

LBRIS

We know
books

About the Author

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When not working he enjoys travel to far-flung and occasionally dangerous spots to research his fiction, and just for the heck of it. He has visited forty-four countries (and counting). History – particularly classical history – has been his lifelong passion. This is his debut thriller.

Forthcoming

The Napoleon Complex

The Sapien Paradox

Foretold by Thunder

E. M. DAVEY



Duckworth Overlook

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Fate

*With domineering hand she moves the turning wheel,
Like currents in a treacherous bay swept to and fro.
Her ruthless will has just deposed once fearful kings,
While trustless still, from low she lifts a conquered head;
No cries of misery she hears, no tears she heeds,
But, steely hearted, laughs at groans her deeds have wrung.
Such is a game she plays, and so she tests her strength.
Of mighty power she makes parade, when one short hour,
Sees happiness from utter desolation grow.*

Boethius, Roman scholar, 480-524 AD

Part One

Squall

*It was by very accurately assessing their chances that the
Romans conceived and carried out their plan to dominate
the world.*

Polybius, Roman historian, 200-118 BC

The journalist had been his last hope. But now there could be no salvation, for the thunderclouds were already gathering. Professor Roger Britton slammed down the phone and buried his head in his hands; but for the heaving of his lungs he was still.

The minute-hand of his clock moved onwards with a click.

Britton stared at it for precisely three seconds, before leaping to his feet and peering from the window. Black taxis inched along beside the Thames. A white Ford Transit which had been parked in a bus lane awoke and ambled away eastwards. The professor scrutinized the traffic: no green Renault Laguna, no silver Ford Focus, no gunmetal BMW. The list of cars he had to keep track of was increasing.

Was he going mad? He honestly didn't know.

Britton cancelled the morning's lectures, flinching at the protest. "Quite unavoidable," he insisted. "Last-minute preparations for the field trip."

The usual accusations ensued, but this time they were accompanied by threats of dismissal. Could he expect to find employment at another university as prestigious as King's College London? When had this become his life? Suddenly Britton realized his boss was no longer talking.

"Thank you," he said, in the hope she had been saying she understood. "I knew you'd understand."

He peeped into the common room. Florence Chung was working on her PhD, and he felt a stab of guilt. She had been a first-class assistant. No, more than that – a rock. And she was always willing to listen to his theories, although he kept the most outlandish close to his chest. He had neglected her thesis; she deserved better. But more important things were at hand.

He wondered if he would ever see her again.

"Professor?" Florence's eyes were wide. "Anything I can help with?"

Britton nodded rapidly, exhaling through both nostrils. "Yes please, Florence. I need some books. The Roman historians. Polybius, Livy, Tacitus, Cassius Dio. Anyone else? Ah yes ... you'd better bring Caesar too."

Florence glanced at the bookcase. "The first editions?"

Britton nodded grimly. Bigger them. Bigger them all.

What followed was a sight to make a Charing Cross bookseller weep. Chapters were torn free; cotton binding was ripped away; the room turned musty as dormant fibres took to the air. Britton's biro trembled as he circled words and underlined sentences. He was aware that his behaviour was demented, but he was past caring.

And it was important the journalist had everything.

Britton blinked twice – as though remembering something vital – and from his desk produced a slim paperback which he added to the pile of eviscerated pages. His fingers lingered on the cover before he remembered himself, urgency returning to his movements. Finally he bundled up the lot in brown paper and scribbled down an address.

The last thing Britton glimpsed before he departed was his wife, Wendy. The snap had been taken at a barbecue in Provence, before all this began. She looked happy. He pulled on his coat and rushed out.

A mature student was malingering on the staircase. Odd place to wait, now Britton thought of it, and he couldn't resist eye contact as he passed. His stomach slid instantly downward, adrenaline lancing through his thighs. He had seen this character before. Yesterday evening, in fact: *at a bus stop near his home in Enfield*. That snow-white spot in his hair was unmistakable. Coincidence? Britton fancied not.

Now Britton abandoned pretence and fled, taking the stairs three at a time, heart banging against his ribcage. Two students

were coming in the other direction – female, attractive. He jinked past them, an improbable sight in bad tweed with his hair on end. Mirth echoed in his wake. When he reached the third floor he paused, listening as the laughter grew fainter.

