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PREFACE

Sir Joshua Singleton Macumbie-Reynolds settled down comfortably in his venerable leather armchair (“we have learned to live with one another”) and puffed lightly on a mild cigar, a pleasure he allowed himself rarely, and one of which he roundly disapproved.

“If I might be permitted a personal observation,” I said, “your name has a fine ring to it.”

“There’s an ‘Othello’ in there somewhere too, Mr. Harvey” Sir Joshua replied with a twinkle in his eye, “but we do our best to ignore it”.

“Might one look briefly into the name itself and its various components?” I asked.

“Absolutely not,” Sir J replied, wagging his finger. “We agreed at the outset, that this interview process, and whatever you may decide to do with it, was to be about our country, not about me.”

“Yes, of course,” I replied. “However since you have been a major influence – and that’s putting mildly – perhaps we could start by looking at, well, your earlier days, and how you came to be a motivator for change.”

“Yes I suppose you’re right. And it’s a story that really should be told, or at least put on record.”

Sir J paused, then smiled. “Listen,” he said, “the sound of silence...”

“Actually you could not have come to me at a better time. The girls have just taken off for England, so we have the place to ourselves, and I can reminisce in peace, free of domestic disturbance.”

“The girls...?”

“My daughter will be going up to Cambridge. It’s her first term and she’s a little nervous. Indicated rather strongly that a little motherly backup, for the first couple of weeks or so, would be more than welcome.”

“Excellent. So when shall we begin? Just say the word, Sir.”

“How about now?”

And so we began.

Chapter One: Early Years

Ours was one of the poorest countries in the world, if not *the* poorest. A small island off the coast of Africa, or rather two, a small one and an even smaller one. Our mainland neighbour did not covert our island, nor had it broken off diplomatic relations – nothing so dramatic. It simply ignored us. We had neither diplomatic nor trade relations with it because we simply did not exist. We were connected with the outside world by a weekly seaplane piloted by an amiable though ageing Australian whose condition often brought into question his capacity to fly, and a most disreputable tramp steamer which plied the coast once a week.

With little in the way of natural resources, the sort international companies like exploiting, we should all have been pretty poor, every one of us. And indeed most of our citizens were. But somehow in such places, there are always some who manage to be incredibly rich, and our family was among those. My father was a military man, number two in the hierarchy. ‘It is best to be number 2 or 3’ he had said to me once. ‘A man can do very well in a slightly lower position, and stands much less chance of getting shot than the Number One’.

Where did we get our wealth? Though our country had nothing, there were still nations who were keen to buy our influence – a vote in the UN perhaps, or some such nonsense. One major power wanted to build a strategic airbase on our island, though heaven knows we had absolutely no room for it. They came up with a wild idea of building an airstrip right out into the ocean where it was shallow around the coral reefs. It would have been an environmental disaster as I

now see. But as a young boy, when I saw the plans and artist's rendition, I was totally fascinated. Fortunately that country's attention was diverted elsewhere. They became embroiled in the fight for freedom and democracy against communism, and we heard no more of it.

But I digress. The point is that a few of us were very wealthy. All foreign funds went through the President of course, and he then rewarded those who supported him, who provided the bulwarks to his throne, as it were. We were the knights and barons who gave allegiance in exchange for the favours of wealth and a comfortable living.

All of this, both our own wealth and the poverty of those around us – and the security fence surrounding the compound where we, the privileged lived – all of this I took for granted as one does when one is young. It was what I was growing up with. I knew nothing else. To me this was the natural order of things. Though I must say, I never enjoyed our occasional forays into the local town or into the country – the sight of abject poverty was not pleasing to me.

The President was a somewhat remote figure, gradually becoming more so. He no longer travelled abroad as he had once done. My father explained that the less popular a president becomes at home, the more likely it will be that if he leaves the country for any purpose he will find himself unable to return. I was presented to our President once. He patted me on the head and smiled. I said afterwards to my father that I did not believe his smile. I thought him to be a very cruel man. I was, I think, eleven or so at the time. My father said I was very perceptive. The President was indeed a very cruel man. My father added that in our country, it seemed that only very cruel men could become President. Only later would I understand the dark humour and the stark truth of what my father had said.

My father had a circle of close friends, most of whom lived in our compound – or Residential Estate as it was known officially. Despite the privileges of their position, they all shared the same dislike for the President, and feared for their country as it became ever poorer and his rule more oppressive. But they were not keen for revolution. They appreciated that at least they had stability. They had seen the havoc and damage revolution can create. Our neighbouring countries provided many examples. A despotic ruler was better, in their eyes, than a prolonged and painful revolution, painful for the wealthy classes who could find themselves escaping penniless if not lynched by the mob, but equally so for everyone when looting and burning and random killing become the order of the day, every day.

I was, or had been in my early youth, a fairly mild, dare I say kindly child. I smuggled food to the watchman at the gate for his family and friends and I was uncomfortable whenever we left our compound, though that was infrequent as I had a tutor who lived in a nearby house.

Looking back however, I now see that as I grew into my teenage years, I, and my peers who were growing up around me, we all became loud and hard. We became aware that the world around us was poor, but we were the rich and the privileged, and surely, we must be the favoured of the gods. It became fashionable among us to view the poor with disgust, as inferior human beings who thoroughly deserved their lot, as indeed we did ours.

Then came the time when I and a couple of my friends were packed off to an English Public School – which I should explain to an American is really a private school, a College you might call it. Here at first we were hounded for our foreignness, our lack of familiarity with English ways despite the efforts of my tutor. I should explain that as a colonial legacy, all of the 'upper crust' spoke English at home and among ourselves. Even the mountain people had been taught English – for as long as we had teachers to teach that is. My first two years were thoroughly miserable. Then came the miracle of the English Public School system – one graduates from being a beaten junior to being a senior, acquiring then the right to take it out on any poor junior who got in one's way or to whom one chose to take a personal dislike whether or not for any valid reason. I took to secretive smoking and drinking, wore expensive clothes and acquired, on my 18th birthday, a noisy sports car.

My father asked me what I would do next. University perhaps, he had suggested. But I had a different idea, and my father respected my wishes, as indeed he had always tried to do. What I wanted was to see the world, or at least Europe. I had learned French, Italian and German from my tutor, who had been miraculously fluent in all three. When I heard him conversing in German with a rare German tourist one evening, I had noted with some pride that their accents were indistinguishable. I had become close to my tutor as he was a good friend and we spent a lot of time together. I was proud on his behalf. He had taught me so much – though the politics of my country were carefully conveyed as lightly concealed historical parables – we all had to be careful.

And so I toured Europe, zooming around in my flashy sports car. I stayed for the most part with our Consuls. These were people whom the President favoured, or whom he feared and so chose to have them out of the way. They fulfilled absolutely no useful function. They entertained one another and occasionally filed official dispatches which no one at home would read. But one felt that the prestige of one's country demanded such functions. The same is still true today of course. Every country, large and small, has its diplomatic corps of expatriates entertaining one another but doing little else of any value.

