Swiftly
by Adam Roberts

[1]

7 November 1848

Swiftly, expertly, the tiny hand worked, ticked up and down, moved over the face of the miniature pallet. The worker was wearing yellow silk trousers, a close-woven cotton blue waistcoat; it (Bates could not see whether it was a *he* or a *she)* had on spectacles that shone like dewdrops in the light. Its hair was black, its skin a golden-cream. Bates could even make out the creases of concentration on its brow, the tip of its tiny tongue just visible through its teeth.

Bates stood upright. "It hurts my back," he said, "to lean over so."

"I quite understand," said Pannell. "Might I fetch you a chair?"

"Ah, no need for that, thank you," said Bates. "I think I have seen all I need. It is, indeed, fascinating."

Pannell seemed agitated, shifting weight from one foot to another. "I never tire of watching them work," he agreed. "Pixies. Fairies! Creatures from childhood story." He beamed. *You smile sir,* thought Bates. *You smile, but there is sweat on your lip. Perhaps you are not altogether lost to shame. Nerves, sir, nerves.*

"What is it, eh, making exactly?"

"A mechanism for controlling the angle, pitch and yaw, in flight you know. I could give you its technical name, although it is Mister Nicholson who is the greater expert on this matter."

"Is it a sir or a madam?"

"It?"

"The creature. The workman."

"A female." Pannell touched Bates's elbow, herding him gently towards the staircase at the far end of the workshop. "We find they have better hands for weaving the finest wire-strands."

Bates paused at the foot of the wooden stairs, taking one last look around the workshop. "And these are Lilliputians?"

"These," replied Pannell, "are from the neighbouring island, Blefuscu. We believe Blefuscans, sir, to be better workers. They are less prone to disaffection, sir. They work harder and are more loyal."

"All of which is," said Bates, "very interesting."

. . . . .

Up the stairs and through the glass door, Bates was led into Pannell's office. Pannell guided him to a chair, and offered him brandy. "When my superior heard of the terms you were offering," he gushed, wiping the palms of his hands alternately against the sleeves of his coat as Bates sat down, "he was nothing less than overwhelmed. Mr. Burton is not an excitable man, sir, but he was impressed, very impressed, more," Pannell went on, hopping to the drinks cabinet in the corner of the room, "more than impressed. Very generous terms, sir! Very favourable on both sides!"

"I am pleased you think so," said Bates.

From where he was sitting the view was clear through the quartered window of Pannell's office. Grime marked the bottom right hand corners of each pane like grey lichen. Each patch of dirt was delineated from clean glass by a hyperbolic line running from bottom left to top right. *X equals y squared,* thought Bates. The pattern on the glass was distracting, the eye hardly noticed the view that was actually through the window, the dingy street, the grey-brick buildings.

He shifted his weight in the chair. It complained, squeaking like a querulous baby. I, too, am nervous, he thought to himself.

"Brandy?" Pannell asked for the second time.

"Thank you."

"Mr. Burton expressed his desire to meet you himself."

"I would be honoured."

"Indeed …"

A bell tinkled, as tiny a sound as ice-glass breaking. A Lilliputian sound. Bates looked to the patch of wall above the door. The bell was mounted on a brass plate. It shivered again, and silver sound dribbled out.

Pannell stood, staring at the bell like a fool, a glass of brandy in his hands. "That means that Mr. Burton is coming here directly. It rings when Mr. Burton is on his way here directly. But I was to bring you to Mr. Burton's office, not he to come here …"

And almost at once the door shuddered, as with cold, and snapped open. Burton was a tall man who carried a spherical belly before him like an O of exclamation. His jowls were turfed with black beard, but his forehead was bald, as pink and curved as a rose petal. He moved with the fierce energy of the financially successful. As Bates got up from his chair he tipped his glance down with a respectful nod of the head: Burton's shoes were very well-made, tapering to a point, the uppers made of some variety of stippled leather. Standing to his full height brought Bates's glance up along the fine cloth of Burton's trousers, past the taut expanse of dark waistcoat and frock, to the single bright item of clothing on the man: a turquoise and scarlet bow tie, in which actual jewels had been fitted.

He faced the proprietor with a smile, extending his hand. But the first thing Burton said was: "No, sir."

"Mr. Burton," gabbled Pannell, "may I introduce to you Mr. Bates, who has come in person to negotiate the contract. I was just telling him how generous we considered the terms he offered …"

"No sir," repeated Burton. "I'll not stand it."

"Not stand it, sir?" said Bates.

"I know who you are, sir," fumed Burton. He stomped to the far side of the office, and turned to face them again. Bates noticed the bone-coloured walking stick, capped at each tip with red gold. "I know who you are!"

"I am Abraham Bates, sir," replied Bates.

"No sir!" Burton raised the cane, and brought it down on the flat of Pannell's desk. It reported like a rifle discharge. Pannell jerked at the sound, and even Bates found sweat pricking out of his forehead again.

"No sir," bellowed Burton. "You'll not weasel your way here! I know your type, and you'll not come here with your *false* names and *false* heart. No."

"Mr. Burton," said Bates, trying to keep his voice level. "I assure you that Bates is my name."

"You are a liar, sir! I give you the *lie,* sir." The cane flourished in the air, inadvertently knocking a picture on the wall and tipping a perspective of the South Seas through forty degrees.

"I am not, sir," retorted Bates.

"Gentlemen," whimpered Pannell. "I beg of you both …"

"Pannell, you'll hold your tongue," declared Burton, emphasising the last word with another flourish of the cane. "If you value your continued employment at this place. Do you deny, sir," he added, pointing the cane directly at Bates, "do you *deny* that you came here to infiltrate? To weasel your way in?"

"I came to discuss certain matters," insisted Bates. "That is all. Sir, do you refuse even to talk with me?"

"And if I do?" said Burton, his voice dropping a little. "Then? You'll have your members of parliament, your newspaper editors, your many friends, and with them you'll turn on me? A pack of dogs, sir! A pack of dogs!"

"I admire your cane," said Bates, lowering himself back into his chair in what he hoped was a cool-headed manner. "Is it bone, sir?"

This took the wind from Burton's sails. "We'll not discuss my cane, sir."

"Is it Brobdingnagian bone? From which part of the body? A bone from the inner-ear, perhaps?"

"There is nothing illegal," Burton began, but then seemed to change his mind. The sentence hung in the air for a while. "Very well," he said, finally, somewhat deflated. "You have come to talk, sir. We will talk, sir. Pannell, you will stay in this room. Pour me a brandy, in fact, whilst I and this … *gentleman* discuss the affairs of the day. Then, Mr. Bates, I'd be obliged if you left this manufactory and did not return."

"One conversation will satisfy me, sir," said Bates, rounding the sentence off with a small sigh, like a full-stop given breath.

. . . . .

Burton settled into a chair by the window, and Pannell poured another glass of brandy with visibly trembling fingers. "This *gentleman,"* Burton told his employee, "is an agitator, sir. A radical, I daresay.

Are you a radical?"

"I am one of Mr. Martineau's party."

"Oh!" said Burton, with egregious sarcasm. "A party man!"

"I am honoured to be so styled."

"And no patriot, I'll lay any money."

"I love my country, sir," replied Bates, "love her enough to wish her better managed."

"Faction and party," Burton muttered grimly, raising the brandy glass to his face like a glass muzzle over his bulbous nose. "Party and faction." He drank. "They'll sunder the country, I declare it." He put the empty glass down on the table with an audible *ploc.*

Pannell was hovering, unhappy-looking, by the door.

"We can agree to differ on the topic, sir," said Bates, a little stiffly.

"Well, sir," said Burton. "What conversation is it you wish to have with me? I own this manufactory, sir. Yes, we employ a cohort of Blefuscans."

"Employ, sir?"

"They cost me," said Burton, bridling. "A fortune. Regular food does not sit in their stomachs, so they must be fed only the daintiest and most expensive. Regular cloth is too coarse for their clothing, so they must be given the finest silks. The expense is very much greater than a regular salary would be. True, I own them outright, and this makes them slaves. But they are well treated, and they cost me more as slaves than employees ever could. I suppose Mr. Bates here," Burton added, addressing Pannell in a raised voice that aimed for sarcasm, but achieved only petulance, "would see them *free.* Mr. Bates considers slavery an *evil.* Is it not so, Mr. Bates?"

Bates shifted in his chair. It squeaked again underneath him. "Since you ask, I do consider such slavery as you practice here an evil. How many of your employees die?"