It was penetrated by the patter of descending footsteps.

The philosophy department beckoned. Britton knew this place, he was familiar with the lecturers; yet today the department offered no sanctuary. Bored students flickered past his vision as he ran, package clasped to his chest and shoes squeaking on the carpet. The post trolley reared up before him like an iceberg. Britton hit it at full speed; letters and parcels flew across the corridor and a Trinidadian porter roared with indignation.

"Hey! Watch yourself, fool!"

The professor was apologizing and piling the packages back onto the trolley when the inspiration struck. He buried his own bundle with them, and in its place he swiped another, already franked and ready for dispatch.

The door behind him opened. It was the man from the bus stop. There could no longer be any doubt – the call to the journalist must have forced their hand. Britton was on his feet in an instant, offering the stranger a glimpse of brown paper in his arms. Then he was running for his life.

Hundreds of students were pouring out onto the Strand, and the professor found his way blocked by the throng.

"Oh God no," he whispered, glancing over his shoulder. "Please no ..."

They meant to kill him.

"You all right there, Professor?" Henry Buckingham was taking his course on ancient religion this year. Britton ignored the student, clawing his way into the press, feeling safer with every pace. He calculated his next move. If they grabbed him now the switch would be exposed. He needed to take the franked package off campus and get it posted – then they would chase the wrong parcel all the way to the sorting office.

There was a post-box on the Embankment.

A blast of winter air hit him in the face as he made it onto the street. A big trial was finishing at the Royal Courts of Justice and a phalanx of reporters rushed towards the famous arches. A blessing revealed itself: sightseers walking along the Thames, following their flag-waving leader like goslings behind a goose. Britton mingled with them, closing on the post-box. He was going to make it.

But wait ...

A BMW had emerged, a *gunmetal* BMW, crawling along the opposite side of the street. Britton felt a fresh convulsion of anxiety. The driver was plump and in his late thirties. Glasses, wavy brown hair. Was it that man who'd taken such an interest in him at the staff bar last week?

The shield of tourists parted. The professor slam-dunked the parcel into the post-box. At once the BMW zoomed away in a bark of highly-tuned engine.

Professor Britton considered his options. Temple was close by – he could take the Circle Line to South Kensington and dash for Heathrow. Then he would get the next flight to Istanbul, whatever the price.

Britton stopped dead. “Oh *shit!*”

Two German tourists gave the professor a wide berth, taken aback at the expletive from the mild figure. Britton didn't even notice. His mind shot back to the university, to his office, to the second drawer in his desk: where his passport still lay.

“Oh shit, shit, *shit!*”

There was a rumble overhead. The sky had turned overcast, a wash of grey that stretched from horizon to horizon. Directly above him the coming precipitation had been worked into a knot of black that twisted around itself in the sudden squall like the knuckles of a fist. Dark clouds streaked away to the north-west, their colour murderous. Tourists fumbled for umbrellas, but Britton was unmoved, staring into the heavens. A perplexed expression had come over his face – childlike, almost – and a

pair of blueish lips mouthed something unheard. He followed the spoor of darker cloud to where it had emerged somewhere over Hampstead Heath. For several seconds he watched, as if seeking some hidden answer there. Then Professor Roger Britton was struck by lightning and killed instantly.

2

The historian's final telephone call had been to a reporter. Jake Wolsey was accustomed to fielding enquiries from the de-ranked, on whom newspapers seem to exert a magnetic pull – but his conversation with Roger Britton that morning stood out from a crowded field.

“I think I might have a story for you,” the academic began.

Jake took a sip of coffee, brewed so strong it was masochistic. “Well fire away then, matey.”

The news meeting was nigh and once again the reporter had nothing to bring to the table. He should be scrabbling for leads, not fobbing off some history wonk with a book to sell.

“I read your article today, Mr Wolsey.”

Jake's gaze fell to that morning's paper – it lay open at page thirty-nine. His efforts had been subbed down to a measly hundred and fifty words, but at least they'd given him a byline for once.

“And I think I know why Winston Churchill was interested in the ancient Etruscans,” Britton finished.