The Consuls of my country were generally housed in apartments rather than grand mansions, and in less fashionable backstreets. They felt, and indeed were, very neglected. They were always pleased to receive visitors, and they entertained me grandly. Looking back I realize that their budgets were fairly small – indeed I learned that it was common for many of them to support themselves in various ways – so they would most probably have tightened their belts after I had gone. But I would often find that a particular consul and I enjoyed one another's company, having mutual interests. We tended to avoid our own country's politics, perhaps I would suppose, because the consuls had become somewhat out of touch with their homeland and its affairs. But some of these chaps were quite worldly wise, and would certainly inform me in some depth as to the social and political situation of the particular country we were in.

This jolly round of pleasurable travel went on for a while. It was in Spain that my life was to take a different turn.

Chapter Two: A Change of Heart

I was in Madrid. Out walking one evening after a large dinner, I came across a pleasant park and sat down on a bench. One felt quite safe, I should add. I sat quietly, enjoying the balmy air and the scents of flowers and shrubs.

Then I heard two voices coming from the bushes behind me. It was two men, speaking very softly. One knew that there were a few beggars, tramps and the like, who slept in the parks. They were quite harmless. I would have ignored them, but I suddenly realized that both were speaking my language, more specifically in a mountain dialect.

Why I don't know – I would never have thought to converse with such people. Maybe I was homesick, maybe it was the sound of my own language, in the mountain dialect our old watchman used, I don't know. But I spoke up. 'Greetings my brothers' I said out loud.

My greeting was met with silence. Neither of the two men spoke. Then I heard whispers, followed by the sound of someone retreating, away through the bushes. It must have been just one of the men, for the other appeared cautiously and sat down, or half sat down, at the far end of the long bench where I was sitting. 'Thank you for your greeting, sir,' he said. I was touched because he had sounded so full of gratitude for those few words of mine.

He was dressed in fairly clean clothes, which I suspected had come from some charitable organization. His general demeanor showed a hint of pride, overwhelmed with, I suppose I would say, despair. I was sure that he was younger than one would think looking at his face.

We spoke in our own language. I asked him which village he was from and he began to cry as he told me. He had not seen his wife and children since he left to seek his fortune two years ago. And now he was sure he would never find his fortune or see his family again. He was a good man. I took a liking to him and his story fascinated me as, with my encouragement it gradually unfolded.

He had left our island to find work, as so many do. A fisherman friend had taken him, quite illegally of course, to the mainland where he had landed after dark. From there he walked across Africa for a year, begging for food, dodging bandits and customs posts before reaching the coast opposite Spain. Here he boarded a small rowing boat, joining many others – far more than the boat should have carried – all of whom would work without pay on one of several farms for two years, sleeping in a barn and living on bread, cheese and cheap wine – assuming they arrived.

They got to the Spanish coast, but were caught by the immigration police who put them in a refugee compound while the authorities tried to decide what to do with them. Eventually, after several months, there was some disturbance in the middle of the night. My new friend, for that he now was and would always remain, was put into a bus with a small group of others, and driven away from the compound. For at least an hour the bus drove on through the night, no one knew where to. Then they came to a city which they later found to be Madrid. The bus would stop from time to time, three or four would be told to get out, and the bus would drive on.

And thus my new friend found his way to the park which had become his home.

I asked him about his life. 'I want to work here', he replied. 'We all do. But it is difficult. We get treated roughly, and very often, we do not get the payment promised. Sometimes we work for a month and then we are sent away with nothing. I had a job with a good builder who was fair to us. But a rival company told the police our builder was using illegal labour, and the police came and said he would be put in prison if he continued'.

I asked him about his future, and he told me very simply that he did not have one. I think it was at that point, Mr Harvey, that I began to see a different course for my own life.

I took the man to an informal street restaurant – they stay open all hours of the night in Spain – and we had a meal together. The poor man was clearly starving. We talked for a long time, and I began to get some sense of the hopelessness in which most of my fellow countrymen were living. I came to realize that, like my new friend, my country too had no future, my country and everyone in it.

I gave him some money for a week's lodging in a fairly decent hotel, and we agreed to stay in touch as I would visit the park whenever I could. I also told him where I was staying. I later learned that after I had left Madrid, he had come to the consulate asking for me, and had become friends with the consul, for the same reasons as he had with myself I would suppose.

That night I went back to my consular apartment and, apologetically avoiding any conversation with my hosts, retired to my room, where I was to lie awake most of the night in unproductive thought, just going round in circles... my life, my country, the people in it and their non-existent future... just round and round.

I slept briefly as the dawn was breaking, then I got up, dressed, and asked my hosts if I could telephone my father. I had written home regularly, but rarely telephoned as it was expensive and the telephones at home were unreliable.

I spoke with my father. We exchanged the usual brief courtesies, then I told him that with his consent I would study at the London School of Economics. My father sounded a little surprised – I suppose I had been a playboy too long! But I think he was pleasantly surprised, and he gave his consent at once, together with a promise to transfer the necessary funds and a caution to spend my allowance a little more wisely in future. I took the hint. But in fact, my playboy days were over.

So I took cheap digs in London, sharing a fairly decent flat with seven other students from different countries and backgrounds, and lived sparingly.

I was interviewed by a Dr Roberts, who was to become my mentor. He asked me routinely why I wanted to study at the LSE. I said without a thought, that I came from a very poor country and I wanted to go back and make things better. He replied non-committedly that it sounded like a good idea, and I was accepted.

Things jogged along for a while. I took lessons in this and that, some of it sticking, some of it not. I must have been partly to blame – I'm sure that gallivanting around Europe without a thought for the morrow would have blunted my appetite for serious study.

Then one morning, as I entered the building, I was met by Dr Roberts, of whom I had to date seen nothing. I had a feeling at the time, that it was not a coincidental meeting. Dr Roberts asked me cheerfully if I was learning anything, and my hesitancy I suppose gave him his answer. He invited me to his house, an old rambling affair in a quiet street in Bloomsbury, where I had dinner with his wife and family. He then invited me up to his attic, a cozily furnished room with lots of books and papers on shelves.

We sat and talked into the night. He wanted to know everything about my country, its geography, climate, natural resources, economics and politics. I did most of the talking for at least two hours and I must confess, I became quite exhausted.

Though I could not foresee it at the time, we were to develop a close connection, with introduction to others who would form, with myself, what was to become an unofficial Revolutionary Committee.

Chapter Three: The Attic Club

That was to be the first of very many afternoons and evenings I would spend at Dr Roberts' home – or more specifically, in Dr Roberts' attic. Here he would introduce me to his many, what he called 'fringe friends', people whose ideas and ideologies did not always correspond with those of the LSE's curriculum! I continued with my regular studies of course, as indeed Dr Roberts encouraged me to do, saying I should have a firm 'classical' foundation. But it was the conversations and lessons in the attic which would fire my imagination.

It was in the attic that I learned about micro-credit, providing small loans which would make a major difference to small people, using the borrower's project itself as collateral rather than property which poor people did not have. 'You need a thorough grounding in classical banking', a serious, bearded and bespectacled friend of Dr Roberts had said, 'but it will be of little use to you when you return to a poor country, for our banking theory and function is designed simply to make the wealthy wealthier.

'The most perceptive truths often come from comedians, and it was Bob Hope who observed that banks are institutions for lending money to people who can prove they don't need it. A poor country needs a totally different approach. Your people are not poor. They have minds and bodies, they have the desire and capability to work. That is wealth. But it needs money, or credit, as the key which unlocks that creative potentiality, credit, not based on property which they won't have, but credit based on their potential, safeguarded with supportive monitoring'.