"I lose money with each fatality, sir," said Burton. "I've no desire to see a single one die."

"And your cane, sir? How many Brobdingnagians are left alive in the world?"

"I have nothing to do with those monsters. Indeed not. One of their kind could hardly fit inside my building."

"Yet you carry a cane made from their bodies, sir. Do you not consider that a small wickedness? A celebration of their pitiable state?"

"Some people, Pannell," said Burton, addressing his employee again. "Some people have leisure and predisposition to be sympathetic towards animals. Others are too busy with the work they have at hand."

"Your Lilliputians …"

"Blefuscans, sir."

"Your little people, sir—and the giant people also—are hardly animals."

"No? Have you worked with them, Mr. Bates?"

"I have devoted many years now to their cause."

"But actually *worked with them?* No, of course not. The midgets are mischievous, and their wickedness is in the bone. And the giants—they are a clear and present danger to the public good."

"The Brobdingnagians have endured homicide on an appalling scale."

"Homicide? But that implies man, don't it? Implies killing *men,* don't it?"

"Are not the Brobdingnagians made in God's image, sir? As are you and I? As are the Lilliputians?"

"So," said Burton, smiling broadly. "It's God, at the heart of your disaffection, is it?"

"Our nation would be stronger," said Bates, struggling to keep the primness out of his voice, "if we followed God's precepts more, sir. Or are you an atheist?"

"No, no."

"Let me ask you a question, Mr. Burton: are your Blefuscan workers—are they white-skinned, or black?"

"What manner of question is this, sir? You've just examined my workers out there. You know the answer to your own question."

"Their skins are as white as mine," said Bates. "Now, the Bible is clear on this. God has allotted slavery to one portion of his creation, and marked that portion by blackening their skins—Ham's sons, sir. There are enough Blacks in the world to fill the places of slaves. But it mocks God to take some of his most marvellous creations and enslave them, or kill them."

"I do not kill my workers, sir," insisted Burton.

"But they *are* killed, sir. Worldwide, only a few thousand are left. And the Brobdingnagians—how many of them remain alive? After the affair with the *Endeavour* and the *Triumph?"*

"I have met the Captain of the *Triumph,* sir," said Burton, bridling up again. "At a dinner party of a friend of mine. An honourable man, sir. Honourable. He followed the orders he was given. What naval gentleman could do otherwise? And," he continued, warming to his theme, "was it so great a crime? These giants are twelve times our size. Had they organised, had they known cannon, and ordnance, and gunpowder, they could have trampled us to pieces. Not only England neither, but the whole of Europe—they *would* have come over here and trampled us to pieces. Who'd have been the slaves then? You may answer me that question, if you please. With an army of monstrous giants trampling England's green fields, who'd have been the slaves then?"

"The Brobdingnagians are a peace-loving people," said Bates, feeling his own colour rise. "If you read the account of the mariner who discovered their land …"

Burton laughed aloud. "That fellow? Who'd believe a word he wrote? Riding the nipple of a gentlewoman like a hobby-horse, begging your pardon—it was nonsense. And the reality? A race of beings big enough to squash us like horseflies, and destroy our nation. Our nation, sir! Yours and mine! We had but one advantage over them, and that was that we possessed gunpowder and they did not. The King did well to destroy the majority of that population and seize their land. Our people are the best fed in the world, now, sir. Perhaps you do not remember how things were before the gigantic cattle were brought here,

but I do: many starved in the streets. Now there's not a pauper but eats roast beef every day. Our army is the strongest and manliest on the continent. Would we have had our successes invading France and Holland without them?"

"You speak only of temporal advantages," insisted Burton. "But to do so is short sighted. It is true that the discoveries of our navy have enriched our country in purely material terms—but the spiritual, sir? The spiritual?"

"God," said Burton.

"Indeed, my friend. God created all these creatures as marvels. We have spat upon his gift. Lilliputians may seem small to us, but they are part of God's universe."

"There are giants in Genesis, I believe," said Burton. "Did not the flood destroy them?"

"The flood may not have reached the northwestern coast of America," said Bates. "At least, this is one theory as to the survival of these peoples."

"It hardly seems to me that God's Providence was greatly disposed towards these monsters. He tried to destroy them in the flood, and again in the form of two British frigates." His face twitched with smiling.

"After much prayer," Bates insisted, not wanting to be distracted. "After much prayer, it has become obvious to me …"

At this Burton laughed out loud, a doggy, abrasive noise; each laugh parcelled into sections, like the "ha! ha! ha!" of conventional orthography, although the noise he made was not so aspirated as this representation implies. More like: nugh! nugh! nugh! It broke through Bates's speech. "Pannell," said Burton. "Mr. Bates has come to vex us, not to divert us, and yet how diverting he is!"

"Mockery is," began Bates, his anger rising. He swallowed his words. Better to turn the other cheek. "I come, sir, to *invite* you. To invite you to join a communality of *enlightened* employers and financiers—a small core, sir, but a vital one. From us will grow a more proper, a more holy society."

"A society? So that's it. And if I joined your communality, I would not be allowed to possess any slaves, I suppose?"

"You might own slaves, sir, provided only they *were* slave—blacks I mean. The Lilliputians are not slaves, sir, in God's eye, and it is God you mock by treating them so. God will not be mocked."

"I daresay not," agreed Burton, hauling his cumbersome body from its chair. "It's been a pleasure, sir, talking with you. Mr. Pannell here will show you out."

Bates rose, flustered, unsure exactly where he had lost the initiative in the interview. "Am I to take it, sir, that you …"

"You are to take it any way you choose, sir. I had thought you a spy for Parliament, sir: there are MPs who would gladly outlaw slavery in all its forms, and they have the power to do actual harm. But you, sir, do not—I doubt nothing but that you are harmless, as are your God-bothering friends. Good day, sir!"

Bates's colour rose fiercely. *Godbothering!* The insolence! "You are rude sir! Believe me, God is more powerful than any parliament of men."

"In the next world sir, the next world."

"You veer towards blasphemy."

"It is not *I,"* Burton growled, "who attempted to infiltrate an honest workman's shop with lies and deceit, not I who broke the commandment about bearing false witness to worm my way inside a decent business and try to tear it down. But you knew that you would not gain admittance if you spoke your true purpose. Good day, sir."

[2]

Bates paced the evening streets of London, the long unlovely streets. He passed gin-shops and private houses. He walked past a junior school with ranks of windows arrayed along its brick walls like the ranks of children within. He passed churches, chapels and a synagogue. Up the dog-leg of Upper St. Martin's Lane and past the rag-traders of Cambridge Circus, now mostly putting away their barrows and boarding up their shops. Bates, lost in his own thoughts, walked on, and up the main thoroughfare of Charing Cross Road.

Around him, now, crowds passed. Like leaves at autumn, drained of their richness, dry and grey and rattling along the stone roads before the wind. He thought of the French word: foule. A true word, for what was of greater folly than a crowd? The stupidity of humankind, that cattle-breed. Hiding, unspeaking, in some crevice of his mind was a sense of the little Lilliputians as daintier. More graceful. More *faery.* But he didn't think specifically of the little folk as he walked the road. There was an oppressive weariness inside him, as grey and heavy as a moon in his belly. Melancholia was, he knew it of course, a sin. It sneered at God's great gift of life. It was the sin against hope. It was to be fought, but the battle was hard. It was hard because melancholia corroded precisely the will to fight; it was a disease of the will.

Over his head, one of the new clockwork flying devices buzzed, dipping and soaring like a metal dragonfly, long as his arm. It croaked away through the air up Charing Cross Road, flying north and carrying who knew what message to who knew what destination. Only the wealthy could afford such toys, of course; the wealthy and the government. Perhaps it was the noise, the self-importance humming of it, that always gave the impression of a creature hurrying off on an errand of the mightiest importance. The war! The empire! The future of humankind!

Probably a financial facilitator, a manufactor, somebody with nouveau riches in the city, one of that type, had sent it flying north to let his servants know he would be late home from work.

The thought was sour in Bates's belly, a tart, undigested pain. He should not have drunk the brandy.

He stopped to buy the *Times* from a barrow-boy, and ducked into a mahogany-ceilinged coffee shop to read it, sitting with hot chocolate breathing fragrant steam at his elbow. Gaslight from four lamps wiped light over the polished tabletops, reflecting blurry circles of light in the waxed wood of the walls. He brought his face close to the newsprint, as much to bury himself away from the stare of the other coffee-drinkers as to make out the tiny printface. Miniature letters, like insects swarming over the page.

