



## ***False Footfall***

by Martin Clark

*He lies like an eye-witness – Russian proverb*

"But it didn't *happen* that way." I stared at the Google entry on my GP's laptop, conscious of the whine in my voice.

Doctor Mathers had the rueful smile/sympathetic tone combination down pat.

"Well, I'm afraid the rest of the world would have to disagree with you there, John. The Apollo Eleven disaster is one of those iconic moments in popular culture. Everyone knows where they were when the lander crashed, plus something like one-hundred-and-twenty million people watched it live on television."

I shook my head, unable to accept the evidence before my eyes. "No, it was a success, a complete success. They all got back safely."

"Apollo *Twelve* was the first successful landing, if a somewhat muted affair, and Apollo Thirteen recovered the bodies of Armstrong and Aldrin. I'm sorry, John, but that's just the way things are."

The pain behind my eyes kicked up a notch. I rubbed my temple. "I don't understand. What's wrong with me?"

My GP sat back. "Well, I could schedule an MRI, or refer you to a psychologist, but I'm certain what you're suffering from is Temporal Psychosis. . . ." I must have blanched or something, as he quickly raised a hand, ". . . which, despite the serious-sounding name, is actually quite a mild condition. I see one or two cases a month, and they've all responded to a straightforward treatment regimen."

"But you're saying that I'm mentally ill?"

"Good God, man, no. You're simply part of that small group who suffer the side-effects of prolonged exposure to chronometric radiation. Once we identify the source, I'll be able to recommend appropriate lifestyle changes." He consulted my notes.

"You're a research fellow at the University of London. May I ask in what area?"

"I assist Professor Rogerson at the Institute of Historical Research. We're—" I broke off, my mouth open, "Oh."

Mathers brightened up appreciably. "Oh, indeed. Unfortunately, old chap, historians are four times more likely to suffer from T-P than the general population. Current thinking is that, being better informed, you're more susceptible to historical 'what if', ah, *imagineering*."

At least he hadn't called it "flights of fancy," but still my face burned with embarrassment. "I don't see how that could have happened. I don't use the damn thing personally. I just analyse transcripts provided by the lip-readers."

"Being within a hundred yards is enough in some cases, I'm afraid." The doctor turned to his desk and began scribbling on a pad, "I'm prescribing something for the anxiety and signing you off for an initial four weeks. This comes under the heading of an industrial injury, and your academic work simply has to take a back seat where your health is concerned, understand?"

"Yes, but—"

"But nothing. The HSE will come down like the proverbial ton of bricks on your department if the University lets you stay on. I'm afraid your esteemed Professor Rogerson will have to employ a temporary replacement or find something else to occupy his time for the next month or so." He tapped the pen on his lower lip. "Now, the most effective protection against this form of radiation is a foil-lined skullcap or wig. Any decent milliner will carry a range of approved headgear, and they'll be a damn sight better quality than those provided by the NHS."

"That's it? That's all I have to do? Hide away for a few weeks and then wear an expensive foil hat?"

He handed me the prescription. "Pretty much. As I said, it's a relatively mild condition and easily treated. I'll see you again in about a month's time, but that should be a mere formality."

I stood and nodded. "Thank you, Doctor. You've taken a great load off my mind."

"Don't mention it, and I hope you can enjoy the weekend." Mathers smiled, "Take care."

In the end it had all sounded so matter-of-fact, so trivial, but I was in a daze. The short distance between the consulting room and waiting area simply failed to register. I found myself standing at the desk with the pretty brunette receptionist looking up at me expectantly. "Yes, Mister Banks?"

My mind stubbornly remained in neutral, and I turned away with a shake of the head. The great outdoors suddenly seemed a harsh and frightening place; people would know, they would stop and point, they would laugh. I stared at the double glass doors, breathing heavily.

The receptionist laid her hand on my shoulder, making me start. "Are you all right, sir? Would you like me to call you a cab?"

