

# THE PLOT THICKENS

My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding  
general laws out of large collections of facts.

Charles Darwin (1887)

"The string is exceedingly interesting," he remarked, holding it up to  
the light and sniffing it. "What do you make of this string Lestrade?"

"It has been tarred."

"Precisely, it is a piece of tarred twine. You have also, no doubt,  
remarked that Miss Cushing has cut the cord with a scissors, as can  
be seen by the double fray on each side. This is of importance."

"I cannot see the importance," said Lestrade.

"The importance lies in the fact that the knot is left intact, and that  
this knot is of a peculiar character."

"It is very neatly tied. I had already made a note to that effect," said  
Lestrade complacently.

Arthur Conan Doyle (1892)

Now I'm not a highly metaphysical man.

Michael Franti (2008)

It's the calm before another storm, it seems to me. I can feel how my detective seethes with clues. If he could he would be pacing. I pace for him but it doesn't seem to help. His mind or his piece of mine is churning. Our neurotransmitters chatter furiously back and forth. Promiscuously he's permuting millions of connections. His hormone balance tilts to excitatory synapses. It feels unstable. We are both exhausted. I can do nothing for him.

Other Frank is nowhere to be seen. It's three days since he was here. She's gone again. Some Institute in Paris. It's where she thinks the action is. We're brinking on a breakthrough here; she's out of touch.

We've got mail. Snail mail, sign here, an Express Post package. As far as I'm aware it's unexpected. Unprecedented is the word my manic mind is fishing for. The label mandates: Return to Der Herr Doktor Professor Heinreich Wirklich, Resources Planning and Control, CERN CH-1211, Genève 23, Switzerland.

I don't know this impressive-sounding doctor but I know something of CERN. Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire. It sits six inches inside France. Known to the cognoscenti as the place the Web was born. Late '80s, Berners-Lee, the heady days. Way upscale from peeking, poking, pinging the old

*DARPANet* with Telnet, Gopher, Archie and Veronica. Betty should have known by then that she was holding the short straw. CERN boasts about this on its website—its role in the Web, that is, not the wedding.

CERN is owner-operator of the LHC. It lies below the French-Swiss border right beside Genève. Random links are zinging in my head: CERN and Dan Brown, king of the conspiracists. *Angels and Demons*. A plot to build an antimatter bomb. Antimatter stolen from the LHC. It threw CERN into a tizzy. Its website sprouted heavy-handed reassurance: ‘There is no way that antimatter could be created in sufficient quantities to be used in a bomb.’ That’s the belt; then came the braces: ‘The creation of black holes at the Large Hadron Collider is very unlikely.’

Like Hamlet’s mom I think that they protest too much. I wonder: Why? I search `lhc+black+holes`. A quarter million hits! One is breaking news in an old issue of *UniSci International Science News* that’s headlined ‘Physicists Hoping To Create Tiny Black Holes At CERN’.

Other sites show it goes viral. Protesters emerge from woodwork where they wait in expectation of a cause like this. UniSci International asks: ‘The world hasn’t been destroyed yet, obviously, but what happens if one of those collisions makes a black hole?’ There’s a lawsuit to stop Armageddon. It’s all BS of course. A small black hole would be no all-consuming monster. But then, I see, a few months later: ‘It is with sadness that we inform you of the unexpected death of Don Radler, founder and editor of UniSci News. With the loss of Don, UniSci News will no longer be published.’ Now *there’s* fresh fodder for conspiracists. And then there’s Landsberg, who reviews ‘a mesmerizing prediction that the LHC would produce mini black holes at an enormous rate [about one per second], thus becoming a black-hole factory.’

Somehow this makes me nervous. Why is she so interested in black holes? Why hide her interest? If the LHC does make black holes they’ll fizzle so fast physicists will swarm all over trying to catch one before it’s gone. But the story I’ve uncovered shows one doesn’t need to *have* a black hole to cause a commotion. And suddenly the lizard-brain pituitary, sensing scent of sabre-tooth, spits an IV shot of epinephrine; no more than a microgram or two. Instantly my heart is pounding fit to burst my chest. In two seconds I can tell for certain that I’m dying. Vision narrows like a searchlight in reverse. I tell myself as always that it’s biochemistry. The voice of reason’s feeble or it’s far away.

