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Opening Extract from...

Bills of Mortality

Written by Norman Russell

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Prologue

An Encounter in Pall Mall East

9 October 1894

Dr Angus McKinnon, Bachelor of Medicine, was delighted and flattered to hear that another physician had actually read his paper, ‘Some Observations on the Secretions of the Bile Duct’, in *The Edinburgh Medical Record*. Some of his Scots friends, he knew, had read it out of politeness, but here was a London physician who had not only read it, but could speak about it with enthusiasm.

‘You flatter me, Doctor – er – Landru? Thank you, I didn’t quite catch your name. I have long believed, you see, that a number of recalcitrant diseases may have their origin in irregularities in the secretions not only of the bile duct, but of the pancreas. But there: I thought I was a voice crying in the wilderness. “Old McKinnon’s going to bore us again with his secretions!” That’s what I imagine people saying.’

Dr McKinnon laughed heartily, and looked at the man who had joined him at the table in the dining room of the Royal College of Physicians in Pall Mall East. This Dr Landru was an articulate, eager kind of man with the glint of strong conviction in his eyes. A very striking sort of man, with a fine aquiline nose. A foreigner, of course: he wore a monocle in his right eye, and his rather alarming black beard was close-trimmed to his face. A Frenchman, perhaps?

‘Did you ever read that paper of yours here, at the Royal College of Physicians?’ asked Dr Landru. ‘If you did so, then I expect it created quite a stir.’

‘Well, no, Dr Landru, you see, I’m not a member. I’m a member of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh – no, I didn’t read it there, either! I came down to London this October partly for a little holiday, and partly to attend Lord Bruton’s lectures on brain surgery here at the Royal College. But do you agree with me that those secretions are neglected by diagnosticians?’

The two men launched into a highly technical conversation, at the end of which the Scots physician found his admiration of the London doctor increasing. The man’s views seemed identical to his own, and although he was clearly not an expert on the physiology of the bile duct, he showed a learned and unbiased appreciation of McKinnon’s theories.

Eventually both men exhausted the topic, and McKinnon called for a couple of whiskies to slake their thirst. Really, what an excellent fellow this Landru was!

‘What a curious coincidence,’ he said, ‘that you and I should meet like this! I thought my views had long been consigned to oblivion! Are you in general practice, Dr Landru? Or are you engaged upon research? So many are doing that, nowadays.’

He saw the foreign doctor – surely he *was* foreign? – pull a wry face.

‘I run a free clinic in one of the poorest districts in London,’ Landru replied. ‘My work there is its own reward. But like you, Dr McKinnon, I have an absorbing line of private research, one which has made a large number of people who ought to know better believe that I am a quack and mountebank. I am an advocate of the miasma theory of infection.’

Oh dear! The miasma theory had been discredited long ago, and in McKinnon’s estimation, anyone who still adhered to it was a crank. But this man had refused to dismiss his own medical theories, unpopular as they were, so the least that he could do was listen to what Landru had to say. But not now. He had a train to catch.

‘I maintain an open mind about the miasma theory,’ said McKinnon, mendaciously, ‘so I would be delighted to discuss it with you when a better opportunity presents itself. If ever you

are in Scotland, you must call upon me, and stay for a few days.'

He withdrew a calling card from his waistcoat pocket, and rather self-consciously handed it to Dr Landru.

'That's where you'll find me,' he said, blushing slightly. He was proud of what it said on the card, but he was a modest man by nature.

*Dr Angus McKinnon, MB, Extra Surgeon to Her Majesty.
5 The Old Cottages, Balmoral Castle.*

'*Mon Dieu!*' cried Dr Landru. (There: he *was* a foreigner.) 'But you are a man of distinction, an eminent person in society. I should be honoured to call upon you, sir, at any convenient time. Surgeon to Her Majesty...'

