

## PROLOGUE

In 1918 up to forty million people died of a disease that circled the globe – more than died in the Great War itself and more than died of bubonic plague in the epidemic that swept across Europe in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. They died of a particularly virulent form of pneumonia, which caused their lungs to fill with blood and mucous until they could no longer breathe and effectively drowned in their own secretions. In the United States, the disease affected so many people – one quarter of the entire population – that in certain areas there was a shortage of coffins and gravediggers. Panic was such that travel between certain towns and cities was banned without certified permission. The epidemic alone was responsible for lowering the average life expectancy in the USA by ten years. The disease was influenza.

*I had a little bird,  
Its name was Enza.  
I opened the window,  
And in-flu-enza*

CHILDREN'S SKIPPING RHYME FROM THE TIME.

It is estimated that one fifth of the world's population was affected by the influenza pandemic of 1918 – 1919, its spread mediated by troops returning home from the war in Europe. Of those American soldiers who fell in Europe, half their number succumbed to influenza rather than enemy fire.

The great influenza pandemic is now beyond living memory to all but a handful of the world's population but the disease itself is as familiar as the common cold. In fact, the two viruses are often confused – particularly by those seeking to excuse their absence from work – flu sounds just a little more serious than a cold.

Influenza breaks out every winter but is not considered a deadly disease – except perhaps for the very frail or very old – but it still retains the potential to wreak havoc as it did nearly a century ago. The flu virus is a master of disguise, constantly changing the structure of its protein coat and challenging the human immune system in being the equivalent of a moving target. These almost annual changes lead to a situation where the virus will be more virulent in some years than in others – 1957 and 1968 were particularly 'bad' years although both pale into insignificance when compared to the ravages of the 1918 strain.

In recent times it has been possible for scientists to study and 'reconstruct' the pandemic strain from biological material recovered from the preserved tissue of dead American soldiers who died of flu after returning from the First World War. The wisdom of doing this has been questioned in some quarters and although the scientists concerned claim that such studies

will help them to understand the virus better, there are those who suggest that creating a monster in order to understand it is irresponsible in the extreme.

There are also arguments over the level of containment necessary for experimentation with such a dangerous virus and unease expressed over the decision of certain workers to downgrade the requirement from BL-4 (the highest level of containment possible – requiring workers to wear full-cover body suits and hoods – to BL-3, a lower grade involving ‘half suits’. The argument against downgrading is simple: if a laboratory worker should contract the disease and take it out of the lab, flu is so infectious that it would spread like wildfire. If the transport systems of 1918 permitted the virus to reach every corner of the globe, how much more convenient would it find travel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Once the genie is out of the bottle, they maintain, global disaster must surely follow.

The existence of the 1918 strain – even if held in secure laboratories – brings the spectre of terrorist threat into the equation. Pandemic flu would be a fearsome weapon in the hands of those whose only motive is the destruction of Western society. A flu pandemic would disrupt the functioning of the entire civilised world.



Mary got a predictable response from the police. 'A what?'

'A monkey of some sort, a big one. It came in through the kitchen window while I was making lunch.'

'Of course it did, Madam.'

'Don't you "of course it did" me,' snapped Mary. 'My name is Mary Elwood; I live at Bramley Cottage in Holt and I am not in the habit of making hoax calls to the police, or any other organisation, come to that. My husband and I have been attacked by a monkey. We would like the police in attendance and an ambulance for my husband; he's been bitten.'

'Yes, Madam.'

By three in the afternoon, Norfolk Police had had three more calls about the sighting of a monkey and no information about a missing animal.

Inspector Frank Giles looked at the reports and said, 'This one records a sighting of a monkey in Weybourne at ten past twelve.'

'Yes, sir.'

'But the Elwoods were still under attack in Holt at five past.'

'I see what you mean, sir.'

'Even a monkey with a Ferrari couldn't have made it to Weybourne in five minutes.'

22 KEN MCCLURE

'No, sir.'

'So there's more than one of them. I take it you've had no joy with zoos and wildlife parks?'

'None of them admit to anything missing.'

'No reports of Michael Jackson moving into the area either, I suppose.'

'No sir.'

'That was a joke, Morley.'

'Yes sir.'

'Any ideas?'

'No sir...unless...perhaps a circus happened to be passing through the county...'

Giles shook his head. 'I think you'll find that circuses don't actually use animals any more,' he said. 'The PC mob got to them. I think they entertain the crowds these days with origami and card tricks.'

'Yes sir.'

'But research labs do...' said Giles as the notion came to him. '*They* use animals and there's a research institute in the area.' He got up and walked over to the wall map. 'Here, between Holt and Cromer on the A148. I can't remember the name of it though...'