The journalist was paying attention now. He had thought it an intriguing tale, even if his editor disagreed. The genesis of the story was a single-line memo he'd spotted in a batch of newly-declassified Second World War documents. In darkest 1941, Churchill had scheduled a meeting with the head of MI6 on a topic described as ‘*the ancient Etruscan matter*’. And that was it: four little words, marooned by history, their

explanation closed up and washed away by time. Jake's requests for elaboration from MI6 had been batted away – there would be no further disclosure. When his attempts to flesh out the story into a page lead had come to nothing it had gone in as a news-in-brief.

"Actually ...," and the professor paused, breath febrile on the receiver. "I think you may have stumbled across something rather big."

The reporter felt a tingle of editorial excitement in his stomach, though numbed by his hangover. "I'm listening."

In the next cubicle Thom Ellis pricked up his ears.

"Can we meet in person?" Britton asked. "I don't want to talk about it over the phone."

"Er, what? Why?"

"It's not safe."

Jake laughed. "What do you mean, not safe? We're talking ancient history here."

The journalist tucked long blond hair behind his ears and looked at his watch. This was starting to sound like a prank call.

"I can't," said Britton. "Sorry."

"At least give me a taster," said Jake. "We're fighting off the timewasters here."

He heard the 'glock' of an Adam's apple rising and falling as the professor mulled it over.

"Very well," Britton said at last. "How much do you know about the ancient Etruscans?"

"Only what I've mugged up on since I got hold of the file. They were the precursors to the Romans – a hill people who lived in modern-day Tuscany. At the height of their powers around, oh, 600 BC or something. Then they got swallowed up by the Roman Empire and the rest is, well, history."

"And what do you know of their religion?"

Jake leaned back in his chair to consider the question. He had a strong jaw and high cheekbones, but it was a lived-in face

– dark bags hung under his eyes and the arc of his spine was a chiropractor's despair.

"I haven't got the foggiest. I'm guessing they worshipped bearded, bonking, Brian Blessed types?" Jake's accent was rather posh, but his voice had a warm timbre.

"I suggest you do some more reading then," Britton replied. "Because it was to discuss religion that Mr Churchill met with his counterpart at MI6. Of that I am certain."

Jake's decision was made. "Look mate, thanks for your time," he said. "But I'm not sure it's one for us."

Protestations surged from the receiver. Then, with a click, Britton was gone.

"Nutter alert?" Ellis's eyes were alive with mockery.

Jake nodded. "Sad really. He was calling about my Churchill story this morning. You read it?"

"Not yet, not yet," muttered the big Mancunian, shuffling the newspaper. "Was just getting to it actually ..."

Jake massaged his eyelids with fingertips that trembled slightly. None of the staff bothered reading his work anymore – not since he'd been biffed downwards in the last reshuffle.

"No bother," he said. "The gist of it is that when Churchill should've been working out how to clobber Hitler he was wasting his time chin-wagging with MI6 about some ancient civilization."

Ellis's head moved from side to side as he weighed up the story. "Not a bad little story I suppose," he mused. "What's our man's take?"

"He wouldn't tell me on the phone," Jake said. "Not safe," he added with heavy irony.

Ellis rocked with laughter. "Man, that's a good one. Did I ever tell you about the guy who used to ring me up claiming the local council had installed listening devices in his flat? He thought they were targeting him because he'd appealed a parking ticket."

Jake ignored him. "The worry is this guy claimed to be a

professor at King's College London – that's a damn good university. And he thinks his phone's tapped because he wants to discuss ancient history. Poor bloke."

"Hey, that might be a decent line for you," said Ellis. "If this guy's well-known and coming out with stuff like that? It could be a giggle. What number did he ring from?"

Jake brought up the university's website. "Well, the call came from King's all right. And Britton exists."

There was a mugshot of the professor in the university's directory of experts. He was balding with a strip of auburn hair, a weak chin and a complexion mottled with patches of raspberry. It was not an appealing face. The professor had a number of books and papers in print, although the credits dried up about three years before.

Jake knew the feeling.

"There you go then," said Ellis. "That's a good yarn – top historian is paranoid nutcase. You need to keep your eyes open, pal."

"I don't know," muttered Jake. "It's just not me. Hounding some poor sod who's lost his marbles? I'll leave that for the red-tops."