News.

British forces had seen action again at Versailles; the famous palace had been pocked with cannonshells. There was little doubt that Christmas would see the flag of St. George flying over Paris. Anxiety of the French people; reassurance from the King that there would be no anti-Catholick repression after an English victory. The mechanics of the Flying Island had been thoroughly analysed by the Royal Society, and a paper had been read before the King. It seemed that a particular ore was required, against which a magnetic device of unusual design operated. This ore was found only rarely in His Majesty's dominions, and in Europe not at all. But deposits were known to lie in portions of the North American and Greater

Virginian continent. The way was clear, the paper announced, for a new island to be constructed as a platform for use in the war against the Spanish in that continent.

Still Bates's spirits sank. He could not prevent it: some malign gravity of the heart dragged him down.

He turned to the back of the paper, and studied the advertisements. For sale, one Lilliputian, good needleworker. For sale, two Lilliputians, a breeding couple; four hundred guineas the pair. For sale, stuffed Lilliputian bodies, arranged in poses from the classics: Shakespeare, Milton, Scott. For sale, prime specimen of the famed Intelligent Equines, late of His Majesty's Second Cognisant Cavalry; this Beast (the lengthy advertisement spooled on) speaks a tolerable English, but knows mathematics and music to a high level of achievement. Of advanced years, but suitable for stud. And there, at the bottom, swamped and overwhelmed by the mass of Mammonite hawking and crying, was a small box: Public Lecture, on the Wickedness of Enslaving the Miniature Peoples from the East India Seas. Wednesday, no entrance after eight. Wellborough Hall. Admission one shilling.

Hopeless, all hopeless.

For Bates, the sinking into the long dark night of the soul had begun. It had happened before, but every time it happened there was never anything to compare it to, never any way to fight it off. He stumbled down Oxford Street in a fuggy daze of misery. Where did it come from? Chapels littered both sides of the road, some polished and elegant, some boxy and unpretentious, and yet none of them held the answer to his indigestion of the spirit. If only some angel would swoop down to him, calling and weeping through the air like a swift, varicoloured wings stretching like a cat after a sleep, the feather-ends brushing the street itself in the lowest portion of Its flying arc, its face bland and pale and still and beautiful. If only some angel could bring God's blessing down to him. Or perhaps the angel would actually be a faery, a tiny creature with wings of glass and a child's intensity of innocence. Grace was Grace, even in the smallest parcels.

[3]

11 November 1848

By the time Bates next rose from his bed he had been on the mattress for two days and two nights. His man put his insolent white head through the doorway to his cubby and chirruped. "Feeling better today?"

"Go away, Baley," Bates groaned. "Leave me in peace."

"Off to your club today? It's Thursday—you told me most particularly to remind you of Thursday."

"Yes," he muttered, more to himself than to his servant. "Yes, Thursday. I will be getting up today. My … stomach feels a little better."

"There you go sir." The head withdrew, with only the faintest of smirks upon it that seemed to say *we all know there's nothing the matter with your stomach, you old stay-a-bed.*

Bates turned over in the bed. The sheet underneath him was foul with two days" accumulated stink, creased and wrinkled like the palm of a white hand. His bedside cabinet was littered with glasses, bottles, a newssheet, an ivory pipe. The curtain was of cotton-velvet, and muffled off most of the daylight. The joints between knuckles and fingers'-ends ached in both hands; the small of his back murmured complaint. His feet hurt from inaction. A series of bangs, miniature sounds, *goh, goh, goh.* Bates could not tell whether the thrumming sound was the spirit of Headache rapping inside his scull, or the sound of something thudding far away. The volatile acid of his melancholia had even eroded away the boundaries of self and world, such that Bates's misery spread out and colonised reality itself, it became a universal

pressure of unhappiness. It seemed to Bates at that moment that the Biblical flood had been, symbolically speaking, a *type* or *trope* for Melancholia itself, washing away strength, joy, will, hope, diluting the very energy of life itself and spreading it impossibly weakly about the globe. Grey waves washing at a rickety water-front.

He pulled the pot from under the bed and pissed into it without even getting up, lying on his side and directing the stream over the edge of the mattress. Flecks of fluid messed the edge of the bed, but he didn't care. Why should he care? What was there to care about? When he had finished he did not even bother pushing the pot back under the bed. He turned on his other side and lay still. There was a faint noise, a repeated thud-thud-thud.

It stopped. Bates turned over again.

Turned over again. Ridiculous, ridiculous.

He pulled himself upright, and snatched at the paper. Baley had brought it to him the night before, but Bates's fretful, miserable state of mind had not allowed him to concentrate long enough to read the articles. He started on the first leader, an imperial puff about the prospects for a British European Empire once France had been defeated. He read the third sentence three times—*our glorious history reasserts itself, our generals revitalise the dreams of Henry the Fifth*—without taking it in at all. The words were all there, and he knew the meaning of each, but as a whole the sentence refused to coalesce in his mind. Senseless. It was hopeless. In a fit of petty rage, he crushed the whole paper up into a ragged ball and threw it to the floor. It started, creakily, to unwind, like a living thing.

He lay down again.

"Gentleman at the door, sir." It was Baley, his head poking into crib.

"I'm not at home," Bates said into the mattress.

"Won't take that for an answer, sir," said Baley. "A foreign gentleman. Says he's High Belgium, but I'd say France, sir."

Bates hauled himself upright. "His hair black, in a long knout at the back of his head?"

"A what, sir?"

"Long hair, idiot, long hair?"

"Continental fashion, yes sir."

Bates was struggling into his gown. "Show him through, you fool." He pressed the crumbs of sleep from his eyes and wiped a palm over his sleep-ruffled hair. Here? D'Ivoi had never before come to his rooms, they had always met in the club. Perhaps Baley had made a mistake—but, no, coming through to the drawing room there was D'Ivoi, standing facing the fire, with a turquoise hat under his arm, the sheen of his silk suit gleaming, and his ridiculous tassel of hair dangling from the back of his head. Baley was loitering, and Bates shooed him away.

"My friend," said D'Ivoi, turning at the sound of Bates' voice.

"I was coming to the club today," said Bates at once. "Perhaps I seem unprepared, but I was about to get dressed."

D'Ivoi shook his head very slightly, no more than a tremble, and the smile was not dislodged from his

face. "There is no need for us to meet at the club." His *th*s were brittle, *tare* is no need for us to meet at *tea* club, but otherwise his accent was tolerably good. "I regret to say my friend, that I leave this city this afternoon." *Tat* I leave *tiss* city.

"Leave?" Bates reached without thinking for the bell-rope, to call for tea; at the last minute he remembered that this was a conference to which the servant must not be privy.

"I regret to say it. And before I depart, I bring a warning of sorts. Events in the war are about to take a turn … shall we say, dramatic?"

"Dramatic? I don't understand. The paper says that we … that, ah, the English are on the edge of capturing Paris. When that happens, surely the …"

"No my friend," said D'Ivoi. "You will find tomorrow's newspapers tell a different story. France and the Pope have declared a common right with the Pacificans."

It was all a great deal for Bates to take in at once. "They have?" he said. "Why that's excellent news. Excellent news for our cause. Common right with Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians, both?"

"Certainly, with both. The petite folk, and the giant folk, both are made in God's image. The talking horses, not; the Pope has decreed them devilish impostures. But of course he does so more because the English has its cavalry regiment of sapient horses. And the French army now has its own regiments. Regiments of the little folk would be useless enough, I suppose, but the giants make fearsome soldiers, I think."

"The French army has recruited regiments of Brobdingnagians?" repeated Bates, stupidly.

"I have not long, my friend," said D'Ivoi, nodding his head minutely. "I come partly to warn you. There are other things. The President of the Republic has relocated to Avignon, as you know. Well, there have been great things happening in Avignon, all in the south you know. And these great things are about to emerge to the day's light, for all the world to see. It will be terrible to be an English soldier before them."

"Monsieur," said Bates. "Are you …?"

"Forgive me, my friend," interrupted D'Ivoi. "When these things happen, it will be uncomfortable to be a French national in London, I think. And so I depart. But I warn you too: your cause, your pardon *our* cause, for the liberation of the Pacificans, has aligned you with the nation of France. Your government may take action against you for this reason."

"I am no traitor," Bates asserted, though his tongue felt heavy in his mouth uttering the sentiment.