In the attic we discussed corruption and how to avoid it. Yes, it can be minimized if not eliminated, providing the will and the intent is there. It requires a Constitution which sets out clearly and publicly the procedures for the making and enforcement of laws. My attic friends stressed over and over again that, to quote the old adage, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. There are no exceptions. And so we debated how to prevent corruption. My friends were unanimous in that if my little country could totally eliminate government corruption, it would be unique in our modern world. I made copious notes. Four principles stuck firmly in my mind.

First, minimize or eliminate the opportunity or latitude for arbitrary action. When government functionaries have personal discretion in any matter, they will quite likely take the opportunity to sell it.

Second, transparency. Every debate, every conversation, every written word of government open to the public, and the accounts of every individual in government employ, every government department, every individual or company supplying services to government or dealing with government, to be public.

Third, all public debates to be conducted locally if they are local matters, or in consultation with any specialist interested groups. Draw the interested parties together. They know the local ropes, and they are the ones who will keep an eye on things.

And fourth: education. General education, yes, reading, writing and all that. But also specifically, political education, how the system works, and most important of all, what you need to check up on and how to go about it. The moral: if politicians start slipping, it's your fault for not keeping tabs on them.

And so it went on. Gradually my attic friends created a picture of how to run a country, how to run a country professionally and productively, especially a poor one. Together we built a shining image of rags to riches. With myself as its Head? No way Mr Harvey. One of my most significant instructions was that if I ever found myself with absolute power, the first thing I should do must be to create corruption-proof functioning institutions to replace me, after which I would gradually retire to the sidelines, watching carefully to make sure that the seeds I had planted would grow straight and strong.

Then one day, Dr Roberts announced that he and his family were going to Greece on a sabbatical, and so our attic meetings would be terminated for an unspecified time. I was left to my own devices. Looking back, I wonder if the mother bird was pushing me out of the nest, saying to me 'now, fly!' I missed the intellectual discussions, the lively conversations and the new thoughts I had so enjoyed in the attic which had quickly become my second, if not my first home. The school terms would end, but the attic sessions had always continued. Now bereft of both, I felt somewhat abandoned, and I rather wondered what I should do next.

It's funny, how someone can say something to you, and you simply don't hear it. Then five, ten years later, suddenly you hear it, loud and clear, and it seems terribly relevant.

My father and I had been talking in the garden of our home. We often talked quietly in the garden as we walked about, my father commenting on the various plants and flowers – about which he was extraordinarily knowledgeable – then interspersing little homilies and words of political wisdom, comments on the government and economy of our country.

Now as I lay in bed wide awake in the quiet of night, I recalled with total clarity what he had once said to me. 'You can become anything you want as you grow up', he had said. 'You can be a rich playboy, that is, as long as the family funds can support that lifestyle, and remember in our position, things can change within moments. Or you can move gently into a position such as mine, where you live well and carefully, looking around from time to time and perhaps giving thanks for the privileged position into which, for some incomprehensible reason, you were born. Or you can become President. And if you do, you can be a brutal dictator, bleeding your impoverished country dry; or you can change everything,

making your small country an example to the world, an example of peace, freedom and justice – but don't ask me how you would do it!

'You see my son', he had continued, 'I and many of my colleagues are in a difficult position. We are a group of friends – we do not meet often as we would be suspected. But we know one another, and we know what we think and feel and believe. We look at our country and want desperately to improve it and the lot of its people. But such a course would require a revolution, a dangerous exercise to say the least, when the President's personal guard consists of the best-armed and the best-paid men in the country. The outcome would by no means be certain, and if we succeeded, well, we are not stupid. We know that then our friendships would be tested, as each wants the top position. And we know also that in all probability whoever gets the Top Job will become as dictatorial as the present incumbent. Apart from that, we are old men. We are set in our ways. Even if we wanted to do good, I doubt that we would know what to do, for making a poor country prosper requires a fund of knowledge which I suspect that we do not possess.

'But you are of the new generation. You may perhaps learn how to make a country prosper, and have the wish to practice that knowledge here. And if you do, then tell me, son. I will look into your eyes, and if I see that you are genuine in your intent, I and my colleagues will make you President, even if we die in the process.'

What my father had not said, probably for fear of scaring me off, was that I was really the heir apparent, the only candidate for the job. Father's 'club' consisted of six members. One was unmarried, another had two daughters – it was not considered even a remote possibility in those days that the President might be a woman! A third couple was unable to have children – again I would add that at that time in my country, adoption would not have been an option. No one would ever consider bringing up someone else's child – one's neighbours would certainly have looked askance.

That leaves two beside my father. They both had sons several years older than myself. One, my next-door neighbour, was already signed up to study architecture in England – he was a natural designer and draughtsman and tremendously keen. His ultimate goal was to return here and build homes designed to harness the winds and store the seasonal rain. The other boy was destined to go to Heidelberg as a medical student, courtesy of the German government. My tutor had been schooling him in the German language.

As I lay awake in the silence of the night, a vision of myself as my country's next President hit me with full force. I suppose the impact of it was quite powerful, for it put me soundly to sleep!

Next day I telephoned my father. I told him I had done quite well in my studies and that I would like to discuss my future with him. Would I come home, or did he happen to have business in London. I sensed that he had understood my deeper meaning, that I wanted to say to him things it would be unwise to say at home. He said he had business in London in connection with the Commonwealth, of which as you know our country is a proud member, and a few days later we were together. I took him to Regent's Park. I knew he would enjoy the plants and flowers. It is a beautiful place.

We talked as we walked, just as we had done at home, except that now we both talked completely freely. And we would pause frequently to rest on one of the many park benches. It was a beautiful sunny day. Looking back I see that I had become an adult, and that I and my father were talking as equals.

Father brought me up to date with family and home affairs, and I told him what had led me to London and the LSE – the meeting in Madrid and the perception it had given me of my country, both its reality and its potentiality. I told him of all the things I had learned. I saw that he was impressed, and I now see that he was impressed not only with my knowledge, much of which was new to him, but also with my maturity and obvious conviction. I know that I spoke confidently and with selfassurance.

I said I really wanted to go back and help my country. He said wanting is good, but was I truly ready? The destiny of a nation is like a powerful horse, and if you do not hold the reins firmly, giving clear directions, you will soon lose control and find yourself heading for disaster.

I replied that our sessions in the attic had, as I had then come to realize, taken me through countless simulations of reality, setting out with this or that good intention, then much like a party board-game, encountering wild cards in the form of unexpected problems with which my friends would challenge my plans and ideals.

When I had said all I had to say my father fell silent for a long time, what seemed like a very long time. But I was not impatient. We both had a lot to think about.

Then at last he spoke. He said that the President was becoming more reclusive and more despotic, and that the living conditions of the people were going from bad to worse. Indeed he feared that some kind of disorder would soon break out.

He looked at me and said ‘at the very worst, we have nothing to lose.’ ‘And at best?’ I wondered aloud. He looked at me and smiled. ‘At best, Son, you will make us all proud, me, your family, and your country’.

And so my future appeared set on its course, though the outcome was by no means clear. Would I ever become my country’s President, or would I and many others die in the process of revolution? And if I did become President, would I make things better, or myself become as corrupt as my predecessor?