'Oh, it's not as grand as it sounds,' said McKinnon, deprecatingly. 'Whenever Her Majesty is at Balmoral, she brings her own surgeon with her – Sir Alexander Findlay, Sergeant-Barber of Scotland. I am on hand mainly to attend any of the Royal Dukes who may be in residence, and then it's usually a matter of binding up cuts and scratches acquired during hunting and shooting trips.'

McKinnon rose from the table, and shook hands with Dr Landru. It was time to catch his train to Aberdeen. Yes, he liked this foreign-looking doctor who kept a free clinic for the poor, while remaining true to his unpopular convictions.

'You have my card there,' he said. 'Drop me a line in the post if you decide to visit, and I'll make all ready for you.'

After the Scots doctor had left him, Dr Landru sat for a while longer, ordering his thoughts. He had come to the Royal College that day knowing that Dr Angus McKinnon would be there, but it had saved embarrassing explanations by accepting McKinnon's belief that their meeting was a coincidence. The public defence of unpopular beliefs was a stance that they shared, and had formed the bond between them. When the opportunity offered itself – and it wouldn't be long, of that he was sure – he would avail himself of Dr Mackinnon's hospitality.

As he descended the staircase from the dining room, he saw how one young doctor who had attended Lord Bruton's lectures caught sight of him, and muttered to a companion, 'There's

Antoine Landru. What on earth's that mountebank doing here? I'm surprised they let him in. He's still spouting all that rubbish about the miasma theory of disease.'

1

Captain Stanhope Plans a Journey

7 November, 1894

Sir Charles Napier, Her Majesty's Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, stood at the window of his room in the Foreign Office, looking down at the black, leafless trees bordering the lake in St James's Park. He had never known early November weather to be so severe. Without turning round, he said to the other occupant of the room:

'There's a crust of ice forming across the lake, Stanhope. There'll be heavy snow, I shouldn't wonder, before the month's out.'

Captain Paul Stanhope looked up for a moment from the desk at which he was working. Why should the Chief be bothering himself with the weather, when there were important segments of the plan still to complete? True, he was a brilliant diplomat, but a bit of an idler in the office. He was too fond of looking out of that window.

'You may well be right, sir,' Stanhope replied. 'I suppose that anything would be better than this infernal cold.' He turned his attention once more to the intricate railway maps spread out on his desk, and began to write rapidly in pencil on a note pad.

Sir Charles Napier looked at him, and smiled to himself. He thinks I'm wasting my time talking, he thought, when I could be writing a memorandum, or dashing off a few letters to the

Prime Minister. How old was he? Thirty-four or so, with a tall, athletic frame, red hair, and a waxed military moustache, which was rather unnervingly similar to that of the young Emperor of Germany. Stanhope looked as though he might be a firebrand, but his voice was unexpectedly quiet and thoughtful in tone, and there were occasions when he was subject to nervous spasms, jumping like a startled hare whenever a door banged. Perhaps he had problems of a private nature, but as far as Napier knew, he had no close ties of family. Still, he had been engaged to a very eligible young lady for six months, and perhaps there were occasions when the young hopefuls didn't see eye to eye – hence the outbreaks of nerves! Stanhope's grandfather had been at the Foreign Office in Palmerston's time.

Stanhope suddenly threw down his pencil, and sat back in his chair.

'There you are, sir,' he said, 'it's all complete, down to the last detail. I've plotted what I think is the most prudent route, starting at King's Cross at ten o'clock on the morning of Monday, 10th December. We will charter a special train from the Great Northern Railway, which will be pulled by one of the locomotives normally used for the long-haul expresses. There will be two sleeping carriages, sufficient to accommodate all the – er – distinguished personages and their secretariat. There will also be a restaurant car for the whole journey, so that there will be no need for the members of the party to avail themselves of hotels on the route. It is quite certain that Lord Kimberley and Mr Asquith will travel together?'