"No no," assured the foreigner. "I only warn you. You know best, of course, how to attend to your own safety. But before I depart (and time is close, my friend), let me say this: contemplate a French victory in this war. I advise it. Believe that, with the Pope and the President now allied formally to the petites and the giants, believe that a victory for France will spell freedom for these people. Perhaps one smaller evil counterbalances a larger good? Perhaps?"

Bates did not know what to say to this. "I know that my actions here," he started saying, speaking the words slowly, "have benefited the French government. And I am not ashamed of this."

"Good! Excellently good! Because it will be less time than you think before French soldiers arrive here in London town, and you would be well to consider how your duty lies. Your duty, my friend, to God above all. No?"

"Monsieur," said Bates again anxiously.

But D'Ivoi was putting his top hat on and bowing, stiffly. "I regret I must depart."

"French soldiers here?"

"Ah, yes. I will say only this, at last. There has been a very great series of inventions. We have a machine, a thinking and calculating machine … have you heard of this?"

"A machine?"

"Mister Babbage, and his French mistress, have been working in Uzes, in France's south, for many years now. You have heard, perhaps, of mister Babbage?"

"The name is familiar …" said Bates. His head was starting to buzz unpleasantly. This conference was a shock, there was no mistaking it.

"He has built a machine. It can undertake a week's calculations in a moment. It is nothing more than a box, the size of a piano I think, but it gives great power of calculation and ratiocination, of the power of thought in this box. Forgive me, I am forgetting my English already. But our engineers now use this box, and with it they design fantastic new machines. Our generals use it, and with it they plan all possible military strategies. This box will win the war, for us."

And he bowed again and was gone.

[4]

11-12 November 1848

Where does it go, the melancholia, when some startling event evaporates it, sublimes it into vapour that dissolves into the wind? Bates's downheartedness vanished. He washed, shaved, dressed, ate and bustled from his rooms in an hour. Everything had been turned topsy-turvy, and the evil spirit squatting spider-like in his head had somehow fallen free.

He hurried. D'Ivoi had been his only contact with the French, and perhaps by limiting his contact to a single individual he had, at some level, believed that he limited his treason too. And for a day or two the very notion of a French victory—of French troops marching up the Mall—was too shocking for him to think about it at all. But the idea percolated through his mind anyway, and soon he was almost welcoming it. It would bring his cause to fruition. The Lilliputians would be freed, the Brobdingnagians reprieved from race-death.

He was up, up, up.

He went to his club, and wrote three letters. Then he caught a cab (a rare expense for him) and visited a sympathetically-minded gentleman in Holborn. He spent the evening with a gaggle of churchmen, duck-like individuals who paced about the room with their heads forward and their hands tucked into the smalls of their backs, talking ponderously of God. He told the sympathetically-minded gentleman little, but he told the churchmen all. Their worry, it transpired, was not of French political rule, so much as the danger of an oppressive Catholicism being imposed as the official religion. Bates was too excited, to elevated in spirit, to worry about this.

"Are you certain that these events are going to come to pass?" one of the clerics asked him. "Are you sure?"

"I am sure," gabbled Bates. He tended to talk too rapidly when the mood was on him, when his blood was hurtling through his body, but it couldn't be helped. "Now that they have declared themselves for the humanity of the Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians, all of the civilised world will support them, surely. And their alliance has meant that they could recruit a regiment of giants to fight us. To fight the English. Moreover," he went on, wide-eyed, "they have perfected a device, a machine, a thinking machine. Have you heard of Mister Babbing?"

Babbing? Babbing?

"Do you mean *Babbage,"* said one elderly churchman, a whittled, dry-faced old man who had been a main agent in the campaign since its first days. "The computational device?"

"The French have perfected it," said Bates. "And with it they have constructed new engineering devices, and plotted new techniques of war-making."

"Incredible!"

"It is credible indeed."

"The computing device has been perfected!"

On the Saturday he attended a tea-party at which he was the only male present. He sat on a chair too small for him, and listened politely to half-a-dozen wealthy matrons and maidens expatiate upon how beautiful the little people were, how marvellous, and how wicked it was to chain them with tiny chains and make them work in factories. Nobody mentioned the Brobdingnagians, of course, who lacked the daintiness to appeal to this class of person. But Bates smiled and nodded, and thought of the money these women might gift to the cause.

One woman confided in him. "Since my husband passed through the veil," she said in a breathy tone of voice, "my life has become divided between these darling little creatures, and my cats."

The Sunday, naturally he went to chapel. But he could not bring his mind to focus on the sermon. Something fretted at its margins, some piece of thought-grit. *These darling little creatures.* But, Bates thought, there was so much more to the Lilliputians than this! They were messengers, in some way or other. He had not managed to clear the thought thoroughly enough through his brain to fully understand it, but he *felt* it, he felt it genuinely and thoroughly. Messengers. There was something about them, something special, that deserved preservation in the way few ordinary-sized people did.

She had sat next to him, with purple crinoline and a lacecap covering her hair, but with these intense, beautiful air-blue eyes, and had said: *these darling little creatures, and my cats.*

Cats preyed on them, of course. One of Bates's acquaintances declared that he had first become interested in their cause after watching two cats fighting over a stray Lilliputian, in the kitchen of his uncle's house.

And so it slid again, dropping like leaves from a tree until the tree has lost all its leaves. Bates went to bed Sunday night with a heart so heavy it registered not only in his chest, but in his throat and belly too. And waking the following morning was a forlorn, interfered-with sensation. The urge not to rise was very strong: merely to stay in bed, to turn the heavy-body and heavy-head and lie there. After a few days of energetic living, Bates's life had been usurped again by melancholia.

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His rooms, on Cavendish Square, looked over an oval of parched winter grass and four nude trees. Some days he would sit and stare, emptying one cigarette after another of its smoke, and doing nothing but watching the motionlessness of the trees.

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When he had been a young man, some six or seven years earlier, Bates had had an intrigue with a tobacconist's daughter called Mary. The romance had strayed into physical impropriety. To begin with, Bates had felt a glow in his heart, something fuelled by equal parts pride and shame. The necessary secrecy had built him up inside his suit. He felt the sin, but he also felt elevated, enlarged. He could walk the streets of London, looking at the others, and knowing something they did not know. The aftermath, the potent stew of good and bad emotions, was more pleasurable than the physical enjoyment of the act itself, pleasurable though that act is.

Then Mary told him that she was carrying a child. This changed the balance of feelings inside him to a form of fear. He could not bring himself to confront his own father (still alive at that time) to declare himself the destined parent of an infant. It was impossible. Inner shame is, perhaps, a sensation so powerfully mixed of delight and disgust it approximates glory; but public shame is a very different matter. Bates senior was not a wealthy man, but he was proud. Marriage to a tobacconist's daughter was out of the question. And Mary was a sweet girl. But what could he do? What could be done?

Of course nothing could be done.

There was a very uncomfortable interview between the former lovers. There were tears and recriminations from her. They made it easier for him to adopt a stony exterior manner. Afterwards he spent the evening in his club, and drank most of a bottle of claret. A walk home and a half-hour in a chapel along the way. Prayer blended his awkwardness, his shame, his self-loathing, his weakness, into a cement of strength. He would be strong from this moment, which was all that Christ required. He would sin no more.

His resolution included a blanking out of Mary, which he managed by pretending that she did not exist. For weeks this strategy worked well. For hours at a time he forgot that there was such a person in the world. Only when he indulged in occasional, night-time bouts of impure thought and manual stimulation did her image pop into his mind, and this only encouraged him to quit that degrading business anyway.

Then, a month or more later, he saw her at the booth, paying to cross London Bridge. He hurried after her, uncertain whether the face glimpsed under the bonnet was indeed hers. "Excuse me, madam," he

called. And she turned.

She looked blankly into his face, neither pleased nor displeased to see him.

"Mary," he said, catching up with her.

Her stomach was flat.

"You're looking," she chided, following his gaze. "Tis not decent."

Light made painterly effects on the river, speckles of brightness spread in a swathe.

He didn't know how to ask the question.

"Don't worry yourself, sir," she said, blushing plum-red, her voice as angry as Bates had ever heard it. "No child will come and threaten your family honour." She pronounced this last word *on 'er.*

"I don't understand."

She was quiet for a time. "Well, a friend of mine knows a doctor. Not that I'd call him a real doctor, if you see what I say."

"Oh," said Bates, soft, realising what had happened. They were a third of the way over the bridge now. The sunlight swelled, and the Thames was glittering and sparkling like a solid. Bates's mouth was dry.