Chapter Four: The French Connection

So Father returned home, and wheels were set in motion. But things would not happen quickly. My father had warned me that his belief in me as future President of our country would need to be put to his colleagues carefully and diplomatically. They would need to be assured that this was not simply a power play by our own family – though neither he nor I would seriously expect that sort of reaction.

Then, once Father’s group had become accustomed to the idea and got themselves behind it, a plan would need to be formulated, and an opportunity then awaited for its safe and certain execution – as certain as could be possible in the circumstances. And while I waited, I would be the guest of our ambassador in Paris. This was for several reasons. My father trusted him – they were very old friends and understood one another deeply. Also the ambassador had substantial financial means, so I would not be a burden. And finally, I could get home from Paris much more quickly than from London; though flying times were identical and both journeys involved two changes, those on the London-based flights involved much longer waiting times between connections.

Our ambassador in France was a very jolly chap, unashamedly rotund, full of good humour and bonhomie, who possessed and knew how to enjoy the good things of life. We knew and liked one another. In my playboy days he had said he envied me. As I became more serious, we enjoyed talking economics and politics, and we became great chess partners. The ambassador’s wife was charming, vivacious, and very French – which in fact she was. She wore expensive clothes and jewellery which she carried with considerable aplomb. When she entered a room she would be noticed at once, though she never sought or attracted attention. The couple enjoyed going about together, and were well known and welcomed in the best establishments.

How did he manage it? Well, I learned his story from a mutual friend several years later.

He had been ambassador for very many years. In those early days, diplomatic staff actually got paid. And property prices were cheap. The ambassador purchased a small holiday home outside Paris where he could entertain his lady friends – not to deceive his wife for she knew, and she entertained gentlemen callers herself – but rather to avoid diplomatic scandal. It was a modest cottage, out in the wilds with nothing much around. Then came the motorway age, and with it the craze for out-of-town hypermarkets. And suddenly the ambassador’s modest cottage was in demand by the development agency and its powerful clients.

The ambassador’s one and only neighbour came to him in some distress, saying he had been subjected to unspecified pressures and that he had been compelled to sell very cheaply and move out at once. He intimated that the ambassador would receive a visit shortly and departed wringing his hands and bemoaning his fate.

The ambassador did in fact receive a visit soon after, but he was not to be fobbed off with a pittance. He knew how critical his property was, set as it was right in the middle of the development site. He quoted his price – quite outlandishly high – then threatened a ‘diplomatic incident’ if any kind of unseemly pressure were to be exerted.

The long and the short of it was that the ambassador did not get his price – he never expected to – but he came out of it extremely well indeed. He purchased a delightful mini-mansion in a quiet side street of Paris known only to the cognoscenti, and rented it back to his Foreign Affairs Ministry – though of course no rent has been paid for years. In this idyllic spot, set in its modest, semi-tropical garden surrounded by a whitewashed wall, the ambassador gives private lessons in ‘social deportment’ while his wife teaches French and the cello in which she is highly proficient. The pupils come from upper-crust families, partly for the lessons all of which are expertly delivered, but also for the prestige of passing through the gates over which is mounted the grand coat-of-arms and pictorial emblems of a country which didn’t even know it had one. Indeed as I later learned, it was the ambassador himself who had commissioned this design from an artist friend who had seized with great enthusiasm the challenge of representing a nation in instant heraldry. The

ambassador had also personally designed the spectacular ceremonial outfit which he would wear when, in the company of other diplomats, he would attend various State Functions – of which there seemed to be many.

My days there were full of contentment. I suppose I knew it was the lull before the storm and felt instinctively that I should make hay while the sun was still shining. It was summer, the garden was wonderful, a tranquil retreat from the world. The Baron, for so he preferred to be addressed, though with what degree of authenticity I neither knew nor asked, seemed to be aware that ‘something might happen’ and that with any luck I would be involved in our joint country’s future. I suppose my father would have given him some hint. They seemed to trust one another fully. In any case, the Baron was a fairly safe bet for such confidences as he once swore to me with all sincerity that he would ‘never, ever go back’. Paris was now his home, a place where, one had to admit, he had everything going for him. Anyway, being thus conversant, he perceptively ensured that I had any books that I might require, and that I was given ample opportunity for quiet study and reflection. A well-read man with an enquiring mind, he kept me up to scratch by prompting discussions on how to improve conditions in an imaginary poor and resource-less country. I also read, and re-read, the files of copious notes I had with foresight taken during our attic sessions.

We three, the Baron, his wife and myself, breakfasted together, in the garden, on the terrace, or in the plant-filled conservatory depending on the weather. We would start with polite enquiries as to health and how one had slept, then a little light conversation, before we all immersed ourselves in the several newspapers and journals delivered to the house. The Baron once informed me with a twinkle in his eye that many newspapers and journals were delivered free to embassies and other ‘important places which are home to world leaders and policy-makers’. We exchanged knowing smiles at the very thought of our impoverished little country being included in such an august group.

It was the Baron’s custom to lunch daily with his wife in some fashionable establishment. Though often invited, and with all sincerity, I had never eaten in the middle of the day and preferred to retain that custom. Indeed I have never been a great eater. I would take a walk after breakfast, often repairing to a nearby park if it was warm and sunny, or perhaps to a favourite Café with a book which I would study over a cup of coffee. I would return in time to see the Baron and his wife departing for lunch, she all a-flutter with excitement as to whom they might see or meet and whether her dress was right for the occasion. I had been instructed by the ‘attic club’, for thus I had named our gatherings, to learn the art of public speaking, to which end I had purchased a course. It required me to spend an hour in front of a mirror each day delivering a discourse on a subject I would specify before commencing, and this I naturally preferred to do when no one was within earshot. With the Baron and his wife out lunching – the maid too was always sent home for her lunch break – I was able to pontificate in peace.

So the days of summer glided slowly by, my enjoyment of them always tempered by an underlying motivation, encouraged by the Baron, to keep myself ‘up to the mark’ and ready at any moment to receive ‘the call’. In early autumn however, perhaps perceiving that the constant stress of waiting was becoming a little wearing for me, the Baron suddenly informed me that I was invited to stay a few days with an old friend of his in Vichy.

How would I get there – and back if the call came while I was away? The Baron had it all worked out. He led me to a small door at the back of the villa and proudly rolled out a 1928 vintage 350cc Saroléa motorcycle, complete with leather flying helmet and goggles, assuring me that the machine was fully insured and currently licensed in the name of the Embassy (complete with CD plates!), adding that ‘she goes like the wind, especially if you keep your head well down’. I packed a small overnight bag, and with some trepidation prepared for the ‘off’. I donned the leather flying helmet, assured by the Baron that it was well padded and if stopped by the police for not having a ‘proper’ helmet I could simply claim diplomatic immunity. So the four of us, Baron, wife, motorcycle and self, went out into the quiet street, the Baron’s wife reprimanding her husband in hoarse whispers for thus exposing his charge to certain *danger de mort*, the Baron trying to assure her that I was ‘young and strong’. The Baron’s wife embraced me fondly and tearfully, the Baron shook my hand, then with a good push from behind I was off. Vichy next stop – provided I kept my nerve and my balance, and had no disagreements with other motorists along the way.