'I think we can take that as settled,' said Napier. 'Asquith's finally seen the wisdom of a single train journey. Besides, he's flattered that the Prime Minister wants him to accompany the Foreign Secretary to this overseas conference. It's not often that the Home Secretary gets the chance to travel abroad. Ah! You have marked the whole route in red ink on this map. They are to go to Edinburgh, by way of York and Newcastle. Now, what happens when they get to Edinburgh?'

'I have shown that part of the route in green,' said Stanhope. 'The party will transfer to the North British Railway for the long haul to Aberdeen. There, they will board a specially commissioned steam ferry of the Nielsen Line which will take them directly

to Stavanger. They should arrive there late on the Tuesday evening, 11th December, but in any case well in time to settle down in the hotel assigned to them by the Swedish government, and perhaps engage in informal talks before the Conversation begins on Friday, 14th December.'

'Excellent, Stanhope! I have never regretted poaching you from the Quartermaster General's Office! You're a superb and meticulous planner. Go away now, and turn your notes into print, so that all relevant departments can be informed as soon as possible. I'll see Asquith myself, this afternoon. His mind's preoccupied at the moment with this rumour of pestilence in the East End, and it will need a personal appearance from me to bring him back to the important business of the Stavanger Conversation. Still, there's a whole month yet before the meeting opens at Stavanger on 14th December. Plenty of time for Mr Asquith to clear up this East End business.'

'A pestilence, sir? I'd not heard about that.'

'Some fool is claiming that the Great Plague has returned to London, and Asquith as Home Secretary is rightly concerned about dangerous rumours of that kind. Well, it's nothing to do with us. It's time we both adjourned to luncheon. I'll need you again by two o'clock this afternoon.'

Captain Stanhope gathered up his papers, bowed briefly to Napier, and quietly left the room. Napier sat down at his ornate desk, and abandoned himself to thought.

Over the last two years, the need for a high-level Conversation on the topic of the western borders of the Russian Empire had become more and more apparent. Dangerous tensions had to be eased if the Balance of Power was to be preserved. There had been a number of minor irritations, which, given the right stimulus by interested persons, could be inflamed...

The situation was not serious enough to warrant a full-blown public conference, or even a *pourparler*, but a Conversation was now imperative. Sweden had expressed concern at Russian troop movements near the border between Russian Finland and Swedish Lapland. Sweden needed to be assured that these movements had no ulterior significance.

Russia, of course, knew that Sweden and Denmark had concluded a secret treaty of mutual defence following Prussia's

annexation of Schleswig-Holstein, and that the treaty would be invoked if Russia seemed to threaten Sweden's borders. Neither side would even mention that treaty, but its ramifications would be there, hovering, as it were, in the air of Stavanger.

And there was something else. It was known in certain circles that a group of fanatical Swedish expansionists had spread a rumour that Germany was preparing to embark on an insidious colonisation of the Russian towns of Memel and Libau across the Eastern Sea from Sweden's coast by means of land purchases funded by the chief merchants of Königsberg. It was an elaborate lie, and he, Napier, had briefed Lord Kimberley on the best way of proving that fact.

There were other issues, all of which could be solved by the Conversation, which was to be held at Stavanger, in the Swedish province of Norway. There was a strong nationalist movement in Norway itself, with talk of the creation of an independent monarchy; that, too, could be quietly discussed by the assembled 'distinguished personages', as Captain Stanhope had called them.

The meeting would involve Russia, Germany, and Sweden, with England as the broker. When it was over, a few private visits would be made by members of the various Royal Families, as a kind of cloak to hide the importance of the Conversation. That had been the Prince of Wales's idea, but it had been thought prudent not to let the Queen know that he had suggested it.

What about France and Austria? Well, they knew that it was none of their business, and so could pretend that they had not known the Conference had taken place... . Napier smiled. What fun it all was! Poor Stanhope, who never gave himself time to think, didn't know what he was missing.