I forced my mouth into the semblance of a smile. "No, no, that's quite all right, but thanks anyway. I'll walk, I need some fresh air."

She sounded concerned. "Well, if you're quite—"

But I was gone, preferring potential ridicule to certain sympathy. I wandered aimlessly, shoulders hunched against the catcalls that never came. There was a pharmacy ahead, and I fumbled in my jacket pocket for the wadded-up prescription. My fingers closed instead around a thin, oblong shape. It was a business card, on good-quality stock, for "The Belmarsh Foundation," with an address in Earlsfield but no telephone number. On the reverse was a handwritten "8:30pm" and beneath that, "Answers."

Answers? I wasn't even sure I understood the questions.

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*Earlsfield, SW18, 8:26 pm*

Despite the grandiose title, The Belmarsh Foundation turned out to be the bottom half of a partitioned terraced house in Duntshill Road, not far from the station. I watched from across the street, in the shadow of a stunted elm. There were no signs of life. The hallway behind the frosted glass fanlight was in darkness, and heavy-duty Venetian blinds covered the bay window.

I couldn't hang about indefinitely, as someone was bound to call the police and report me for loitering, with or without intent. So, I crossed the empty roadway and raised my hand to knock on the front door.

It opened, taking me by surprise. The surgery receptionist stood there—the brunette—only now she had close-cropped hair. I lowered my awkward fist, at a loss for words. She half-smiled and stood to the side.

"Welcome, John, I'm so glad you could make it. I'm Hazel, by the way. Go down the hallway to the kitchen, then straight through to the conservatory. The others are already here."

I hesitated. "Others? Look, what's all this about?"

"It may help to think of Belmarsh as a place where we discuss alternatives, but, please, this isn't a conversation for the doorstep."

I squeezed past her and walked down the narrow hall, noting a foil-lined hat and wig hanging on the coat rack. The white-tiled kitchen was cold and lacked the usual dirty dishes, cereal boxes, and other clutter normally associated with a living household. I moved on, conscious of Hazel's footsteps close behind. The conservatory was a modern extension sandwiched between the adjacent houses, with only the rear wall offering any view of the narrow garden. Despite the background burble of central heating, there was a damp chill to the air. It was obvious that the Belmarsh "alternatives" weren't discussed very often.

Two men sat there, waiting. The younger appeared nervous, restless, half-rising as I entered, only to flop down again when his companion didn't stir. This second man was middle-aged with short grey hair, moustache, and goatee. He seemed to be mounting a one-man Edwardian revival, right down to the silver-topped cane and black Homburg resting on the side-table.

Hazel stood beside me. "John, this is Richard. . . " (hesitant smile) ". . . and Leon" (no reaction). "Please, take a seat."

The four chairs in the room were arranged in a rough diamond pattern, facing inwards. Leon toyed with his cane. "You have taken your first *small step* towards the truth, John Banks." I jerked, as if touched by a live wire, and that earned me a thin-lipped smile, "Congratulations." He had an accent, an odd inflection, but nothing I could pin down.

I sat there, floundering for a reply, but Hazel came to my rescue. "Leon, don't tease the poor man. You know how fragile someone in his condition can be."

Leon inclined his head. "As you wish, Fraulein. Well, John, we both have an interest in Apollo Eleven, do we not?"

"Ah, yes, well, I guess you could say that."

"Armstrong and Aldrin, such a tragic loss. Nixon vowed their sacrifice would not be in vain and committed America to establishing Eagle Base as a permanent habitat on the Moon. Since then they have spent billions, trillions, of dollars keeping it manned and operational, to no appreciable scientific or military benefit. The effect of this distortion on the American economy is felt around the globe. However, no subsequent President has dared to dishonour the dead by pulling the plug, as the saying goes. Yes?"

The pain, which I'd almost gotten used to, stepped up a notch. I rubbed my temple. "Yes?"