I was graciously received in Vichy by the Baron’s friends, an elderly French couple who hastened to assure me of their full awareness that I might have to return to Paris with all speed. We enjoyed refreshments together, after which I went out for a walk, enjoying the temporary freedom from the atmosphere in Paris, realizing then that wonderful though it was, a tension of anticipation was ever-present. Here it seemed far away – though in reality of course, I was as much on call as ever.

Vichy, previously known to me only as a name on bottles of expensive water, proved to be a once-fashionable spa-town whose now somewhat faded glory created that relaxing atmosphere found in tranquil places which fashion has all-but abandoned. It being autumn, the remaining stalwart visitors had gone home, and the faded white-wood chairs scattered about the park evoked settings for a play after the actors had left. Here, there would be a circle of chairs representing a group of friends, discussing their treatment perhaps, or the current news headlines, while over there, two chairs very

close together brought to mind thoughts of a *tête-à-tête*, perhaps a couple long-married and now renewing their commitment to one another. I was then, as now, an incurable romantic!

I selected a lone seat under a tree in the avenue of chestnuts, and looking down contemplated the red, yellow, brown and rust-coloured leaves, a carpet to which the gentle warm breeze constantly provided new additions. There's something about autumn – the warm breezes, perhaps spots of rain and darkening skies, the autumn colours – which has always evoked a strange emotion in me. Ever since I can remember, this has been my favourite time, my special time.

Why, I wondered. Did I possess some kind of foresight? Was it to be an autumn revolution? I wandered back to my temporary home, to be greeted at the gate by my hosts in a state of some agitation, he having brought out my motor-bike which stood ready on its stand, my bag strapped to the carrier, his wife proffering a thermos flask of tea and a packet of sandwiches. So much for that relaxing break!

I had always thought I was keeping myself up to the mark, ready at any moment to go and face my destiny, cool, calm and collected. James Bond, suave and relaxed even as he faces death at the hands of his arch-enemies. But when I got back to Paris and found that I was to fly home early next day I fear I was totally devastated and almost went into shock. I will always be grateful for the Baron, whose understanding yet firm guidance got me quickly back on track and ready for what might come – well sort-of ready anyway.

My father had telephoned to say that Mother was unwell, and although it was not serious, she would very much like to see her dear son again as I had, after all, been away for some considerable time. This was, of course, an innocently sounding pre-arranged signal, from which I knew that plans were laid and ready for execution, and that I should be present during whatever happened so as to be on hand at once should 'whatever was to happen' succeed. It was considered unwise to have an inter-regnum. If the revolution did in fact succeed, whatever was to follow should follow at once, with no delay.

And so I bade a very fond well to my host and hostess and prepared to set forth full of trepidation for my homeland.

The Baron shook my hand firmly. Looking into my eyes he told me quietly to 'be strong'. I knew what he meant and his words did indeed give me strength.

His wife, meanwhile, had once again burst into tears. '*Au revoir, mon jeune cavalier*' she cried, waving her lace handkerchief somewhat melodramatically as my taxi pulled away.

While residing in Paris I had written to Dr Roberts at the address he had given me in Greece. My letter to him was very short. 'If I am called to do what I have been preparing to do, and if I need advice at any time, may I call upon you for counsel?'

His reply came much more quickly than I would have expected and his message was even terser than mine to him. 'You bet!' was all it said.

Yet that hand-written half-sheet of paper was worth everything to me at that moment of departure. I kept it in my wallet with my passport and air ticket, and as I sat in the train heading for the airport I took it out and held it tightly, feeling somehow the strength and re-assurance of the Attic Club fully behind me. I remembered the long talks, the friendly advice, the warm atmosphere of camaraderie, and felt strengthened.

As I presented myself at the check-in desk I could feel myself standing proudly, fully ready for what the future might hold. I remember smiling to myself as I realized that my future at that moment held considerably more promise of triumph or disaster than that of any of the other passengers crowding the departure hall.

And so I returned home. Everything seemed normal. So it should of course. My father said nothing. It was only later, in the safety of a post-revolutionary environment, that the full story would be told to me.

Chapter Five: The Revolution

During his journey home after our meeting in Regent's Park, my father's mind had been full of possible plans and wild schemes. But once he was back at home on his own soil, practical minutiae were to occupy his attention.

Fortunately, as I believe I have already mentioned, I, that is my father's son as he would see it, was really the only possible candidate. His colleagues knew that. They had also been kept somewhat informed as to my studies and seriousness of disposition. So at least there would be no acrimony arising from the choice of heir to the presidency. One major problem immediately presented itself: communication. They could hardly hold regular conspiratorial meetings, the blinds drawn and servants sent home early. In any case, Number One, the Supreme Commander and father's superior, indicated that although he would certainly not oppose any plans for a 'regime change' as I believe it is currently known, he did not wish either to be involved or to be informed. Clearly he was covering his options!

The other four members of my father's 'club' had little to offer and indicated that they would be happy to leave the planning to him. That it was Father's Son and family who would reap any supposed glory was a consideration tactfully left unsaid. In fact my father was happier that way, communication being the major danger. In addition, planning 'by committee' can easily turn into a minefield. But the fact remained that he was left holding the baby, as it were.

The problem was not the President. He was by then so feeble that the mere sniff of revolution would surely have given him a fatal heart attack – a few of us were in fact 'in the know' that the president had serious heart problems brought on mainly by the combination of fear, stress, over-eating and lack of exercise. His doctor was, after all, a neighbour and close friend. But the president still knew how to treat his Palace Guard with that special mixture of rewards and threats which guaranteed his continuance in office. The Guard was in fact the problem: the elite, well equipped, well paid and well fed Palace Guard. They were only sixteen in number, but their hold over power and the people was absolute. How to deal with them was the key challenge, one which seemed to offer no solution.

Father has always believed, as indeed do I and most sincerely so, that if something is good and right and meant to be, then one's spiritual guides will provide intuitive instructions, and the fates will provide the opportunity. One only needs to keep an open mind and watch for the right signs. And indeed that is partly how it came to pass, or at least one can say, events provided opportunity.

The key player turned out to be our gatekeeper. He was devotedly faithful to my family – 'you have always been polite to me' he had once said, after which my attention was frequently drawn to the rudeness with which other residents treated him. My father had always taught me that I should treat everyone with respect. He did so himself, and I suppose I learned by example.

The gatekeeper provided a vital liaison to two other key players. One was our 'mole' as I believe it's called, among the Palace Guard. While the rest of them were loyal to the President as long as he treated them royally, our contact mole would never either forgive or forget that the President, in his younger days, had taken a liking to the man's daughter, defiled her, then kept her for two years in his palace and at his disposal until she killed herself. Personally in his place I would not forgive or forget either. Thus our mole was a man who would indeed delight in betraying the President and seeing him overthrown.

The other key player was an aging cavalier, a somewhat decrepit Don Quixote hiding out in the mountains with a motley band of farmers who had been forced off their lands. It was his great dream, the total and unquestionable viability of which he somehow managed to convince both himself and his 'troops', was that he would one day ride into town in a tank – or other armoured vehicle unspecified – at the head of his troops, to liberate his country from oppression and magically make everyone rich. Of course he had no tank, though he had managed to get hold of three US Army Jeeps which had come over when the great air base was being planned – as I had previously mentioned.