★

In a little court off Bridge Street was to be found Garvey's Dining Rooms, a warm, low-ceilinged and smoky establishment where a good number of people who worked in Whitehall liked to spend the lunch hour. Bridge Street was only a brisk step away from the Foreign Office, and Captain Stanhope was well-known there. He sat now at a little table near the stairs that led up to a further dining room on the first floor, eating a plate of chops, peas and potatoes, which would be followed by a very decent cup of

steaming coffee. Around him, talkative men in bowler hats regaled each other with office talk, occasionally erupting into laughter at the climax of some amusing tale of a senior's discomfiture. The air was sharp with tobacco smoke, and the windows were all steamed up.

The door from the court opened, and a thickset, bull-necked man in a plaid overcoat and curly-brimmed bowler came into the café. He threaded his way through the tables until he reached the place where Stanhope sat, nodded briefly, and sat down opposite him.

'How are you, Captain Stanhope?' he asked. His English was perfect, though spoken with a heavy foreign accent. He removed his hat, revealing a head of close-cropped sandy hair.

'I'm very well, thank you, Herr Falkenheyn. Can I order you a coffee?'

'No, no, I'm just passing through. I wondered whether you had anything to tell me. Or to give me.'

Captain Stanhope put down his knife and fork and removed a brown envelope from the inside pocket of his overcoat. He looked cautiously around him before sliding it across the table. In a second it had disappeared into one of Herr Falkenheyn's pockets.

'The route to Stavanger?'

'The very same.' Stanhope looked at the bull-necked man with something approaching affection and respect. No one would ever know how that lumbering German had plucked him from the very jaws of death. He lowered his voice to little more than a whisper, and added: 'They will begin their journey from King's Cross on the 10th of December. The – er – the event, you know, begins in Stavanger on the 14th.'

It was Herr Falkenheyn's turn to place a sealed envelope on the table, manoeuvring it skilfully under the edge of Stanhope's plate. Stanhope knew that it would contain one hundred pounds in Bank of England notes.

'Tell me, is your name really Falkenheyn?' he asked. 'I've often wondered.'

The big German chuckled, and rose from the table.

'It is indeed my name – a very exalted name in Prussia. Admittedly I have been known to use other names, Hirsch, for

instance, and sometimes “Herr Niemand”, which amuses me. But to you, Captain, my name is Falkenheyn. Why seek for another? In any case, I wouldn’t advise it. Just think of me as a quiet, harmless fellow, living in welcome obscurity. Good day.’

After the German had gone, a waitress brought Stanhope his coffee, which he sipped appreciatively. He had already hidden away the envelope containing a hundred pounds. ‘Herr Niemand’...it was German for ‘Nobody’. He was only marginally interested in who the German could be: it was both prudent and profitable not to delve too deeply into matters of identity.

It had been over a year since he had encountered Herr Falkenheyn. To be precise, it had been on the dark late evening of 25th October, 1893. He had found a stretch of the Embankment which was quite deserted, and he had looked back for a moment at the twinkling lights lining the great promenade before leaping on to the balustrade. The shining waters of the Thames lay below, waiting for him; his appalling dilemma left him no alternative but suicide.

He had actually begun the fatal jump when a pair of strong arms had seized him and wrestled him to the ground. He had struggled for a while, and then had gone limp. He had thought that he would be resentful of this interference; instead, he felt nothing but profound thankfulness, particularly when his rescuer said something that shocked him back into full consciousness.

‘Thirty-three is too young to go drowning yourself, Captain Stanhope. Come, We will hail a cab, and you shall come back to my house in Clarence Gate. I have been useful to you this night. I may be even more useful to you when you have heard what I have to say.’

There had been nothing attractive about Herr Falkenheyn. A heavy, brooding man with cropped hair and a cruel mouth, he had yet saved his life, and when they arrived at his house, he had given him whisky, and more or less ordered him to tell his story. It had been a sordid tale enough.

A year earlier, when he had been working under Sir Charles Napier for six months, he had attended a convivial party thrown by some of his former colleagues in the Quartermaster-General’s Department at the War Office. The party, held in a private dining club near Regent Street, had been a wild one, with plenty of

champagne and the company of a number of 'young ladies' from the chorus at the Alhambra.

