

# THE FERTILE CRESCENT

BY

DEMOCRITVS MINIMVS NATV



## 4 Money troubles

The Leader was worried again. The flurry of sympathy and consequently the additional funding that had flowed in as a result of Mr Mandius' unfortunate demise and the collapse of the e-ligion project had dried up. The financial position was looking poor.

He did not have any idea what to do next and as usual knew he would have to leave it to others. Leading from behind was always a good policy, he thought, since then you don't need to worry about whether anyone is following you or whether they have turned tail and fled while your back is turned. No, staying in the base camp giving vague instructions is always the best thing. That way when it succeeds you can claim the credit and if it goes wrong you can blame others for misunderstanding what you wanted. After all, that's how Stalin got success.

That and not taking no for an answer. That and being totally unpredictable and endlessly ruthless.

Without Mandius he felt a bit lost. Arbuthnot was all right in his way but despite obvious intelligence he refused to become obsessive.

He sighed.

The door opened and Mandius sidled in. Or was it merely Arbuthnot putting on a brave face and a serious demeanour to play the part? Either way he didn't care. It was a welcome sight – the man who would come in and solve his problem.

"Are you still alive?"

"Let us just say that news of my death was much exaggerated."

The Leader was still unsure. Since he had seen Mandius' charred remains he was loath to believe that he was still alive. On the other hand, he had never seen Arbuthnot wear quite such a sharp uncrumpled suit. A man can change his appearance in many ways but the way a man wears a suit is instinctive and highly personal, and it is impossible to forge that any more than you can change your fingerprints.

He decided to live with the uncertainty. Negative capability had always been one of his great strengths.

"OK. So now you're here, what shall we do? The government say they have given us a 5% increase in funding. Boast about it in the papers. But, in fact with inflation at 3% and a 10% increase in the target for student numbers for next year to get even the basic funding, we are in effect substantially worse off – and as you know, last year was bad enough."

His visitor spoke. (If it was Mandius he must have been brought back by the power of the imagination, the mysteries of fictional gullibility -- but more likely it was Arbuthnot.) "So, what have you done so far?"

"Well, I phoned the Funders -- spoke to Callum Caeruleum -- you remember him -- looks about 15 -- slight amount of bum-fluff down on his cheeks, but basically beardless (and chinless) -- recent graduate from one of Scotland's older universities -- degree in some fine liberal arts. He's now been promoted to be Under-Vice-Depute Assistant to the Senior-Depute-Chief Policy Adviser to the Second-Depute Regional Strategy Officer (North-East Region)."

"Good Lord. Meteoric rise."

"Yes. Still clueless though."

"Who did he replace?"

"No-one. It's a new post -- part of a new tier of posts designed to take the pressure off the Vice-Depute-Assistants who apparently are run ragged with the sheer complexity of their duties."

"Poor things. So what did you say to him?"

"I pointed out that the 5% additional funding represents about 8% less in real terms if you take into account inflation and the increased target."

"So, what did he say?"

"He said that there was an increase in funding on their part and that it was to be expected that we should respond by making a small efficiency saving on our part."

"And?"

"I asked if they had modelled the new allocations in terms of economic impact."

"And?"

"He said that they really did not have the sort of staffing complement that would allow them to carry out any kind of modelling, but that they were relying on the management of colleges to carry out the detailed staffing and physical resource reprofiling activities that would allow expenditure to be retained within budgetary limits."

"And?"

"I suggested that they needed to carry out a review of the funding allocations, as the current approach seemed to be an arbitrary game of chance hiding behind a complex formula designed to give it a semblance of academic and intellectual credibility."

"And?"

"He said that in order to carry out a review they would need to appoint a new tier of staffing and that he would have to speak to the Under-Vice-Depute Assistant Chief Executive's Assistant Executive Assistant (Interim) (Temporary) (Maternity Leave) about getting an appointment with the High Heid Yin to discuss the idea of setting up a working party to discuss the feasibility of putting together a committee to consider the formation of a steering group to manage the process of establishing the resource implications of developing a new wing of the organisation to undertake the review that I proposed."

"Ah, well, that's progress. Who is the current High Heid Yin post holder?"

"You know, it's that woman Fran who came up last year on a fact-finding mission."

"Fran?"

"Yes, you know. Eastern European. Rather severe features. A bit nery. Ms Zekafka."

"Oh, yes, of course, Fran Zekafka. How could I forget. What a bundle of laughs she was."

The Leader was still worried.

"OK, Mandius. Get working."

"It's Arbuthnot actually."