Ellis shook his head. "You soft bastard. Well, don't come moaning to me that you don't bring in scoops anymore. You can't make an omelette without ..."

He was cut off by the phone ringing.

"Oh Christ," said Jake. "It's him."

"Let me handle it," said Ellis, mischief on his face.

But before he could answer Jake snatched up the receiver. "I'm sorry, Professor Britton, I'm afraid my mind's made up."

"I'll level with you, Mr Wolsey," Britton interrupted. "I think I'm being followed. I need your help, I really need your help."

Jake shielded the mouthpiece from his colleague. "Can I make a suggestion – have you considered discussing this with your GP?"

"You don't understand," shouted Britton. "You're just like all the others. Why won't anyone listen to me?"

On the other side of London someone was listening to them.

3

As the last traces of Professor Britton were being brushed from the Embankment that evening, Jake found himself in The Dolphin, King's Cross. The tremble in his fingers was gone and his pool cue glided over the fulcrum of thumb and forefinger. He blew a strand of hair from his brow and his brown eyes narrowed; the background fug of drinkers seemed to withdraw, belonging to a different place. Jake's life had become fuzzy and confused, like a lens knocked out of focus – only here on the pool table did it make sense. He released the shot with the crack of a sniper rifle and the black was assassinated.

They say skill at snooker is a sign of a misspent youth; reflecting on his adolescence, Jake could concur. He was clever but scatter-brained and only after muddling through university had he soared in ambition. That was before the booze had dragged him down again. Thirty-something, and he still hadn't grasped the vicious circle that linked falling achievement with rising intake of units. Jake took a double swig from his pint, the level falling by a clear inch.

"So what's this job then?" Luke McDonagh was a freelancer with a lazy eye whose freckled head reminded Jake of some kind of bean. He was also one of the best diggers in the business.

"An intriguing one, this," said Jake, handing the researcher his article. "Winston Churchill discussing classics with the Secret Service at the height of the war. I just don't know what to make of it."

"It's an oddity all right," said McDonagh. "What on earth's gone on there?"

"Lord knows. I've already whacked the Freedom of Information request in, but that'll take weeks to come back."

"Waste of time," said McDonagh. "If it's related to national security they can bat it back without explanation. They don't have to give you the information and they don't have to tell you why."

Jake smiled gloomily and took another gulp of lager.

"I'm thinking a forensic audit at the National Records Office in Kew," said McDonagh. "Let's find a linked document – cabinet minutes, other declassified files. Paperwork like this doesn't exist in isolation." He spun the black ball inside the triangle. "Do I get a bonus when it makes a front-page splash?"

"Ha ha, very funny."

McDonagh retrieved his cue, slapping the *London Evening Standard* on the table. Jake's pint was halfway to his lips when he saw the front page.

He let go of the glass.

The pint plummeted downward before exploding on the carpet in a foamy starburst.

McDonagh's trousers were soaked. "What the hell?"

"The paper," Jake croaked. "It's him."

The headline screamed: "*Lightning horror on the Thames.*"

Alongside the professor's photograph was an image of the strike itself, obtained from a nearby CCTV camera. The lightning bolt lanced to earth from the north-west, a jagged line of white in a sea of grey.

McDonagh peered at the mugshot. "You knew that guy?"

"Not really," said Jake. "He's some nutter – sorry – some bloke who rang me this morning. About this story, actually. He wanted to meet. But I gave him short shrift, I'm afraid. He wasn't well in the head. And now he's been struck by lightning, for Christ's sake."

The article's tone was grave, but as McDonagh read he struggled to keep the smile from his voice. "The professor had written several acclaimed papers on the ancient belief in interpreting the future through omens such as *lightning bolts.*"

4

Jenny Frobisher was four floors underneath MI6's Vauxhall headquarters and consequently, she calculated, actually *below* the Thames. She was also fuming – getting pulled off a case halfway through was a bloody nuisance. She had been tracking the Nottingham cell for the last eighteen months, and along with her colleagues in MI5 she'd linked the plotters to Lahore, northern Pakistan. This was not Al Qaida 'inspired' terrorism; it was the real deal. During the investigation Jenny could count the number of dinner parties she'd attended on one hand. But she was not a woman who let socializing get in the way of her job, nor did she mind as her circle of friends dwindled with each let-down, usually by telephone from some windswept northern service station. Even the collapse of her engagement hadn't distracted her. And now she'd been pulled from the case, the decision as abrupt as it was unexplained.