So. From our mole in the Palace Guard we heard that there was trouble brewing. The Guard had for several years been permitted to take charge of the importation of gifts of food, medical supplies etc from the outside world. Of course that gave them license to take whatever they wanted then sell off the rest. But the aid agencies had become aware, and were getting tired of this, and donations were drying up. Thus also was the Guards' source of wealth. And now in compensation, emboldened by the President's weakening condition, they were demanding some of the President's personal goodies – which of course the President flatly refused to share. The President's problem was that his 'goodies' came in through the harbour, over which the Guards also had control.

This situation provided just the opening my father needed. Through the gatekeeper and our mole, Father launched the rumour that the President was secretly plotting a major personal delivery by helicopter, which would land in the mountains, the booty then being brought down in innocent farm trucks disguised as fruit and vegetable deliveries. As a little mouthwatering jam on the cake, so to speak, a list was provided of the expected contents: several large hampers of exotic foods from Harrods, a quantity of assorted jewellery (the President had a large collection of expensive watches, cufflinks and the like), and a few parcels of high-value Swiss banknotes. The Guards of course fell for it, mouths already watering at the prospect of hi-jacking the delivery just as Father had hoped they would do. Of course it never occurred to them in their greed and enthusiasm, to enquire who got the information and where it came from. So they were in no way

suspicious. The rumour had already provided the location of the drop and subsequent route into town, so that they could plan their ambush in advance. All they wanted was to be told the day and time of the helicopter delivery.

Meanwhile Father had gone into the mountains to view his 'estate'. Farmers on the best hill lands had been roughly dispossessed and their lands given to the President's influential friends and supporters, or to those whom he feared. Few had bothered to interest themselves beyond boasting about 'my country estate in the mountains'. Of late however many had begun to employ farm labour to bring back the land into cultivation. These were mostly government employees who were no longer getting any pay. So my Father's little expedition aroused no suspicion.

Well into the wilds and making sure no one was within sight, Father turned off on an almost invisible dirt track. He knew where to find Don Quixote's band of willing rebels and he was expected, for the gatekeeper had managed to send word through one of his relatives in a nearby mountain village. Father was received with open arms upon arrival at the camp, and led into a rough shelter by The General, for thus he styled himself. His title was 'for the benefit of the troops', the General had explained to Father apologetically, for Father would have surely known if a genuine General had absconded into the wilds. The two men sat drinking tea from chipped enamel mugs and Father laid out his plan. When the full impact hit him, the old General roared out loud, slapping his thigh with amusement and the anticipation of fulfilling his dream at last.

The plan was simple. Indeed Father always believed that the simpler a plan, the more the likelihood of its succeeding. Upon the given day, the General would bring out his Jeeps and commandeer a couple of trucks from local farmers who would willingly help any anti-government plan. They would set forth at the given hour – the General was told this, but not the Palace Guard as yet – along the specified route. The two trucks would be full of concealed 'troops', armed with farm implements and whatever else they could get hold of. The Jeeps would follow at a discrete distance. When the Palace Guard surrounded the convoy, thinking that they had successfully ambushed a wealth of presidential booty, the General's troops would leap out of the covered trucks screaming wildly and inflict their worst on their unsuspecting victims – Father, perhaps wisely, left further detail unspoken.

At ten minutes past nine of the evening on the appointed day, the Palace Guard mole received news that the drop would take place within the hour, informing the rest of the Guard accordingly. Of course panic set in. The Guard, well sated after their usual large evening meal accompanied by a goodly intake of presidential wine, grabbed their pistols and jackets, dashed out into the yard and almost falling over themselves in the process, rushed off with a roar on their expensive BMW motorcycles. For a few moments the sleepy town was deafened by the passing motorcade, then they were gone, speeding like maniacs into the mountains.

The Guard took up their positions at the location they had planned for the ambush of the convoy. Father had heard of it through the mole and had passed word to The General. It was an ideal location. The convoy would pass over a narrow river bridge then begin to climb a steep hill. As they did so the old farmers' trucks, notorious for their lack of maintenance, would surely be slowing right down, an ideal target for an ambush. Lush growth on each side provided cover.

The convoy was late. Father had planned it that way. Keep the Guard waiting for half an hour to make them itchy and impatient, perhaps even questioning the truth of the whole story.

Then the waiting ambushers saw dim lights winding down the road towards the bridge, and they heard the rumble of ancient trucks, their engines occasionally missing a beat or two.

The trucks crossed the bridge – no sign of the Jeeps – and slowed down as their tired old engines grappled with the upcoming hill. Suddenly in their dim headlights the unsuspecting drivers – they had not been told the full story for fear of frightening them off – were confronted with a line of uniformed men aiming their pistols at them. The lead truck stopped abruptly with the following truck almost hitting it from the rear. The Guardsmen motioned the drivers to get out with their hands up and lie face down on the ground by the road which they did with all speed.

The Guards' plan had been to have the trucks continue at once to the Fire Station. The Fire Engine itself was always parked outside, the interior being used to store the Guards' booty. However in the event, one of them shouted 'Let's see what we've got!' and they all rushed eagerly to uncover and gloat over the contents. As they threw back the covering tarpaulins however, it was the General's troops that came leaping out screaming wildly as instructed. The Jeeps meanwhile, the General standing up precariously in US Army fashion, had closed the bridge to cut off any attempts at escape by motorcycle. Armed only with pitchforks and sickles the General's troops made the most of what they had and with surprise and enthusiasm on their side they rapidly decimated the Guardsmen without a single casualty to themselves.

Father had promised, perhaps rashly but he had to give them some incentive, that they, the General's happy band would, if their endeavors succeeded, become the new Palace Guard – or sixteen of them anyway. Being canny farmers with a

distinct eye for opportunity, they had all managed to dispatch the Guardsmen in such a way that their uniforms were not damaged – I apologize, Mr Harvey, for the rather gruesome picture this must conjure up, and hasten to assure you that a decent burial was organized the very next day.

I think in all fairness to the Revolutionaries I should insert a very brief story here. A teenage boy stole one of the Palace Guards' BMW motorbikes and gave them a good chase into the hills. He ended up in his village, riding back and forth along the short street. The people came out and were cheering. The Guards caught up with him, shot into the villagers at random, then set fire to their barns. People were killed and the fire spread, leaving many homeless. Some of the village men disappeared into the hills and joined the General's band. So there were scores to settle. Violence breeds violence. Forgiveness is easily preached, but not so easily practiced.

As another important 'aside', the Australians had at some time made us a much-needed and very practical gift of several telephone kiosks which were dotted about our island in strategic places mainly for emergency communication. They had little radio dishes on top and could transmit messages to our central exchange. The Australians were canny with their charity. They gave gifts which were practical and useful, and more importantly, they delivered and installed them themselves so that nothing would be 'lost' on the way.

One such telephone installation was situated at the intersection of two country roads, serving two small farming communities, and it was on the route which the revolutionaries would take when returning home. It was arranged that the General would telephone my father giving him one of two coded messages: either the operation had gone according to plan, or it hadn't. When my father picked up the phone – he confessed his hand was trembling – the first thing he heard was the almost deafening sound of BMW motorcycles revving loudly outside the phone box. The General had to shout his message, and it was not in the pre-arranged code. He simply shouted excitedly: 'the Palace Guard are all dead. You have a new one and we're heading into town. I want the people lining the streets. And the street lights must be on. Thank you.'