"What did you do with it?" he asked, a pain growing in his chest as if his ribs were contracting and squeezing his lungs.

"It?" she replied.

"The," he said, his voice sounding somehow different to himself, "child."

She stared at him, stared for half a minute, her face immobile but her eyes wide. "I buried him," she said. "I dug under the hedgerow in Somer's Town, beside the churchyard, and buried him there."

For days Bates had been unable to get this image out of his mind. His child, his son, buried and mixed into the earth. Like ore. He dreamt of the little creature, its eyes closed and its mouth pursed against the chill. He imagined it with hair, long blonde strands of hair. He imagined it miniature, Lilliputian in size. In the dream he scuffed at the dirt with his feet, knowing his child was interred beneath the spot. A strand of gold grazed his wrist. Boys in brown, crossing-sweepers, leant together to talk, somewhere in the distance. Through a window, perhaps. One of them yawned. But he was in a room, with velvet curtains. The strands of gold were woven into a cobweb. A strand of gold grazed his wrist. The baby's tiny hand was reaching for him, and when it touched him its skin was so cold he yelped out loud.

At that point he awoke.

[5]

On 19 November, French forces crossed the Channel. The fighting in the northeast was the hardest, British troops having pulled back with a military alacrity to trenches dug earlier in the campaign and then sticking to their positions in and around Saint Quentin. But the French army was renewed. Three battalions of regular troops attacked the British positions; but then the *premier corps de géants* stormed the eastern flank. They carried enormous weaponry, great hoops of iron ringing massive planks of treated wood, cannonaders that the Brobdingnagians could fire from their shoulders, sending fissile barrel-shaped

charges hurtling onto troops below. The packages were filled with Greek Fire. The giants proved remarkably resistant to rifle fire; although cannon-shells would tend to bring them down.

The battle fought at Saint Quentin was the major engagement of the whole war, with conventional troops charging the English line-of-defence from two sides at once, and a platoon of Brobdingnagians wading amongst the fighting with studied, slow-footed seriousness, smashing and killing about them with long, weighted pikes—sixty foot long, and carrying nearly a ton of metal shaped at the killing end. And the cannonaders wrought havoc. One colonel lost his colour completely as he read the paper containing the casualty figures after the battle. "If this number were pounds rather than corpses," he told his aide de camp, "we would be wealthy indeed." His bon mot went around the camp. The English Army, the soldier joked grimly, was wealthy indeed in corpses, but poor in terms of the sovereign. The Commander in Chief was still hanging men for High Treason, because this joke had passed their lips, when the rest of the army had retreated to the coast. He himself left on a sapient horse as French forward-troops broke through the camp and past the dangling bodies.

From Quentin the English fell back across the Pas de Calais. Orders to establish a series of redoubts were ignored, or heroically followed to the death of everyone concerned. Commanders attempted to co-ordinate an evacuation on the beaches around Calais-town, but the French pressed their advantage and embarkation turned to rout. Eventually the Brobdingnagians swam through again, pulling boats down to perdition from underneath. Commanders fled the scene in small skiffs. There was screaming, weapon's-fire, commotion and confusion. The English losses were even worse than they had been at the battle of Saint Quentin.

Corpses sank to the bottom of the Manche as stones, or bobbed on the surface, tangled with the waves, or rolled and trundled dead in the surf, sand in their mouths and in their hair, in their sightless eyes.

. . . . .

Bates followed the news, reading the hastily printed news-sheets with a fearful avidity. He wanted the French repulsed, like any Englishman. But he wanted the French victorious, and with it the noble God-endorsed cause to which he had devoted so much of his adult life. He didn't know what he wanted. He wanted to sleep, but he could only toss and roll on his dirty sheets.

His servant vanished. This abandonment didn't surprise him. Everywhere, people were leaving the capital.

The *premier* and *troisième corps de géants* walked and swam the channel, pulling troop-barges behind them. The army beached at Broadstairs. The English army, with all reserves called up and all available men under orders, assembled themselves on the hills south of Canterbury. Travellers and passengers began carrying word-of-mouth reports of the fighting. *Terrible, like the end of the world,* they said. *It be the world's end, a preacher was saying on Gad's Hill. These gigantic men are God's wrath.*

The flood of people from London increased.

Bates found his mood undergoing one of those peculiar bubblings-up that correlated only poorly to his

surroundings. He took to rising relatively early, and walking the streets of London with a dispassionate, observer's eye. He watched servants load belongings onto carts outside lankily opulent town houses in Mayfair; watched shopkeepers fitting boards over their windows, whilst their wives wrapped whimpering Lilliputians in handkerchiefs for the journey. On the Great North Road a great worm of humanity pulsed away to the horizon, people walking, trudging, hurrying or staggering, hand-carts and horse-carts, men hauling packs stacked yards high with clinking pots and rolled cloth, women carrying children, animals on tight tethers. Bates stood for an hour or more watching the stream of people trudge on, as seemingly sourceless and endless as the Thames itself. Militiamen trotted by on horseback, hawkers cried wares to the refugees, clockwork aerial craft buzzed up and down the rank, left and right across it.

Eventually, Bates wandered back into the city, and went to his club to take luncheon. Only Harmon was there, and one cook in the back-room. "Dear me," Bates muttered. "What's happened here." Harmon was all apologies, a good man in trying times. "Luncheon should not present problems, sir, if you'd care to eat."

Bates ate. His thoughts kept returning to the war. Could the Generals, perhaps, be persuaded that England was losing the war *because* it had flouted God's ordinance? A general proclamation from Parliament freeing the Lilliputians, and God's radiance would smile on His people again—surely? Surely?

He wandered, pensive, taking twice his normal time back to Cavendish Square. A stranger, dressed in an anonymous brown, was waiting outside his front door.

"Sir?" he said, starting forward. "You are Mister Bates?" The words were enough to reveal that his accent was French.

Bates felt suddenly panicky, he wasn't sure why. "What do you want?"

"Calm yourself, sir, calm yourself," said the stranger. "You are a friend of Mister D'Ivoi, I believe?"

"D'Ivoi," said Bates. "Yes."

"I bring a message from him. Could we go inside your apartment?"

"Your army is in Kent, sir," said Bates, his fight-or-flight balance teetering towards the aggressive again. "It loots Kent as we speak, sir."

The stranger only said: "I bring a message from him."

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The stranger did not introduce himself, or give a name. He carried a leather attaché case, and his boots were well worn at toe and heel. Inside, as Bates unclasped his own shutters (having no servant to do the job for him), the man placed his case carefully on a table, took off his three-cornered-hat, and bowed.

"Swiftness is to be desired, sir," he said. "I apologise for my English, for the speaking. You will pardon my expression?" Without waiting for an answer, he went on. "Mister D'Ivoi has asked for you particularly." He enunciated every syllable of this latter word with care. "He, and I, ask for your help. You have faith in our cause, I believe."

"Cause."

"For the Pacificans. For the little and the great, of the people. The Holy Father has declared the war a holy war, to free these creatures from their bondage. Yes?"

"Yes."

"Our army will soon be in London. We wish for you to do something for us, which it will make more swift the ending of the war. If you do this thing for us, the war will end sooner, and the holy cause achieved."

"Yes," said Bates. His mouth was dry.

"In this satchel there is a person."

"Satchel?"

The stranger bowed. "Is the word incorrect? I apologise. This sack, this bag."

"No, sir, I understand the word."

"Please, will you take this satchel to the Tower of London. It is this tower which is the command position for the defence of London, as we believe. The generals, the munitions, the forces, they gather there. The person inside the satchel will be able to work such things as to … to make more swift the ending of the war."

"There is a Lilliputian in the bag?"

The stranger bowed, and opened the flap of the satchel. A Lilliputian unhooked himself from a small padded harness inside and climbed out to stand, at attention, on the tabletop. Bates, as amazed and as unsettled as he always was in the presence of these tiny beings, smiled, made his smile broader, opened his mouth to show his teeth as if he were going to eat the thing. The Lilliputian stood, motionless.

"He has a training, a special training," said the stranger. "He is a warrior of great courage, great value. If I were to approach the Tower I would be shot, of course. And the naked streets are dangerous places for the little men, with traps and cats and all things like this. But if *you* were to bear the satchel, you would be able to release him inside the fort. Yes?"

"I know nobody in the Tower of London," said Bates. "I have no contacts in the army."