"No." Leon sighed, "The *success* of Apollo Eleven spawned several follow-up missions, but the great American public rapidly lost interest, and the program was ultimately cancelled. No one has set foot on the Moon in over forty years."

"I don't understand. Which version is true?"

"You have a memory in your head like a cancer. A memory that is at odds with everything else you remember. A memory that is at odds with what everyone *else* remembers." He spread his hands to encompass the room, "Except us. For if not friends, then we are at least fellow sufferers."

I shook my head as if that would somehow dislodge the false past. "No, *no*. How can we all be having the same hallucination? I'm ill, that's all, ill, a recognised condition. This is just a cruel trick."

"Humanity is at war, Herr Banks." Leon tapped his own temple with the head of the cane, "Both up here and in the wide world. Against who or what I cannot say, but our past is being altered in an attempt to manipulate the future. Fortunately our adversary can only take a broad-brush approach, changing major events. We, on the other hand, are a guerrilla band, able to pick at loose threads until the entire tapestry of lies unravels."

"God, Leon, you do go on sometimes." Hazel sounded both amused and irritated, "Richard, will you explain? In English, please."

The younger man leaned forward in his chair. "The chronoscope is our window on the past but we have to make damn sure its presence goes undetected. If our digital camouflage isn't primo, then the link won't open. It won't open, because there's no recorded instance of us spying on the past." He scratched his head, "I know, I know, it's one of those causality paradoxes that will turn your mind inside-out if you think about it too much. Anyway, you *could* abandon any attempt at concealment and show someone in the past a short message instead. Just a few lines but more than enough to *completely* blow their mind."

I frowned. "But you just said that can't happen, because, ah, it never has happened."

Leon looked and sounded smug. "We believe that President Nixon will be *very* interested in what we have to say, and if there was anyone obsessed with information control, it was him."

"You're going to warn Tricky Dicky about this unknown adversary of yours? What possible good will that do? It's certainly not information he could act on without someone asking some damn awkward questions. Either that, or they'll have him committed." I blinked, "Had him committed, except that they didn't. My head hurts."

The older man just smiled. "Back in the nineteen-sixties NASA was certain a spectacular disaster before they reached the Moon would send manned space flight the way of the Zeppelin. Even a significant postponement was viewed with alarm, and given the available technology a major systems failure was always a distinct possibility. So they initiated a fall-back plan, Project Capricorn."

"Never heard of it."

"I should think not. Simply put, it allowed for the simulation of an Apollo mission, with the full co-operation of the astronauts involved, culminating in their air-drop as part of a faked re-entry sequence."

I snorted. "Bollocks. That's, like, the worst conspiracy theory I've *ever* heard of. Someone would have talked, especially after all this time."

Leon shook his head. "You are dealing with true believers here, John. Patriots prepared to sacrifice anything, *everything*, if that meant America was first to the Moon. Anyway, a Capricorn simulation was only to be contemplated in extreme circumstances."

I stood up. "I can't listen to any more of this. I may be ill, but at least I've accepted that I have a problem. You three, you're all in denial."

Hazel also stood, partially blocking my exit. "Please, John, just listen for one more minute."

I sighed and turned to face Leon directly. "So, let me guess, you're going to tell me that Apollo Eleven, *our* Apollo Eleven, was faked?"

"Oh, no, my friend, but it *could* have been."

We stared at each other for a long moment. I sucked in a deep breath. "You're going to scare Nixon, convince him to call-off the real Moon landing in favour of a damn *pageant*? Christ! How?" The penny continued to drop. "Oh, bugger off! *Me*? I've never been in the same room as a bloody chronoscope, let alone programmed one."

Richard fished a small vacuum-packed object from his pocket.

"This is a designator chip for the standard Mark Two, just like the model you have at the University." He licked his lips, "Now, it was a bit of a rush job, seeing as how Hazel didn't give us the heads-up until earlier today, but everything should work just fine. All you have to do is swop this baby for the one already in the slot, and away we go. To the observers at this end, it will look like your typical failed insight, end of story."