So! The General wanted a triumphal entry! But that could be a problem. He had been told specifically to come in quietly. The revolution was to be a controlled event. Wild demonstrations and general mayhem would have set us off to a bad start. In any case, it was late at night, and a politically weary population would surely not respond to being awakened by a revolution. Father had to think quickly. He telephoned his 'Gang of Six' to tell them, in code of course, that the operation had been a success, adding an instruction to one of the younger members that he should drive out immediately to meet the General's motorcade and, without detracting from his triumphal entry, insist that it be silent. My father did however switch on the street lights – such as they were – a few 40 watt light bulbs dangling precariously from sporadically located poles. We had no timer or photocells of course; the lights were all switched on from our gatekeeper's cabin, and only for a few hours each night, sufficient electricity permitting.

My Father, with myself and the remainder of his group, then drove towards the Palace, where we waited in a side street near the Palace. As the General's motorcade approached – mercifully without horns sounding! – our car pulled out in front of them. So it was that in the quiet of night a strange convoy of three Jeeps, the General standing in the lead vehicle of course, waving to imaginary crowds, followed by two farm trucks, and a line of motorcycles driven by what appeared to be drunken Guardsmen – farmers who could barely ride a bicycle – with my father's car in the lead, drove through the quiet main street and pulled up at the Palace Gate. The guard at the gate of course knew my father's car and opened at once, my father leaning out of the window to thank him as he always did.

Once in the Palace forecourt, Father's group moved into action as pre-planned. One member conducted the 'new' Guardsmen to their quarters, where they were formally disarmed. Father didn't want the Palace itself vandalized by the General's forces in the moment of their Triumph, nor did he want the President maltreated. That was not Father's style. However there was little protest at this, for the General's men were far too impressed at the thought of taking up residence in such luxury – remember that only hours ago they had been outcasts living rough. Now they were 'official' and members of the Palace Staff. Another member of Father's group roused the three cooks and told these startled functionaries to produce a hearty meal for the Guard as fast as possible, with plenty of watered-down wine.

I was told to wait in the Stateroom where the President received the occasional foreign dignitaries crazy or misinformed enough to call on him. My father went up with his Number One to the top floor where the President had his private suite. Neither Father nor his commanding officer relished the task of informing the President of his demise. In the event however, this was not necessary. The President, mercifully perhaps, was to be found dead in the Presidential Bedchamber. One of the President's personal maids who was sobbing with fright outside the door told how the President, hearing the Guardsmen leaving, had feared the worst. He had called for attention, the maid had come in and served him a Brandy as he requested, then left.

She thought she heard the sound of a glass crashing to the floor and peeping through the door, saw the President lying motionless, half falling out of his bed. And that was that. A doctor was called to certify death. Next day the undertaker would be instructed to lay him to rest in the undertaker's small private chapel before committing him to the earth after

three days, all without ceremony. Not that he was being denied for denial's sake, but rather to avoid any kind of spontaneous demonstrations or violence. The President had indeed become very unpopular, and that's putting it very, very mildly.

My father returned from the President's suite and threw open the double doors of the Stateroom. 'The President is dead', he said. 'Long live the President'. That was 'it'. Suddenly, I was 'on'. During our last meeting in London, my father had made one point absolutely clear to me. It was a matter of demarcation. He would take charge of the coup. But once it was successfully accomplished, the ex-President either dead or in captivity and the Palace Guard somehow subdued, it would be up to me. Father and his colleagues would obey my orders. But I would be in charge. Yes. I was to be the Number One from that moment on.

Father had done a brilliant job. As in the art of Judo, he had harnessed two potentially explosive forces: on the one hand, the discontent of the Palace Guards, and on the other, the General and his Merry Men impatient to make their own revolution.

His plan was simple, brilliantly and precisely executed. He had set the stage. But now the revolution would really begin. Revolution in its etymological sense of a turning round, from oppression to liberty, from decline to growth, from hopelessness to the prospect of a decent future. This was My Revolution. And I was fully prepared.

Chapter Six: Drama at the Palace Gates

During my period in London and my sessions with the Attic Club, one rather fun individual who often popped in was a gentleman the others called 'our Professor of Revolution'. He was, in fact, Research Professor for the Study of Developing Nations. His remit covered their economies and politics. However as he pointed out, their economies were generally nonexistent and their politics a dictatorial disaster, their on-going poverty punctuated only by the periodic revolutions which served only to replace one brutal and incompetent dictatorship with another. I had been forewarned that he was somewhat cynical, but he defended himself by challenging anyone to do his job and remain an optimist, a challenge which quickly silenced his critics among our group!

For me, however, his contribution to my political/economic education was one of the more significant. He gave me several essential pointers for a successful revolution.

First of course, the revolution itself must be meticulously planned and expeditiously carried out. A President who is being ousted for his totalitarian brutality will hardly treat attempted coups with leniency.

But the Professor then stressed that what comes after a successful revolution is equally important, for if there is no post-revolution planning in place for immediate operation, the whole effort will be ruined.

It is absolutely vital that there be no inter-regnum, no visible power vacuum. If the people get wind that their evil President is dead and his cruel, hated henchmen disbanded, then yes of course there will be immediate rejoicing in the streets. But if clear signs of effective law enforcement are not present, many emotions will be let loose: vengeance, greed, and fear. Poor people will expect instant riches, and they will seek vengeance against those whom they perceive as oppressors or exploiters, while those who had been in superior positions will fear for their status and indeed their lives. Looting will follow, first the shops and supermarkets, then, of course, the greatest prize of all: the Presidential Palace. Crowds will storm the gates, force their way in, and leave with anything that is remotely removable. It's all happened many times before.

These reactions must be anticipated. Law and order must be seen to continue without a break. And the public must be assured that while there will be neither retribution nor instant wealth, a new era has begun in which government will be honest and competent, and things will slowly improve. If possible a dramatic gesture would help, for example, freeing any political prisoners, and declaring total freedom of the press.

That is what I had learned, and that was the stuff of my post-revolutionary planning.

So. The Palace Guard was new and open to my orders. For the meantime, they were sleeping after their midnight adventures and a large much-needed meal. Even The General was happily quiescent. The President was dead, and I was the new President. My father and his colleagues awaited my orders.

I sent for the television crew. They resided in an annex of the Palace, where they also had their main studio. The Press can't get much more controlled than that! In any case, since most of the programming emanated from the Palace, that seemed a good place for them.

When they arrived, partly dressed and rubbing their eyes, I told them that yes, it's one-thirty a.m. But there's been a regime change. You have a new President, a new boss, and we have news to tell the people. I told them we would tape a recording which would be shown at 7 a.m. that morning, and probably fairly continuously throughout the day on the ancient TV sets – rich country cast-offs – spread around the Cafés and public places.

The producer and senior chap was an astute man, who had retained his job because he had the sense to know what the President wanted, then given it to him in large quantities. Seeing one of my father's high-ranking colleagues standing behind me, he quickly caught the situation and asked, businesslike, what would be the subject-matter and how long it would it run for. To the first question I replied that we'd make up the script as we went along based on an outline in my mind. To the second question I replied that we will know how long it is when we finish it.