'The Crick Institute.'

'That's it, the Crick Institute. Get on to them and see if they've lost any monkeys.'

Giles was still examining the map, head held to one side, when Morley returned to say that there was no reply from the Crick Institute.

'No research on Sundays, eh? Well, they must have a note of key holders in case of fire etc. Call one of them.'

‘Should I get them to check their animals?’

‘No, ask them to meet us there. We’ll go over ourselves. It’s a nice day for a drive.’

Sergeant Morley slowed the car as he saw a figure running towards them waving his arms. ‘What have we here?’ he murmured.

Giles opened the window on the passenger side and the running man stopped at the side of the car to rest one hand on the sill and the other flat on his chest as he fought to get his breath back.

‘Take it easy now,’ said Giles.

The man, a portly figure in his late fifties with a ruddy complexion and wearing a green quilted jacket and corduroy trousers, pointed behind him and gasped, ‘We’ve been hit. These animal rights loonies have done us over. Bastards!’

‘Us?’ asked Giles.

‘The institute, the Crick; I’m the key holder you contacted, Robert Smith, not that you need a bloody key for the place any more; the doors are wide open. The windows are broken and there’s paint all over the walls. Bastards.’

Giles got out and opened the back door of the car to usher Smith inside before climbing back in himself and radioing for back-up. Morley turned into the drive leading up to the institute and drove slowly up to the front door.

‘Scared they’re still there?’ said Giles.

‘No sir, Mr Smith’s already been up here, just looking for any movement in the bushes, sir.’

‘I didn’t go inside the building, mind you,’ said Smith from the back, leaning forward to rest his elbows on both of the

front seats between the two policemen. 'One look at the outside was enough.'

'See what you mean,' said Giles as the institute building came into view.

'What a mess,' murmured Morley.

'What kind of people do this?' complained Smith.

'What do you do at the institute, Mr Smith?' asked Giles.

'I look after the animals; clean their cages, see that they're fed and watered; generally cared for and that.'

'So you would have been in earlier today?'

'No, Professor Devon said that he would be coming in himself today; he would feed them so I could have the day off. Apparently his wife was going to see their daughter in Manchester this weekend so he decided to work.'

'That was decent of him,' said Morley.

'He's a real gentleman is Professor Devon, one of the old school if you get my meaning.'

'So he might actually still be here?'

'Bloody hell, I didn't think of that,' exclaimed Smith. 'I suppose he could. If those bastards have...'

'You'd better come in with us, Mr Smith. Just don't touch anything.'

Smith hesitated at the door and said, 'I'm not sure that we should go in... I mean, they work with some dangerous stuff in there, suits and masks and all that...'

'He has a point, sir,' said Morley.

Giles nodded. 'Better get a biohazards team over here. What about the other key holders?'

Morley looked at his notebook. 'Mr Smith was top of the list...'

‘That’s because I just live at the foot of the drive,’ explained Smith. ‘It’s usually the fire alarm going off for no good reason. Anything else and I call the professor or one of the scientists, Dr Cleary or Dr O’Brien or one of the others.’

‘I’ve got a Doctor Cleary on the list,’ said Morley.

‘Try him.’

Morley phoned Cleary while Giles turned to Smith and asked, ‘Is it possible to get to Professor Devon’s office without going through any of the labs?’

‘Absolutely, it’s just off the main corridor, along to the left.’

‘Maybe we could risk that then,’ said Giles. ‘Just in case he’s still in the building.’

‘Cleary will be here in fifteen minutes, sir,’ said Morley.

The three men got out of the car and paused to read the graffiti on the walls before kicking away some of the broken glass from the steps.

‘Walt Disney’s got a lot to answer for,’ said Giles, turning his head sideways to read some of the writing around the entrance. ‘Some of these buggers seem to think that the animal kingdom lives in peace and harmony singing happy jungle ditties.’

‘Instead of ripping each other to pieces you mean,’ said Morley.

‘Survival of the fittest, the fastest, the strongest and no quarter given.’

‘Nature red in tooth and claw,’ said Morley.

Giles gave a surprised sideways glance at his sergeant. ‘Didn’t know you were a Kipling man.’

‘Some things stick from school, sir.’

'They do,' agreed Giles. 'With me it was Christina Rosetti. "Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone"...every time I walk across the park on a winter's day... Well, shall we make a start? We can at least check out the Professor's office while we wait for Cleary and make sure he's not lying there injured. We'll also get some idea of what sort of mayhem these fuck-wits have caused this time?'

'If you think it's safe, sir,' said Morley.

Giles surveyed the open door and broken windows and said, 'What was in there is already out here...'