One girl in particular, very pretty and petite, with a winning way about her, had attracted his attention, and when the party was over, he had escorted her back to her lodgings in a narrow street off Leicester Square. From that moment, a close liaison had developed between him and Maisie Dawson. She was only seventeen, and her artless chatter amused him, as did her curious naivety about the sterner realities of life. It would be untrue to say that he was besotted with his little chorus girl; but he liked her so much that he began to pretend to himself that she was his equal socially, and that if he ever wanted to do so, he would marry her. His ruin, and hers, dated from that moment of self-deluding folly.

Two months later she had come to him, tearful and hysterical, to tell him that she was pregnant with his child. From the beginning of their intimacy he had known that she was innocent, and he had no reason whatever to disbelieve her assertion. What was he to do?

Common sense now told him that marriage was out of the question. Maisie was pretty and endearing, but after all she was only a common music-hall dancer. His family had served in the Foreign office since Palmerston's day; marriage to Maisie would put him beyond the pale socially, and it would be the end of his promising career as a forward planner for Sir Charles Napier. There was only one solution to his hideous dilemma.

He had taken her to a mean tenement in a lane off Wapping Dock Stairs, a vile place, recommended to him by one of his former intimates from the War Office. He would never forget the tear-stained, trembling girl, her beauty marred by terror, looking back at him in anguish as she accomplished an appalling parody of a woman to an upstairs room. The whole place stank of blood and corruption...

She had died within minutes of the commencement of that hideous 'operation', and he had been told that if he paid the criminal woman one hundred pounds he would hear no more of the business.

The demand for further payments began within the week. He was working on some Government papers in the sitting room

of his house in Vincent Street when a rough, pockmarked man was shown up by his housekeeper. The man was roughly dressed, and smelt of drink. He seemed to make it a point of honour to behave in as common and insolent a way as possible. He was about thirty, unshaven and slovenly. He had glanced around the room as though he was taking a proprietary interest in its furnishings, and then sat down in an armchair.

‘It’s a nice little billet you’ve got here, Stanhope,’ said the man. ‘Very nice indeed. I wouldn’t mind being butler here. Why don’t you get rid of that old party who showed me upstairs, and employ me? You and I are two of a kind—’

‘How dare you?’ Stanhope had cried, but even as he did so he knew how impotent those three words were. This ruffian, whoever he was, would dare to do anything, because it was clear that he knew all.

‘Now, now, none of that, Stanhope – Paul!’ cried the visitor, half rising from his chair, and waving an admonitory finger at the man he had come to torment. ‘If anything, I’m a better man than you are: better by far. What are you, after all? A seducer of a seventeen-year-old girl with no mother or father to protect her. You’re a procurer of an illegal operation, and that procurement, Paul, once known, will send you down for fifteen years penal servitude.’

‘What – what do you want?’ Stanhope could hear the craven fear in his voice, and saw the would-be blackmailer smile.

‘And don’t forget,’ the man continued, ‘the girl *died*, and it’s murder, and you are an accessory before and after the fact. You gave that blood-soaked hag money to get rid of the body, and hush the matter up. A word from me in the right quarter, Paul, and you’ll swing for it. But I don’t want to put you out too much. Maybe I won’t come here as butler just yet. I want ten pounds in gold a week, left for me in an envelope at the Grapes in Cinnamon Street, Wapping. My name’s Bully Dolan. You can call me Bully, if you like. I’m not proud, like some I could mention.’

From that moment things had got worse and worse. Dolan would turn up unexpectedly, drunk and abusive, demanding more and more money. Stanhope’s bank account was nearly empty, and he had had to resort to securing loans on the deeds of his house.

And then had come the fatal 25th October, when Bully Dolan had come to the house with a vicious, painted trollop who he said was his 'friend'. They had come to live with him in the house, Bully told him. He had been obliged to dismiss his own housekeeper through lack of funds, and bully told him that the trollop would look after them both.