"Never mind, you'll do. Things are bad. We need to do something. Go and think."

"What about?"

"The solution."

"But I don't know what to do."

"Well, go and find Mandius, he never lets me down."

"But Mandius is ....."

"Don't waste time with excuses. Just get Mandius."

"But Mandius ....."

But the Leader had turned his back and was deep in thought, or maybe dozing off for his afternoon nap.

Arbuthnot went back to his room.

For a few moments he stood, deep in thought.

"Oh, dear," he said. "There's no hiding place now."

He pulled out his pocket-watch and looked at it. His whiskers twitched. "Now's the time," he thought. "I must not delay. I would not be forgiven for being late."

He looked towards the door in the corner of his office. It was the door that communicated directly with Mandius' old room. In Mandius' days it had been kept bolted, but when the room had been refurbished the door had been left unlocked. The door was slightly ajar. He wondered what future awaited him in there, what manner of person he was about to merge (or e-merge) into.

He opened his drawer and took out a small bottle with "drink me" written on a little label tied round the neck. It was not his habit usually to drink before lunchtime. In fact it was not his habit to drink before the sun went down over the yard-arm (though in midwinter in Erewhon that was about lunchtime anyway and in summer it never really went down anyway so you could ignore the rule).

But today was different.

He took a swig, replaced the cork and slid the bottle back into the drawer. He swilled the liquid round in his mouth, looking around as if for somewhere to spit it out, but presumably seeing nowhere suitable, he swallowed it down with a faint shudder.

He sidled up to the door, and gently prised it further open and slid in and shut the door behind him.

What was in the room? What happened? Did he pass through the door and out into the corridor or did he stay in Mandius' old office? Was anyone else there?

These are reasonable questions to ask an omniscient author. But, Reader, I am not of the Victorian school. I was brought up in the Democritan world of atomisation of matter, learned in the ways of the uncertainty principle, negative capability, the relativistic recognition that what you see depends on where you stand, the Hawthorne effect whereby to observe anything is immediately to cause it to change, or the anthropic principle that states that, since the universe would not have any meaningful existence unless human beings were here to observe it and try to understand it, therefore the existence of human beings was an inevitable outcome of the origin of the universe. And one of the great things about growing older is the acceptance that to deduce cause and effect is a gross simplification, and to assume that you can identify the reason behind any action is intellectual arrogance.

So for now – maybe forever – you will have to be content with incomplete knowledge.

But, to be helpful, let us restate the basics.

A figure, human, has entered a room in which there may or may not already have been some one else, or some other people. The door is closed so we cannot see what happens next.

Time is passing but we do not know how much.

Let us wait and see if the door reopens.

For several minutes there was silence, except for a few scuffling noises like a gerbil making itself comfortable in straw, a slight rustling as if of disturbed and discarded garments, and the occasional low moan -- and one deep, long manly-animal growl.

Then silence.

Then the door opened. Not the door that Arbuthnot had passed through, but the other door out of the room, which opened onto the corridor. Readers, we have been watching one door without taking the precaution of putting a guard on the other door.

At any rate, the door into the corridor opened.

A figure appeared. Was it a man? Was it a bird? Was it a bard?

Well, it was human, that much I can reveal.

Was it Mr Arbuthnot transformed from polite cultured Dr Jekyll into some ravening beast, a vicious Mr Hyde, the type of individual you need to deal with a critical funding crisis – the macho manager?

If so, was it Mandius reborn? For, it could be that Arbuthnot's suspicions were right, and that Mandius had never really existed as a separate entity from him (if he had ever existed at all) and that he had merely resumed his alternative persona, slipped it on like a spare uniform.

Well, whatever the truth of that suggestion, this at any rate was not Mr Mandius.

It was an elegant, slim woman in a tightly-fitting black dress.

It was Mandy.

"Well," said Mandy, looking back into the room, "That was some induction, I must say.

"But now I have to go. Work to do."

She was called Ms Erse, in tribute to her Irish ancestry, and, of course, obviously, she came from Australia.

Was Arbuthnot still in the room? Or was Mandy talking to someone else who had entered the room from the corridor after Mandius had left it? If so, who had been involved in this particular induction session, and who was inducting whom or was it mutual? Or was she talking to an empty room?

Readers, we may never know. But on the other hand, since the middle of the book has not yet written itself (though the end was written before the beginning was ever conceived of) it is possible that somewhere in and amongst the muddle some clue will be given as to what really went on in there. Or maybe some Poirot will join the cast and help us out.

Let us wait and see.

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