Minutes later it’s subsiding and it surfaces a worry that was well suppressed. She is turning out to be a little scary. Trouble is this job now means much more to me. What her game is I don’t know yet but it’s clear it isn’t my game. Where she thinks she’s going isn’t where I aim to go. So, where *am* I going? Well . . . for

me that is an unkind kind of question. I'm never going anywhere. I'm *from*.

Ducking these disturbing thoughts, I turn back to the package. Brown paper wrapping and it's tied with string. String! My uptake is slow this morning; now it's not conspiracies but Conan Doyle that comes to mind. He has Holmes opining on all sorts of things when packages arrive tied up with string. From looking at the knots in one case, he deduces that the sender is a sailor, so I check the knots with care. There are two. My boat experience is slim but I know these are granny knots. Why two? Well, when cut—of course I don't untie it—it confirms what I thought I could see. It's one strand made up of two pieces, each too short to do the job alone. All this has me basking in some kind of amateur-detective sunshine as I reason this string-work was *not* done by a sailor. A sailor—or a boy scout even—never ties a granny knot in anything. And whoever—should that be whom-ever?—no, whoever ever heard of any sailor short of string?

The paper's next. It's of the plain, brown, shiny-surfaced, wrapping kind. It has already been on active duty; it looks too wrinkled and has creases where they shouldn't be. Against the light, there is no watermark. No wax drippings either: Does this tell me the Professor has electric light? The customs declaration has a check mark in a box for 'Documents'. The signature's illegible. The overall effect is hokey. It doesn't come from CERN. It's been sent by somebody who isn't in the sending business.

Inside, the contents are wrapped in three sheets of newspaper including the front page. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung—the New Zürich Times*—an old issue: 'Montag, 15. Februar 2010'. Holmes might make much of it but I'm the Watson in this enterprise. And the contents, if that's what they are, are just more paper, neatly stacked, standard European letter size, about two hundred pages, printed one side only, printed with some kind of plans. Of what I can't decipher. A name in caps keeps jumping off each page: ALICE. *A Town Like*, I think. A favorite of mine by Shute. As I'm thinking this is not a helpful thought the door clicks open; she walks in.

She takes in the pieces of the parcel with a sweeping glance. Right away it's clear she's mad at me but won't let on. Just a curt I'll take that as she takes the pages from me. She crams them in her handbag, followed by the wrapping. Leaving me the string, she leaves without another word.

What?

A few stunned seconds, then my brain kicks in. The name, I think. What was the name? Luckily, the surname's easy. Wirklich caught my eye at once since it means really. But I didn't focus on the other name. Maybe Heinz; or Heinrich. Something German with an H, I'm sure. The reason that it matters now is her reaction. She was pissed but it was *guilty* anger. What did she expect? I *wouldn't*

open it? After all I *am* the office flunk.

No way do I expect her to come back but still I tilt the screen a few degrees. Excessive caution. I type search string cern. The top hit takes me to CERN, and then to Users' pages. Lots of options there. I want Organization. And then the Chart. The heading says CERN's Structure. Scanning labels in the boxes on the screen, I can't remember what I'm looking for; and then I see in blue: Resources Planning and Control. That was the address beneath the name. I click it. A dead end it seems until I notice Contact Us. And there they are: the names of everyone above the rank of janitor. The Members, this page tells me, of the Resources Planning and Control Group. As I more than half expected, there's no Wirklich in the list.

My last lead is just a first name, Alice. Search string alice gets me junk. I think: Why a first name on a blueprint? On a whim add cern and there it is: The ALICE Collaboration. It has a heavy-particle detector. Called ALICE. It's a piece—a big piece it appears—of the world's biggest machine, the LHC.

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*He is tall. Thin, even for a Swiss who's from Genève. He bends to check the labels on the last four boxes. They lie on the floor, stacked two and two. Their contents are innocuous; their purpose is the address. It's disinformation. Even for a Swiss he is a cautious man.*

*He is pleased with his performance. The teller at his bank in Zürich was unruffled when he made deposits. Even the most recent, the quarter million US dollars he demanded for the latest plans. The contact paid the balance on delivery. He gave her no hint that he would be leaving soon. There was not a twitch when he transferred the dollars to his bank on 25 de Mayo. Llambi built a Swiss connection into Argentina that would ask no questions of a Swiss with money and some scientific expertise.*

*He takes a last look at his office. Farewell Route de Meyrin; next stop the new condo in BA. His name isn't Wirklich. The only link he leaves—behind the trash can—is a six-inch piece of string.*

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