'It'll be nice for you, Paul,' Bully had said, 'to have a family all of your own to work for while you're down there in Whitehall, hobnobbing with the toffs. Pol and I will be here waiting for you when you come home of an evening, won't we, Pol?'

'Do we have to have him under our feet all day?' Pol had asked. 'This room would be fine for you and the boys to run a blackjack game. Couldn't you find a nice little room for him somewhere up in the attics?'

'What a good idea, Pol!' cried Bully, his eyes suddenly blazing with some kind of perverse pleasure at the idea. 'Yes; or he could live in the cellar, and be a kind of butler...would you like that, Paul?'

Stanhope had made a feeble attempt to drive his tormentors from the house, but a sudden vicious blow had felled him to the floor.

'None of that, killer!' Bully had roared. 'Murderer, gallows-fodder! You've got to learn to respect your betters, Paul. Now go on out of it, go to work, and earn some more nice gold sovereigns for Pol and me.'

Captain Paul Stanhope had known that none of these threats were idle ones. He was to become a servant to a common labouring man and a woman who was obviously a prostitute. God knows what they would do to him in the end.

As he left the house, Bully had appeared on the doorstep. 'Hey, you,' he shouted. 'Don't tell no one about this, do you hear? Otherwise it's the gallows for you. I mean it!' That night, he had attempted suicide on the embankment, and had been rescued by the intervention of Herr Falkenheyn.

'What do you want of me?' he had asked his rescuer. Falkenheyn had listened most carefully to his sordid tale, but had revealed nothing by word or gesture of his own reactions to the young man's wretched narrative.

'I want very little of you, Captain Stanhope,' Falkenheyn had

replied. 'But there will be occasions when I will ask you to furnish me with details about the movements of certain political figures when they embark on journeys in this country and abroad. I emphasise that I will ask you purely for details of movements – there will be no demands upon you to reveal any state secrets.'

'So it's out of the frying-pan into the fire,' Stanhope had declared bitterly.

'Not at all. For instance, I will pay you a hundred pounds in notes for every piece of information you give to me. Hardly blackmail, I think you'll agree. And there is something else that I think will tempt you to fall in with my wishes. If you agree to cooperate with me, you will never see that man Bully Dolan, or his harridan companion Pol, again.'

Stanhope had agreed immediately, and the German had invited him to stay in his house in Clarence Gate for the night. He had slept well for the first time in months, and on waking the next morning he had recalled how this mysterious man had saved him from death in the murky water of the Thames. He had obviously known who he, Stanhope, was, and how vilely he was situated, but he determined to ask no questions of his rescuer. What mattered now was whether Herr Falkenheyn would be as good as his word, and cleanse Stanhope's house in Vincent Street of the hideous interlopers.

On arriving home in the mid-morning, he had found no trace of Dolan or Pol. Nothing of theirs remained in the house. On the table in his sitting room he found an envelope containing one hundred pounds in Bank of England notes – a kind of retainer from the man who had saved his life. It had come in the nick of time to prevent his account being closed by his bank.

The next day, he found that a copy of the *Morning Leader*, a radical halfpenny newspaper, had been pushed through his letter box. A lurid article on page two told of the brutal murder of Patrick 'Bully' Dolan and his woman companion, Mary Jane Slope, known as 'Pol'. Their bodies had been found in an alley in Wapping, and both had been killed by numerous blows to the head from a common house-brick.

'That'll be elevenpence ha'penny, sir.'

'What? Oh, sorry, Susan, I've been wool-gathering!'

Captain Paul Stanhope paid his bill, and left the cosy premises

of Garvey's Dining Rooms to face the bitter cold of Bridge Street. He must learn to put all that sordid business out of his mind. It was time to rejoin the privileged world of Sir Charles Napier, the Earl of Kimberley, and Mr Herbert Asquith, who was currently concerning himself with rumours of plague in the East End.