head, muttered, 'and the doctors say that I am unhinged . . .' He set his jaw, reminded of how maliciously maligned he was by a conspiracy of alien lizards masquerading as psychiatrists. 'Compared to you, my hirsute highlander,' he told McTavish with a snarl in his voice, 'I am as sane as a doorpost. In any event, I very much doubt that Sir Freddie would be taken in by the ruse. It could backfire.'

Not to be dissuaded by petty pernicketies, McTavish had a second thought, so to speak. 'Well, how's about ye keep the light off while yaer filming? I can bounce about on the bed and squeal like a lassie whenever ye threaten tae chop me intae little pieces.'

'Hmmm, now there is a thought.' The Professor stroked his jutting jaw. 'Might work. Let me think about it,' he said, not entirely - that is to say, not in the least - convinced. 'Alternatively, I could just have done with the matter and live out my days in Stoke-on-Trent. It is a fate worse than death, I gather.' He raised a don't-go-there finger as McTavish's eyes lit up. 'Where is the little fly-by-night, anyway?'

'Barricaded hesself in yon Oatstore.' McTavish pointed to a steel-clad door on the far side of the recreationary.

Making sure not to dislodge his top hat, The Professor threw back his head and cackled out loud. 'Fool,' he scoffed. 'Does the little gannet not realise that we will starve her out?'

'Ye reckon?' McTavish raised a ginger eyebrow. 'Last time I checked there was enough takeaway trifles and cans of fizzy back there tae last a month. Maer judging by the size of the wee bairn. So what we gonna do, Chief?'

In an unusual display of indecision, The Professor scratched his cerebrum and frowned. 'Without Sir Freddie's precious stepdaughter, I do not have a limb to stand on. She is my ten-million-pound stake in a deathly game of apocalyptic chance.'

Hardly had The Professor ceased pontificating than the Oatstore door slammed open and a gymslipped figure swaggered out. 'Did I hear you right - a measly ten mill?' HostageKaty lounged against the wall with a can of Scotchpop in one hand and a family pack of thistleberry trifle in the other. 'Hardly worth getting kidnapped for.'

The professor swung around and glared at the pigtailed teen with a look of utter obfuscation upon his face. 'Be gone with you,' he roared. 'It is a hostage's solemn duty to be neither seen nor heard.'

'Stuff that for a game of soldiers,' HostageKaty said with a toss of her pigtails. 'I'm worth loads more than that. Fred's minted and mam'll chew his bollocks off if he don't cough up.' She skipped over to the table, arranged six cushions on a chair and hopped up between McTavish and the man occasionally known as The King of Confusion. Or was it The Prince of Puzzlement? He was no longer quite sure. Indeed, at this particular juncture of the narrative, he was no longer quite sure of anything worth the time of day. Or night.

'So here's what we'll do.' HostageKaty popped a liquoricestick in her mouth and knotted her fingers as if kneading a blob of playdough. 'We're going halves and I'm calling the shots. Got it?'

After a moment to dissemble his discombobulation and another to unfuddle his muddle, The Professor muttered, 'I do not believe that this is

happening,' and pinched a leg. 'You, my little canary bird . . .' he jabbed a finger at HostageKaty's cherubic face, 'have just made the biggest mistake of your premature life.' As a deathly silence sucked the sound out of the room, he fixed her in the eye with a maniacal glare and twisted his lips into a snarl. 'Let me introduce you to . . . The Jockal.' He swung around and aimed a spindly finger at McTavish. 'A ruthless killer whose depravity knows no bounds.'

'Whoa, steady on, Chief.' McTavish raised his hands in a gesture of defiant non-compliance. 'That was when I done ma course in pest control. Woodlice mainly. Teck it frae me, its murder trying tae get-rid of the wee pests from a tenement karzy.'

The Professor gave McTavish a despairing look, shook his head, cleared his throat and turned to HostageKaty. 'Unless you do exactly as I say,' he said with a certitude that brooked no contradiction. 'The Jockel will snuff you out like a candle flame.' He went to jab a finger in her face then pulled back quick as a slick when she bared her teeth at him.

'Think you're Reggie Kray, do you, you big girl's blouse?' HostageKaty scoffed. 'You're thick as a plank, you are. Use that excuse for a luffa you call a brain. Do for me and you'll piss ten million quid up the wall. Fred's not stupid. Well, he is, but mam's not.' She cocked a snook at McTavish and said, 'if you think HairyFace is scary, wait till you meet my mam. I seen blokes twice his size piss their pants when she gives them one of her looks.' She crossed her arms and rocked back in her chair swinging her legs like a striptease artist on the high strapeze. 'So, we got usselves a deal or do I grass you up to the filth for banging me up in this smeggy excuse for a hovel and messing with me?'

‘Enough.’ The Blackened Man of Gloom hammered a fist on the table. ‘How dare you have the brazen impudence to call Mission Control smeggy?’

‘Tae be fair, Chief, it is a wee bit whiffy in here,’ McTavish whispered in The Professor’s good ear. ‘Thought of tecking yaer frockcoat tae the cleaners to be fumigated?’ He edged away when the man known as The Puppetmeister of Parsimony by those who knew no better pinned him to the metaphorical wall with a metaphorical flash of the eyes.

‘Right then, we done?’ HostageKaty said. ‘I’m off for a Big Mac, and I don’t mean you.’ She tweaked her nose at McTavish and stuck out her tongue. ‘I’ll be back tomorrow in time for you to smack me about for the video. We do this shakedown proper or not at all.’ She buttoned up her blazer, slung her satchel over a shoulder, skipped through the door, and melted into the night like a hot Malteser.

‘Think the wee lassie will be alreet oot on her own this time of night, Chief?’ McTavish asked as he stood at the window watching HostageKaty swagger down the road swinging her schoolbag like a satchel in the rye.

‘I pity the misguided soul who tries to tangle with that spawn of Beelzebub,’ the Professor muttered unquixotically. ‘I will eat my spats if we see hide or hair of her again.’