

'The ultimate saviour of mankind is about to destroy it!'

The INVESTIGATIONS of the PARA-USUAL



PAUL ANGLISS

Jungle Strut ³

'Taxi!' hollered O'Singh, scuttling down the steps of the Royal Academy of Philosophy onto the busy Georgian-terraced street. Upstream, in the flow of one-way traffic, a black cab fell back and began drifting skilfully across lanes. Something odd about it, thought O'Singh. Quite possibly the periscope, maybe something else... no definitely the periscope...

A strange affair, the cab. A kind of submarine vehicle for hire. Though 'sub' would suggest 'under' as in 'submarine' – under the sea. This was surely an above water carriage, something that was driven above the sea – a 'supermarine', if you will.

The cab glided to the kerb, O'Singh's side of the road. The professor tucked in his pockets, blew hard and with a resolve squeezed himself into the back of the taxi.

'The Investigations of the Para-Usual, if you please,' requested the professor, addressing the back of the cabbie's head, which was swaying gently with the vehicle's bulk-accommodating suspension. Professor Breville O'Singh was a gentle colossus, big enough to fill the back of a London taxi like a ship in a bottle.

'The offices are located on Great Albemarle Street, the City. Thank you,' the professor added, flourishing the unopened letter of recommendation.

'Great Albemarle Street, mate?' replied the cabbie, instinctively following the tradition of repeating the fare's requested destination. She inched the cab out from the kerb, denting a flow of cyclists like a big fish scattering a shoal of smaller fry.

'Look at 'em all,' marvelled the cabbie. 'Sign of fuel prices, what it is.'

The professor considered for a moment the fish-cyclist connection and the cost of petrol. He had set his senses to red alert. He needed to keep his wits about him. His prime focus – an appointment, ten o'clock, today. Remarkably, the very same day he had set out believing his last chance of attaining an academic post rested at the Royal Academy of Philosophy. Now here he found himself tearing away from that institution as fast as a supermarine could take him.

O'Singh checked his watch, peered out the window to satisfy himself that the progress they were making was fair, then flumped back into the upholstery. His

attention drifted to the interior of the cab. Something caught it. Not something extraordinary, as he saw it, but more than ordinary, all the same. Ordinary with a little something thrown in, perhaps. Apart from the peculiarity of the periscope, there was the image in the cabbie's rear view mirror. Ordinarily it is the cab driver's eyes reflected, mused O'Singh. When one talks to the cabbie, that is what one is talking to – the eyes detached and removed to the mirror, staring back in another dimension; and the back of the driver's head. An optical phenomenon one might only otherwise experience viewing a Picasso .

The professor's chauffeur was sat bolt upright in her seat, so high in fact as O'Singh observed, that the periscope eyepiece was almost abutting the roof of the cab. Instead of the eyes, he could see framed in the mirror a 'Los Angeles Lakers' logo on her T-shirt, emblazoned across her chest.

O'Singh mouthed before he ventured aloud: 'What if we wanted to stuff a dead bat?'

'Say it again, mate?' replied the Lakers' T-shirt. She had stopped outside the British Museum to wave on an old couple dithering at the side of a zebra crossing. 'Hola! Hola!' she called, to coax them across, assuming that they were either Spanish, Latin American or bilingual Irish.

With a trousers against leather squelch and a ker-dang of strained springs, the professor shifted his bulk and squirmed forward in his seat. Distractedly, he sniffed at the air.

'Lettuce,' he pondered, as he edged closer to the glass partition separating him from the driver. Though just briefly. The cab lurched forward causing his broad features to become squashed and splayed broader across the pane.

'Blet us splay a blat...' endeavoured O'Singh.

'Take yer face off the partition,' urged the cabbie.

O'Singh eased his features from the glass and began afresh.

'Let us say a bat-owner – a dead bat owner – knows of a taxidermist in Kensington, in West London...' ventured O'Singh. To the cabbie he now appeared, with his head twisted to one side, as though he were in a deadly headlock. The professor had positioned himself so he might reach the partition window to wipe the condensation of his features with his shirt collar.

'Taxidermist? What them animal stuffers?' returned the cabbie, oblivious to O'Singh's contortions.

'Ab-absolutely. But, but the bat-owner lives in Whitechapel over in London's East End.'

'Riiiiight,' drawled the cabbie, charitably. In one word she was saying, 'No idea what you're saying, but here, here's some slack.' She pulled the cab through a tight arc to bolt down the kind of unknown-to-mankind-save-the-London-cabbie city alley and set swinging a miniature basketball on a chain, attached to the rear-view mirror.

O'Singh scanned the dashboard, located the clock and computed. Just before 9. Appointment at 10.

'So he's on the Whitechapel High Street...' continued the professor, to the image of a juddering T-shirt logo. The cabbie was wriggling in her seat, back to a fully upright, attentive position.

'Yeah?' prompted the cabbie. The professor had faltered, making a mental note of a flag sticker on the dash. Red, gold and green horizontal bars, a black star centred on the gold. The Ghanaian flag, O'Singh recalled.

'Yes, quite. So, the dead bat-owner is hopping about looking out for a black cab, when he spots one. At once he bawls "Taxi!"'

'Right.'

'Only he is stood, unwittingly, right outside the premises of a taxidermist, right there on the Whitechapel High Street. One whose practice he had not been aware of.'

'Oh?'

'Out bursts the taxidermist, eager for custom, and bundles the bat-owner and his unstuffed pet back into his premises. The cab driver meanwhile, having been hailed, pulls over but loses out to the animal stuffer. His fare is gone.'

'OK.'

'Do you see what has occurred?'

'Got a picture in me mind.'

'Taxi!' hollered O'Singh, unexpectedly, slightly alarming the driver, for it is a rare instance where a passenger hails from actually inside a cab. 'Now "taxi" could be a constriction of "taxicab" or "taximeter" – a form of chauffeured transport – or it

could be short for "taxidermist". Who gets the business depends on who gets to the customer first. After all, why pay the cab fare to Kensington when you can get your bat stuffed right where you are in Whitechapel?

'Never thought of it like that, mate,' said the cabbie, contemplating that special situation.

'Problematic. Tricky. Could be a problem, but what you could do, you see, the business association of cab drivers, to prevent this situation ever occurring, is act to patent the taxi hail. Save this type of thing happening.'

'What, you mean so taxidermists can't use it?'

'Ab-ab-absolutely. Any taxidermist found answering the call thereafter would be doing so illegally.'

'Right.'

'Prevention, as it is said, being the best solution.'

'I've 'eard pretty much.'

This was the cue for O'Singh to deliver his coup de grace, to earn his fare.

'Now, in your opinion, would you say that your association might find this a valuable piece of information?' enquired O'Singh.

The cabbie pulled herself up abruptly in her seat once again.

'Depends what you mean, guv,' she replied, stiffly.

And she was about to find out.

How she would then react to O'Singh's answer would determine whether or not the professor stood that one last chance of earning a research post and the chance to discover everything. Of at last finding out how to read people's minds; or why old dogs always belong to old owners.

In the back of the cab, O'Singh sniffed. Indisputably, lettuce.