Jenny wore a charcoal skirt cut below the knee paired with an anonymous jacket. From the latter she produced a mirror to check her make-up. The face that stared back would have been attractive were it not so severely arranged. She wore her blonde hair in a neat bob and her pale blue eyes shone with intelligence.

There were two of them waiting to brief her: a silver-haired woman in early middle age and a man in his late thirties who looked flabby and slightly soft. Jenny had never laid eyes on either of them before. A copy of the *Guardian* lay on the man's desk and she glanced at the headline of the page at which it was open:

Britain's military power waning, says thinktank.

The man beckoned her to sit.

"Jenny, I take it? Apologies for hauling you off your job. Realize it's a pain in the arse." For a large man his voice was high and he struck her as rather effeminate. "This is Evelyn Parr," he said. The ladies exchanged nods. "And I'm Charlie. Charlie Waits."

Jenny had heard of him; only now did she see how wide of the mark her first appraisal was. The pupils observing her from behind tortoiseshell glasses were cold and his mouth was a small hard line. A knot of blood vessels had burst in the white of his left eye, an ugly sight. She needed to be more on her game to work for Charlie Waits.

Waits was a mythical figure within The Firm. He had stopped two IRA plots in their tracks by the age of twenty-five, before moving on to counter-espionage. There he'd done battle with his Chinese and Saudi counterparts, and seen more than one ambassador hauled into Whitehall for a dressing-down. Finally, aged twenty-seven or so, he'd vanished from the coalface – 'gone upstairs', it was widely assumed.

"Drink?" Waits's smile was drowned in the pads of his jowls.

Jenny glanced at her watch – it was 11.40 a.m. Was this some kind of test?

"No, thanks."

"Evelyn?"

The woman shook her head.

"Then I hope neither of you mind if I have a quick peg?"

They assented and Waits produced a bottle of Glenfarclas eighteen-year-old single malt. Jenny watched him half-fill a tumbler with the straw-coloured medicine. What decade was this? But Waits's fingers held the glass with the implacable grip of a glacier.

"We're asking you to work on a rather special brief," he said, sliding a file across the table. "There's a journalist we want you to monitor."

Jenny waited for him to continue, but Waits set down his drink and brought the tips of his fingers together. "That's all there is to it."

"What's the background? What's the case?"

"For now that's unimportant," said Waits. "I daresay if you stay on this beat you will, necessarily, learn more. We shall deal with the implications of that as and when they arise. It may be this journalist's nothing to worry about, in which case the problem goes away. So for now, be a sport and tell us what he's up to."

Parr spoke for the first time. "We want to know what stories he's working on, who he's talking to, that sort of thing."

"But we do want to know – *everything*," Waits ran a hand through his wavy brown hair, the handiwork of an expensive gentlemen's barber in Pimlico. "Leave out nothing whatsoever, no matter how daft it may seem."

Jenny pursed her lips as she digested the brief. "Fine. What's the level of intrusion?"

Waits waved a hand. "My dear, you can do whatever you like." The offhandedness in his voice was that of an elderly thespian. "You'll have a healthy war-chest. If you need more funds, just ask."

"So what's the journalist's specialism? Security?"

"Actually, he's a 'historical correspondent'."

Her brain whirled. "Some sort of declassified file issue then?"

Charlie's eyebrows shot up. "Perceptive, isn't she?"

"With respect, it could hardly have been anything else," she said. "Apart from declassified files it's a fluffy newsbeat, I should think. Can you tell me more about the journalist?"

Now Parr took over. "Jake Wolsey. Age thirty-three. Made the broadsheets eight years ago and before that with the local press. Our contact on the paper says he was a real high flyer when he arrived. The editor of the day took a shine to him – reckoned he had the 'gift of the journalistic eye', whatever that means. He lacks organization and ruthlessness, but rose on the back of being able to spot a story from nothing. Seeing things other people miss."

"A rather dangerous characteristic," observed Waits, a gleam in his eye.