"You go to the Tower, and tell them that you bear a message from Colonel Truelove."

"I do not know the gentleman."

"He is captured, but we believe that the … English, excuse me, that *you* … do not know that he is captured. You will present to the guards and tell them that you bear a message from him, for attention of General Wilkinson only, for the General *only.* Once inside, find a quiet place to release the warrior from the satchel."

Sunlight laid squares on the floor. Light is a weight upon the earth, a mighty pressure from above, and yet it is constituted of the tiniest of particles.

Bates felt as if the moment of choice had already passed behind him. He did not have the language to phrase a rejection. All he could say was: "I will do this thing."

27 November 1848

You are a strange figure, somebody told Bates. Sometimes your spirit is enormous; sometimes it shrinks to nothing. To nothing, Bates thought, and I lie abed for days. But not now, he thought. Now I have a task, to test myself, to prove myself to God.

The Frenchman had insisted on the urgency of his mission, and had pressed Bates until he offered up a promise to undertake it the following dawn. "Dawn, mind, sir," said the Frenchman, before leaving. "If we co-obstinate …"

"Co-ordinate," corrected Bates.

"Just so. If we co-obstinate, such that the little warrior is inside the Tower at the right moment, then we can complete the war much sooner. Much sooner."

He departed, with a gait that looked to Bates like an insolent jauntiness. But it was much too late for regrets. He shut his door, pulled up a chair and sat opposite the miniature human on the tabletop.

"Good evening, my friend," he said.

The Lilliputian was silent.

There was some uncanny aspect to them, Bates thought to himself. He could not feel comfortable in their company. They unsettled him. He tried to visualise them as toys, or marionettes, but then they would shiver in some inescapably human way, or their little eyes would swivel and stare, as if penetrating beneath the decorous levels of manner and behaviour. They carried within them a strange elision. They were sylphs, but they were also and at the same time devils.

But it was too late for regrets.

"You are reticent, my friend," he said. "I cannot blame you if you harbour resentment against the English peoples. My people have committed … terrible crimes against … your people."

The Lilliputian said nothing. Was his silence the outward sign of some savage indignation?

"Believe me," Bates went on, "I am your friend. I have devoted my life to your cause."

Nothing.

It occurred to Bates that the Lilliputian might not speak English. "Mon ami," he began, but his French was not good. "Mon ami, j'espère que …"

The Lilliputian turned on his heel, clambered back inside the satchel, and was gone.

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In the small hours of the morning Bates discovered that the Lilliputian did indeed speak English. He had somehow mounted the arm of the *chaise longue* on which Bates was sleeping, and called in his wren-like voice: "Awake! Awake! For the sun will soon scatter darkness like a white stone scattering crows in flock."

Sleepy-headed, Bates found this hard to follow.

"We must be on our way," cried the Lilliputian. "We must be on our way."

"It is still dark," Bates grumbled, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with the calf of his arm.

"But it will be light soon."

"You speak English."

The Lilliputian did not say anything to this.

Bates rose and lit a lamp, dressing rapidly. He used yesternight's bowl of water to rinse his face, laced his feet into his boots and looked about him. The Lilliputian was standing beside the satchel.

"You are eager to go to war, my little friend," Bates said.

The morning had a spectral, unreal feel about it: the citrus light of the lamp, the angular purple shadows it threw, the perfect scaled-down human being standing on the table.

"I am a warrior," it piped.

"But we must remember that Jesus is the Prince of Peace."

The little figure slanted his head minutely, but did not reply.

"Well well," said Bates. "Well well, we shall go."

The little figure slipped inside the case.

Locking the door to his rooms felt, to Bates, like sealing off his life entire. Perhaps I shall die, he said, but his mind was so muzzy with tiredness that the thought carried no sting. Perhaps I shall never return here. But he didn't believe that, not really. He did not truly believe that.

His fingers slipped and fumbled at his coat buttons, and then hoisting the case with its precious cargo and striding out.

The light was growing, as his heels sounded on the pavement in Cavendish Square. The air was chill. The western horizon was still a gloomy and impressive purple, but the sky to the east was bright, the colour of malaria, with the morning star a dot of sharp light like a tiny window, immeasurably far off, open in the wall of an immense yellow citadel.

At the top of Charing Cross Road Bates saw a solitary person in the otherwise deserted streets, a hunched over infantryman stumbling, or hurrying, north. He was nervous enough to draw back into the shadow of a doorway, and then rebuked himself and strode on. He imagined sentry-questions. *Who goes there?* An Englishman! A loyal Englishman! God save the King! *What's in the bag?* Nothing—sir—nothing at all, save some personal belongings … but that would be easily disproven, a quick search would reveal his true carriage. Papers! Papers for the general … to be perused by him alone. To be seen by his eyes only! Would that satisfy a sentryman?

He walked on, and the dawn swelled in brightness all around him.

By the time he reached Holborn the sounds of fighting were unignorable.

From a distance the cannon-fire sounded like the booming of bitterns over estuary flats, or the

stomach-rumble of distant thunder. But once down the dip and up the other side of Holborn the battle seemed to swoop out of the imaginary into the real with appalling swiftness. Knocks and bangs three streets away, two, and then rifle fire tattering the air, men in beetroot uniforms with bayoneted rifles trotting en masse, or hurrying singly from firing-position to firing-position.

Bates was fully awake now.

He ducked down one side street, and then another, trying to stay clear of the scurrying military action. He was vividly aware of the stupidity of his position; a civilian, an unarmed and inexperienced man wandering the streets in the midst of a war. A bomb swooned through the air, exploding somewhere away to his left with a powerful crunch.

Panic took him for ten minutes, during which time he dropped the satchel and tried to claw his way through a barred oak door. When his right fingernails were bloody the panic seemed to ebb from him, leaving him panting and foolish. He retrieved the satchel, hurried to the end of the street, turned a dog-leg and found himself on the riverside.

The sun at its low angle, with sunlight trembling off the water, turned the river to metal. Bates hurried on. Fifty yards downriver and he was at the deserted toll-booth of London Bridge's Middlesex side.

"You there!" called somebody. "Hold yourself! Friend or foe!"

Bates stopped. "An Englishman!" he called.

From where he was standing he could look down upon the bridge, and across the pale brown rush of the river. The Thames's flow seemed enormous, the water standing up at the leading face of the bridge's pillars in burly, muscular lips, the trailing edge leaving deep scores in the surface that broke into wakes and ripples hundreds of yards further downstream. Riflemen hurried along the half-completed embankment, ducking behind the unplaced stone-blocks, or jumping into the holes where such blocks were yet to be placed. The sound of horses' whinnying, like metal skittering over ice, was in the air from somewhere on the other side of the river. An artillery unit laboured with a recalcitrant field gun, poking its snub over the bridge's parapet. On the river's surface, a boat jockeyed against the fierce pull of the water, three sets of oars flicking up and down like insect legs to keep the boat alongside a small quay onto which soldiers were alighting.

And then, with the sounds of multiple detonation, smoke flowered into the air. French dart-shells hurtled over the horizon, threads against the sky, and careered into the masonry alongside the river with astonishing vehemence. The ground shook; ripples shuddered across the face of the water; stone cracked and puffed into the air as smoke. Bricks, pillars and blocks tumbled and clattered. More explosions. The tick-tock of bullets, British rifle fire, although Bates couldn't see what they were firing at. Then the giants came; heads rearing up like the sun over the horizon, but these suns followed by bodies, and the bodies supported on enormous legs. They strode up the river, the water blanching into foam about their shins. They were dressed in crazily-patched leather clothes, padded with numerous metal plates that were too poorly burnished to gleam in the light. With the sun behind them, four marched.

He was so stunned by the sight as to not understand how much in shock he was. He blinked, and turned. People were rushing on all sides, faces distorted as they shouted. He blinked again, turned again. The French, soldiers of ordinary size, were visible on the south bank, some firing over the water, some attempting to cross the bridge. English troops were defending the position. Bates stood in the midst of it, a single gentleman in modest but expensive clothing, his coat buttoned all the way to his chin, carrying a leather satchel briefcase. One of the English soldiers, hurrying to the bridge, caught his eye. "You!" he yelled. "You!"

Still numb to his surroundings, Bates turned to face him. Smoke misted up and swirled away, to an orchestral accompaniment of clattering explosions.

Everybody was looking north. Bates followed their glances. Another thunderstroke.