They found the entrance hall strewn with broken glass, much of which had come from a glass-fronted notice board that had hung in the hall listing staff members and their room details. The walls were daubed in red paint. 'Murdering bastards' seemed to be a recurring theme as they moved along although 'Animals have rights too' was also popular.

'Professor Devon's room is just along here,' said Smith leading the way.

Giles knocked on the door but predictably there was no response. He turned the handle and looked inside. The room was empty and appeared to be undamaged although untidy with masses of files and papers arranged in piles on the desk and floor.

'Looks like the Prof had already left when these bastards appeared on the scene,' said Smith.

'I hope so for his sake,' said Giles. 'It wouldn't have been much fun watching your lab being smashed up before your eyes.'

'This'll break his heart,' said Smith.

The sound of wheels on gravel heralded the arrival of two

police patrol cars, followed a few moments later by a Fire Brigade biohazard team. Giles filled them in on the situation and suggested that everyone wait for Cleary who could appraise them of any likely danger. They didn't have long to wait. Giles was explaining the situation to Smith when a green Land Rover Discovery swung in through the gates and a tall, fair-haired man in his thirties got out.

'I'm Nick Cleary. What a bloody mess!'

'Well, they haven't been too shy about stating their views, I'll give you that,' said Giles as he watched Cleary turn his head this way and that to read the daubing on the walls. 'Mr Smith thought there might be an element of danger about going inside although we have checked out Professor Devon's room just in case he was still here.'

Cleary looked surprised so Giles added, 'The professor told Mr Smith he was coming in to work this morning.'

'Ah,' said Cleary. 'Not too surprising I suppose. He seems to work all the hours there are these days.'

'About the danger...' began Giles.

'We do work with pathogenic microbes,' said Cleary. 'Several. The viruses are kept in a locked deep freeze in bio-lab 3. The lab itself is locked and the doors are air-tight. Pathogenic bacteria are kept in freeze-dried vials in a safe in the same lab.'

'Windows?'

'No windows in the bio-lab. It's an inside room with a filtered air supply under negative pressure,' replied Cleary.

'Then we should check out the integrity of that room first,' said Giles. 'Perhaps you could brief the bio-hazard team on its location in the building?'

'I'll go in with them if you like,' said Cleary.

'You should talk to the Fire Chief.'

'I'll do that.'

'Before you do, what bugs are we talking about here, sir?' asked Giles.

'Maybe we can leave off worrying about that until we see if there's a problem?' said Cleary.

Giles nodded his understanding. 'But if you find security of either of the microbial stores has been breached...'

'The public will have a right to know. You're quite right. But if that's the case I suspect the matter will be taken out of both our hands.'

'A comfort,' said Giles. 'There's another problem: we had reports earlier today about monkeys being on the loose in this part of the country...'

'Jesus,' said Cleary. 'They let the monkeys out?'

'Liberated them is how they would see it. Perhaps you could advise us of the risk involved?'

'I don't use primates myself; that was Tim Devon's province and the room was always kept locked. But I don't think he had any animal experiments running. Chances are they are perfectly healthy monkeys although that's not to say they can't be dangerous. You can get a very nasty bite.'

'Someone already did,' said Giles. 'But you don't think there would be any other hazard involved?'

'I can't be absolutely sure; you'd really have to ask Tim that. Have you managed to contact him yet?'

'Not yet. Sergeant Morley is still trying.'

Cleary went off to talk to the Fire chief and Giles found Morley. 'Any luck?' he asked.

'Still no answer,' said Morley.

'Shit,' muttered Giles. 'I'm beginning to think we should hit the panic button on this one.'

'Why?'

'To guard our arses. I'm beginning to see "Police Delay Puts Public at Risk." headlines.

'You think the monkeys were infected with something?'

'The trouble is we don't know for sure and Devon seems to be the only one who can tell us.'

'I'll keep trying.'

'I'm going to give him until they've examined the microbial stocks. Even if the stores are intact, if we still haven't made contact with Devon I'm going to blow the whistle.'

Giles and Morley returned to the car to wait.

'What happens if they do find the virus store has been breached?' asked Morley. They were watching the bio-hazard team make last minute adjustments to each other's suits before trooping in single file into the institute. Giles noted that Cleary was with them.

'Depends on what bugs they've been storing there,' said Giles, 'and what their characteristics are. Some viruses are highly infectious, others not. Some are stable in air, others are not. Some diseases are contracted by breathing in the virus, others you have to ingest them. All these things have to be taken in to consideration. At least that's what they said on the course... Personally, I'm a run-for-the-hills man.'

'Surely a place like this wouldn't be working with anything really bad. I mean, smallpox or plague or anthrax, anything like that?'