I glared at him.

"All I have to do? Listen, *Dick*, apart from the small fact that I don't have security clearance for the operations area, I'm now also banned from the entire building on health and safety grounds. So think again."

Leon pointed at me with his cane. "Not until Monday, Herr Banks. It will take until then for the bureaucracy to act upon Mather's diagnosis. So we have a small window of opportunity, should you have the stomach for this enterprise."

"It's for all of us, John." Hazel was almost pleading, "For everyone out there who knows, deep down, that something is *wrong*."

"If I do this, what will it achieve? If the past has been corrupted, can a lie change things back?" No one answered. I held out my hand for the chip. "See, if this doesn't come off, sunshine, you best hope we don't end up sharing the same padded cell or you are *so* fucking dead."

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The Institute staff were used to me working Saturday mornings and didn't bat an eyelid when I pitched up around ten. There were other sad-sack individuals about, as historians don't tend to have much of a life outside academia. I had no plan, not even an inkling, and already regretted the previous evening's uncharacteristic display of bravado.

I walked down to the basement, conscious of sweat tickling the small of my back. The depleted uranium used in its construction meant that the chronoscope couldn't be housed above ground, plus tucking it away down here simplified security matters. Yet there was no protection detail on duty when I reached the bottom corridor, and the double doors of the operations room stood wide open.

The terms *gift horse* and *too easy* vied for my attention.

I stepped cautiously over the threshold, expecting to be challenged at any moment. All the operators were gathered at the far end of the long room, clustered around some item of equipment giving off a flickering blue aura. Nobody looked in my direction. The chronoscope squatted under the strip lights; a brooding gunmetal toad.

"It is a mere toy, of course, a trinket." Leon stood beside me. He wore a pristine lab coat and carried a heavy-duty protective visor around his neck. "Yet the technology it represents leads inexorably to time-travel."

Surprise and fear couldn't agree amongst themselves, and so my mind opted for dull-witted acceptance instead.

"Leon? But if you have access, if you work here, then why give me the chip? Why not do this yourself?"

"Because I cannot change anything, Herr Banks. Not here, not now." He straightened his tie. "And I am out of time."

"Doctor Prinz? Sir?" One of the technicians called from across the room. He ignored me, so perhaps I was accepted as an assistant or similar lackey.

Prinz settled his visor in place. "You must excuse me, but they require adult supervision, as the saying goes." He walked over and was absorbed into the huddle. No one paid me any further attention.

I stepped up to the helpfully labelled "Targeting Array." The Eject button did just that, and I swapped my chip for the one currently in place. A red light went green. I turned on my heel and left, without breaking into a run.

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The wall clock in my office crawled towards 11 am, the time of the next scheduled insight. I could have run away, I suppose, but I found being surrounded by my books and papers more comforting than the thought of skulking in some alleyway. Anyway, if anything went wrong there would be no place to hide.

10:59

11:00

11:01

My background headache vanished, the sudden absence of pain making me gasp. For a moment the room around me seemed unfamiliar, but the feeling faded like the memory of an interrupted dream. I blinked and rubbed my eyes. Everything appeared as it should, apart from the desk calendar, which still showed Friday. I tore off the top sheet—and laughed, staring at the daily quotation for Saturday, July 21.

*One giant leap for mankind.*

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### About the Author

Martin Clark is a freelance writer and occasional poet.

He is the author of supernatural noir novellas formally produced by Eggplant Literary Productions (now sadly defunct) now taken on by Tickety Boo Press, and short stories in recent Third Flatiron anthologies. He also contributes to several online publications including Mythaxis.co.uk, Timelesstales.com, and Kraxon.com. His range of subject matter includes science fiction, urban fantasy, romance, and westerns. He puts this down to the somewhat eclectic mobile lending library where he grew up.

He works as a local government officer in south-west Scotland but still finds time to be an evil stepfather.

We've been looking forward to more stories set in the universe of Dr. Leon Prinz.

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