One of the Brobdingnagians was standing over the dome of Saint Paul's. He had driven his metal-tipped staff through the shell of it, as if breaking the blunt end of an egg. He lifted it out, and struck again, and the dome collapsed leaving a fuzzy halo of dust.

Bates turned to look for the soldier who had accosted him. He was not standing where he had been standing. Bates looked around, and then looked down, and saw him lying spreadeagled on the floor. Blood, dark and taut like poured molasses, was pooled all around him.

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Bates stumbled, half-awake, from the tollbooth and down a side-street. A crazy trajectory. He ran clumsily past a row of scowling arches, and then turned into a doorway, pressing himself up into the shadow and against the side wall.

The sounds of battle became chuckles and creaks. It took him a moment to realise that the fighting was moving away, sweeping round beyond the wrecked cathedral and into the fields to the north. He fiddled with the catch on the briefcase and whispered inside, although as he did so he was struck by how peculiar it was to be whispering.

The street was deserted.

The Lilliputian's high-pitched voice warbled from its hidden place. "You must go on."

"I will be killed," said Bates, a trill of nerves shaking the last word. He felt close to tears.

"Death is the soil of the world," said the Lilliputian, the oddness of the sentiment made stranger still by the ethereal, piping voice that uttered it.

"I will wait here until the fighting has stopped," said Bates. Saying so brought him a trembly sense of satisfaction: to be safe, not to die, to stay hidden until the danger had passed.

"No," said the Lilliputian. The timbre of his voice had changed. Somehow, Bates could not see how, he had slipped out of the case and climbed up the coat. He stood on Bates's shoulder, and with a shimmer was on his face. Tiny pressure on his ear, a tickling sensation of an insect on his cheek. Bates could not repress a shudder, a raising of his eyes to swat the spider that had the *gall* to touch his face—to touch his face! Only an effort of will, consciousness, prevented him from slapping at the little creature. I must not! He thought. God's creature! So easy to crush it out of life … but no, no, I must not, never, never.

Blurrily close to his eyeball, the pink-yellow shape of a head, a lash-like hand, dissolved by nearness. "This thorn," warbled the Lilliputian, "is a weapon. I can thrust it into your eye, and it will explode, a bomb." Bates blinked furiously. "If you attack me I will have your eye." Bates blinked again. His eye was watering; his breaths were coming much more swiftly. "If you do not move *now,* to go to the Tower, I will have your eye."

"My dear little friend," said Bates, high-pitched. "Mon share amy."

"The Brobdingnagians live to be a hundred and fifty years of age," came the sing-song rapid little voice. "They are wary of death, for death is a rarity to them. But we of Lilliput live a quarter as long, and hold death in a quarter as much worth. We are a nation of warriors."

"My dear little friend," said Bates, again.

"Go now." And the tickling sensation vanished from his face, the ornament-like pressure removed from his ear. When Bates had regained his breath the Lilliputian was back in the satchel.

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The battle seemed to have passed entirely away. Cautious as a mouse, Bates ducked from doorway to doorway, but the only people he saw were British soldiers. He hurried down Eastcheap, and came out from the tall houses directly before the Tower.

He had no idea of the time. Certainly the morning was advanced now, the sky was crowded with ivory-coloured thunderheads. Spots of rain touched his face, and Bates thought of contemptuous Lilliputians spitting upon his skin.

There was a great deal of military activity around the Tower; mounted troops jittered by, their horses glittery with sweat, or rain, or both; cannons were positioned at all places, sentries doing their clockwork sentry-business, chimney-smoke and noise and business and camp-followers, all the melee. It seemed odder to Bates than the battle he had just witnessed. He shouldered the satchel, its occupant like some wasp, striped with its own uniform; and yet, who could say, why not angelic as well? And there was the tower itself, London's tower as white as ice, blocky like teeth, standing taller over him, his parent, his nationhood's parent. It did not look inviting.

Nobody challenged him as he marched up the causeway until he had come within ten yards of the closed main gate, with its lesser gate inset and open. "Who goes there?" yelled the sentryman, although he was only a foot or so from Bates. "General Wilkinson! shouted Bates, startled into life. "I bring a message for General Wilkinson!" His heart stuttered. "I have a message for the General's ears only! From Colonel Truelove!"

[7]

He spent much of the rest of the day hiding inside a well-appointed house whose door had been blown, or beaten, from its hinges. The kitchen was messed and food looted, but the other rooms had been left untouched: beautiful furniture, with legs curled and slender as string, ornaments with the intricacy of clockwork but without function or movement, globes of glass holding preserved flowers, a new design of tallboy-clock, whose metronomic timekeeper rocked back and forth on its hinged base like a tree swaying in the breeze. The walls were hung with oils of society beauties.

Entering the Tower had been simple in the end. The guard had looked inside the satchel, but only cursorily and without penetrating deep enough to unearth the miniature warrior concealed inside. He had slipped through the inset door, the flap a twelfth the size of the great gates which were not opened, and hurried past the buzz of people within, over the inner quad, through another door and to a coign in an empty corridor. And there he had released the Lilliputian warrior, who had emerged from the bag with threads of rope coiled over his shoulder, and his own miniature satchel on a belt around his waist. He had not bade Bates farewell, but had scurried off.

Bates had loitered, nervously, around the Tower, and then had slipped amongst a crowd of engineers and kitchen-servants as they exited the Tower, and after that had slipped into deserted streets in Whitechapel.

Perhaps he expected to hear some titanic explosion, the arsenal beneath the Tower exploded by the fierce little Lilliputian; perhaps he expected the cheers of French troops. But although his ear was repeatedly distracted by bangs, knocks, creases of sound in the air, yells, tatters of song, aural flotsam, he heard nothing that matched the imagined cataclysm of his heart.

Much later in the afternoon, ashamed at his own instincts for cowardice, he had ventured out from this house, and wandered the city. He came across one body, in a British uniform, and then a clutch more of them. A print shop's window's had been broken in to make a placement for a field gun, but the gun's barrel was sheared and broken as a daisy, and its crew lay in a tangle of blackened arms and legs around it. Southward brought Bates out on the river again. Here there were more bodies. Bates went to the water's edge and sat down. On the far side of the river broken buildings bannered smoke into the evening air.

There was nobody around. It was as if London were a dead city.

The river hushed below him, like breathing.

I have killed my city, thought Bates, his mood flowing away from him now like the river itself, his spirits draining into the hidden sinks of despair. I am a traitor, and I have killed my city.

An irregular splashing to the west intruded on his attention. Upriver he could see one of the giants, sitting on the bank with its legs in the water for all the world like a small boy beside a tiny stream. The giant kicked his legs, languidly, intermittently, sending up house-sized bulges of water up to trouble the surface. Behind him, the tip of the sun dipped against the river, colour bleeding from it into the water like watercolour paint from a paintbrush being washed after a day's work.

With desperate, self-detesting resolution Bates started towards the figure; this giant surveying the ruins he had made of the world's greatest city. "Monsieur!" he called. "Monsieur!"

He ran for ten minutes before he was close enough for his gnat's-voice to reach the great flappy ears. "Monsieur! Monsieur!"

The Brobdingnagian turned his head with the slowness of a planet revolving.

"I am here Monsieur!" squeaked Bates. "Down here Monsieur!"

The eyelids rolled up, great blinds, and the carpet-roll lips parted. "Good day," said the giant.

And now that he was standing beside the creature, Bates realised he had no idea what he had intended in coming over. "Forgive me, sir," he said. "Forgive me for approaching you. Is the battle over?"

"I can barely hear you," grumbled the giant, its sub-bass voice rolling and coiling in the evening air. "Allow me to lift you." And with sluggish but minute patience the enormous hand presented itself, so that Bates could step into the palm. The quality of the skin was not in the least leathery, as he expected it to be; it was douce, though strong, with some of the quality of turf. And then he was lifted into the air, and brought before the enormous benign face. Bates could see the pores, a thousand rabbit-holes in the cliff-face; could see the poplar-stubs of unshaved beard, the tangle of hair in the nostril like winter trees.

"Thank you monsieur," he said. "Is the battle over?"

"It is," said the giant.

"Are the French victorious?"

Every flicker of emotion was magnified, as if the great face were acting, over-acting, each expression. "You are French?"

"No sir, no sir," Bates gabbled. "But a sympathiser, sir. I am an ally of France, an ally, that is to say, of its great cause, of freedom for Pacificans, of freedom against slavery and the upholding of God's law."

"Your voice is too small, and too rapid," rumbled the voice. "I cannot follow your speech."

"I am a friend to the Brobdingnagian people," said Bates more slowly and more loud. "And the Lilliputians."

A smile, wide as a boulevard. "The tiniest of folk. Our fleas are bigger than they. Some of my people," he grumbled on, benignly, "do not believe they exist, never having seen them. But I am assured they do exist, and I am prepared to believe it."

There was silence for a moment. The light reddened deeper into sunset.

"The day is yours?" Bates asked again.

"The army of France is victorious."

"You do not seem happy."

"Melancholia," said the giant, drawing the word out so that it seemed to rumble on and on, a sound like heavy furniture being dragged over the floor. "To observe a city broken like this. We Brobdingnagians are a peaceful people, and such destruction …" He trailed off.

"But your great cause," chirruped Bates. "This victory is a great thing! It will mean freedom for your people."

"The France-army," said the giant, "possess a machine of the greatest ingenuity. I have seen it; no bigger than a snuff-box, yet it *computes* and *calculates* and solves all manner of problems at a ferocious rate. So swiftly it works! It is this machine that has won the war, I think. This machine. Its strategy, and its solution to problems. This machine." He hummed and hoomed for a while. "My people," he continued, "my people are ingenious with machines, but never so ingenious as your people. You are small, but cunning. Perhaps the others, the Lil, the Lilli …"

"The Lilliputians."

"Just so, perhaps *they* are more ingenious even than you? The smaller the more cunning? This may be God's way of ordering his universe. The smaller the more cunning."

"I have long been an ally of France," Bates declared. His spirits, sunken only minutes before, were rising again, following their own unfathomable logic. Perhaps, he thought, perhaps my betrayal truly followed a higher good. Perhaps it is for the best. After defeat, England will abandon its persecution of the Pacificans, and soon after that its greatness will reassert itself. In ten years … maybe less. And it will be a more worthwhile greatness, because it will not flout God's ordinance. "I have long been an ally of France, and a friend of the Count D'Ivoi."

"D'Ivoi," said the giant. "I know him."

"You know him?"

"Indeed. Shall I take you to him?"

"Yes!" Bates declared, his heart flaring into fervour. "Yes! I will congratulate him on his victory, and on the new age of justice for Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians both!"

The enormous hand cupped him against the giant's shoulder, and he rose to his full height. The sun seemed to pull back from the horizon with the change in perspective, and then in lengthily slushing strides the giant marched down the river. He paused at the wrecked arches of London Bridge, stepping up onto the concourse and over it into the water again. In moments he was alongside the Tower. The troops outside the citadel were in French uniform; they scurried below, insect-like, apparently as alarmed by their gigantic ally as the British had been by the giants as foes. Cannon were hauled round to bear on the figure.

"A visitor for Monsieur le Comte," boomed the Brobdignagian. "A visitor for Monsieur D'Ivoi."

He placed Bates on the charred lawn before the main gate, and withdrew his hand.

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Bates was kept waiting for an hour or more, sitting on a bench inside the main gate. The evening light thickened to full darkness, and a November chill wrapped itself around the skin. Soldiers passed back and forth, their spirits elevated by victory. Every face was grinning. Bates allowed the sense of achievement to percolate through into his own heart. Something great had happened here, after all. He thought of the little warrior he had carried past this gate only that morning. Such valour in so small an individual! Was he still alive? When he met D'Ivoi again, he would ask. Such valour. He deserved a medal. Would miniature medals be forged, to reward the part brave Lilliputians had played in their own liberation?

"Monsieur?" An aide de camp was standing in front of him. "The Comte D'Ivoi will see you now."

Bubbling with excitement, Bates followed the fellow across the court and down a series of steps. Gaslit corridors, the stone wet with evening dew. Finally into a broad-groined room, lit by two-dozen lamps, brighter than day. And there was D'Ivoi, his absurd pigtail bobbing at the back of his head. A group of gorgeously uniformed men was sitting around a table.

"Bates, my friend," called D'Ivoi. "France has much to thank your for."

Bates approached, smiling. The generals at table were examining maps of the Southern Counties. Around them strutted and passed a stream of military humanity. In the corner, the size of a piano only taller, was an ebonywood box.

Of the generals, only D'Ivoi stood up. The rest of the generals were still eating, and pausing only to drink from smoky coffee-cups as wide as skulls.

"Bates, my friend," said D'Ivoi again.

They were eating pastries glazed with sugar that glistened as if wet.

"D'Ivoi," said Bates. He felt cheered to see his old friend, but something was wrong somewhere. He couldn't put his finger on it. He could not determine exactly what was wrong. It might have been that he did not want to determine what was wrong, for that would mean dismantling his buoyant feeling of happiness and achievement. And yet, like a pain somewhere behind the eyes, Bates knew *something*

was wrong.

One of the generals looked up from the table. His ugliness was breathtaking, the left eyebrow and cheek were scored with an old scar, the eye itself glass and obnoxious. "Sit," said D'Ivoi.

The air in the room was not sweet: close and stale-smelling.

"I am glad my small action," said Bates, "was able to hasten the conclusion to this wasteful war."

One of the generals at table snorted.

"Did the Lilliputian warrior I ported here … did he survive?"

"He did his job very well," said D'Ivoi. "Although, alas, the war is not over yet. The English are resisting at Runnymede, with some skill and some force. But it will not be long! It will not be long, in part because of your labour. We, France, salute you."

"Ours is a nobler cause," said Bates, the words for a moment swimming his head with the thrill and honour of it all.

"Cause?" asked the General with the glass eye. It was impossible to look at his bunched, seamed face without one's glance being drawn to his hideous eye. Bates snapped his gaze away, and it fell on the box in the corner of the room.

"The Pope's latest decree," said D'Ivoi, and stopped. He noticed where Bates was looking. "Ah, my friend, your eye falls on our most valuable ally. The computation device!"

"So this is it," said Bates, distantly. The fact that there was something wrong was, somehow, intruding itself again. "The famous computation device."

"Truly," said D'Ivoi. "It has brought us further, and faster. It will change the whole world, this beautiful machine. Beautiful machine!"

"The Pope's latest decree?" queried the General. "C'est quoi ce que t'as dit?"

D'Ivoi gabbled something in French, too rapidly for Bates to follow. His own smile felt fixed, now. The light was too bright in this underground cavern. It slicked the walls. Centuries of the Tower, a prison. The giants Gog and Magog, or was it Bran? Bran the giant? Buried under Tower Hill, that was the story. Buried under the hill and the Tower built above it, pressing down on the enormous bones. A giant prison squashing the bones of a buried giant. How many people had seen the inside of this chamber, and never seen the light again? Centuries of people locked away, barred and closed and buried in the ground like blind stones in the mud.

Bates was stepping towards the device now. "It is marvellous," he muttered. "How does it work?"

D'Ivoi was at his arm, a touch on his elbow. "Ah, my friend," he said. "I cannot permit you to examine it too closely. You are a friend to France, I know, but even you must respect military secrets."

The box was coffin-black. It did not display any of its secrets on its exterior. "Of course," murmured Bates.

"As to how it works," D'Ivoi continued, steering Bates back towards the door of the room. "For that you will have to ask Mister Babbage. It is something like an abacus, I think; something like a series of switches, or rolls, or gears, or something like this. I do not know. I only know," he beamed, and took

Bates's hand in his own. "I only know that it will win us the war. Goodbye, my friend, and thank you again."

Bates was half dazed as he walked from the room. A guard eyed him. He walked half-aware up the stairway. There were certain things he should not think about. That was it. That was the best way. Bury thought, like the giant buried under the hill. Certain things he should not think about. He should not think of the French troops ranging out across the fields of England, of other towns burning, of the smoke rising as a column from the heart of the kingdom. Should not think of the blood draining out of bodies, pooling like molasses, dark in the sunlight. Should not think of giant men working to the extinction of their race at brute tasks, menial tasks, hauling logs or working great engines until their sturdy bodies gave out in exhaustion. Should not think of the Computational Device in the corner of the oppressive underground room. Not imagine opening the front of the device and looking inside. Or if he did think of this last, if he must think of it, then he should think of some giant clockwork device, some great rack of toothed-wheels and pins and rods, something wholly mechanical. But not think of a tight, close, miniature prison-cage, in which sweating rows of labouring tiny people worked at wheels and abacus racks, tied into position, working joylessly in the dark and hopelessness to process some machine for computation. Not that. He was on the top step now, and about to step back into the light, and the best thing would be to leave all that behind him, buried away below.

The End