Fortunately I think we clicked straight away. I liked his open professionalism, and as he later told me, his immediate impression of myself had been very positive. And anyway, he was looking forward to doing some creative television. He had been sent as a student to the BBC in London for a year, only to return to filming endless diatribes by the President, sitting in the same pose at the same huge desk, the camera never permitted to move during takes. The only breaks from this monotony had come when the President 'went among his people' – at high speed surrounded by a motorcade – or during the odd state visit by anyone crazy enough, or wanting something from us badly enough, to brave the lion's den (the world had come to know our President as the devil incarnate fairly early in his career). Recently however, the President had rarely if ever ventured out.

Our nation was still sleeping, blissfully unaware of the changes that had taken place. And meanwhile we embarked on assembling the message they would see on their television screens when they awoke.

Once again, as I would do often in the following weeks especially, I returned to the memories and lessons of the Attic Club. Lesson One: there must be no power vacuum, no break in the authority of law, or there will be chaos. Two: let it be known that things will improve, but that reforms must be done carefully and over time. Three: if possible, find a dramatic act or event to symbolize a new era.

And so we began. We started in the President's Study, in that well-known room, myself seated at the well-known desk. The video would start with the national anthem as always, then the title 'A message from the President'. But instead of white titles on a black background bearing the silhouette of the President's head, the titles would be in dark green superimposed on the national flag. The people must know straight away, that something was different.

Sitting at The Desk, as filming began I slowly removed the framed portraits of the President in different poses and uniforms which had adorned his desk, facing the camera of course, and put them away in the drawers. I then rose slowly and turning, took the framed oil-painted portrait of the President which hung behind me and turned it to the wall. Sitting down again I smiled briefly at the camera.

'No, your eyes are not deceiving you. There has been a change of government. I am your new President. It is my intention to serve you.

'My first request to you is that you remain calm. Changes will come, but within the proper bounds of law and order. My promise is that from this moment, there need be no more fear among you. I will work to make life better, not just for the rich, not just for the poor, but for all of us. A country is like a machine. It can be operated badly and it will not work. But if it is operated properly by those who know and understand it, then it can produce everything it is designed to do. I have studied the sciences of politics, of liberty, of money, of agriculture, of how to create the conditions in which we can all work and prosper. This is how I intend to serve you and my country.'

That was my opening. Alright, so it was corny! But in the event, ordinary people understood it, and I think were reassured by it. Then would come the 'dramatic event' I felt was needed. And here I'm afraid we enter a somewhat darker area.

There had been political prisoners, you see. The Palace had started life as a Governor's Residence in our colonial days, and attached is a walled stable yard with its eight stalls for the horses used on formal parades, placed around an exercise area. The yard was always gated of course, and with the simple addition of barbed wire it made a secure prison. There were sixty-two prisoners, crammed into the eight stalls each designed for one horse. Indeed, one of the stalls still had a horse as a permanent resident – a relic from the President's younger days in office. The prisoners, I fear, were in

desperate condition when I visited them straight after filming the Desk Speech episode. They were under-fed, dirty, dressed in scant rags. It was quite terrible.

But this was the 'gesture' I wanted, I saw that straight away. Of course they would all be released at once, no question of that. But it was the gesture I needed to reassure the people. I sent two of the palace servants out into town, telling them to wake the town's six barbers and bring them quickly to the palace stables. It was two in the morning remember, and these poor fellows would have no knowledge of the regime change or the reason for their apparent abduction. But we had no time to waste, not a moment to lose.

Six chairs were brought from the Palace and placed in a row at one end of the yard. Six prisoners were brought out and seated, one on each chair. The barbers arrived and were told to shave the men and cut their dirty matted hair. The barbers approached their task with obvious and indeed natural distaste, but, still ignorant of the regime-change, they did as they were told, perhaps even wondering if these poor wretches were being groomed for some gruesome public execution. That could well have been a natural assumption under my predecessor.

As each group of six was finished, six more replaced them, while those who had been shaved and shaven were taken to the other end of the compound where the drain was located, stripped of their rags, and given a preliminary hosing down. Then each was given soap and told to wash thoroughly before being hosed again as a rinse.

They then went into the changing room attached to the stable yard where they were given palace towels – bearing the presidential monogram! – with which to dry off. Finally they were kitted out with clean clothing.

And their clothing is a story in itself.

Two years previously we had experienced a bad flood. Many were rendered homeless, and among other gifts from the international community were bundles of clean used clothing. Of course this was immediately seized by the Palace Guard and taken to their lair in the Fire Station. It had been their intention to sell these clothes to the unfortunate flood victims. But they heard word that second-hand, obviously used and worn jeans, preferably with a few tears in the legs, were now the height of fashion in California, with the rest of the western world fast catching on. They contacted a store chain in USA who would buy these goods – they wanted them sorted and packed with sizes clearly marked: small/medium/large for sweaters and shirts, waist and inside leg sizes for trousers and jeans. And that is how they were brought from the Fire Station, ready for our ex-prisoners to wear after having been quickly measured.

After an hour we had sixty-two fairly presentable ex-prisoners ready for release – but it was still only three in the morning. They obviously couldn't go back to sleeping on filthy hay in the stable stalls, so, by now thoroughly bewildered, they were led into the palace State Room and told to lie out on the floor to rest as best they could. Not a very appetizing bed for such as yourself, Mr Harvey. But for them it was warm and dry. And most fell asleep fairly quickly. At six a.m. they were to be woken and given a hearty breakfast in the same State Room, seated at the long State Dining Table. Only then, clean, decently clothed, rested and fed would they be told of their impending release.

I had expected, when I later told them what had happened, to be deafened by a loud cheer. In the event however, they looked at me, silent, doubting, hardly knowing what to make of it all.

But I am jumping ahead. While the washing ceremony was going on, we woke the Palace Guard – the new Guard of country peasants you will recall – and had them smarten themselves up then form a proper line in the Guardroom to parade before the camera. Once we had got them looking reasonably tidy and well-disciplined, we filmed them first as a group, as the voice-over told that there was now a new Palace Guard to go with the new President. It would surely not escape the audience's notice, that the hated black reflective glasses, almost more deadly in their appearance than weapons, were noticeably absent. The camera then panned along the two lines slowly, as each man gave his name, and the village he was from. Surely, this would be as clear a message as one could want, that the new Guard was nothing like the old.

Then we, I and cameraman, went into the stable yard and filmed the empty stalls. The voiceover told how sixty-two political prisoners, not one of them ever tried for any crime, had been incarcerated in abysmal conditions. 'The prisoners are prisoners no longer. But they would not want to rejoin their loved ones in the dirty condition in which they had been forced to live. So they have been given the opportunity to make themselves presentable and given proper food before their departure from prison'. We then took the camera into the Stateroom where the still bewildered prisoners were filmed after I had told them of their impending release.

When the filming was over, one of them boldly spoke up. 'You look like an honest gentleman, Sir,' he said to me. 'Tell us. Are we to be freed, or executed?' The others nodded agreement, and this insight into their state of mind shocked and

saddened me. 'You are to be released', I assured them. 'The prison will become a stable once again. And you will be able to speak freely, as will all our people'. Even then, I fear, their expressions told me that they still doubted their fate.

That was the end of the video, save for an announcement by me in the Stateroom with the ex-prisoners behind me, that 'All political prisoners will be released unconditionally this morning at eleven a.m.' The video was to be shown at seven a.m. and at nine a.m. The delay was to allow people to come down from the villages, especially the relatives of prisoners, for while there were tv sets scattered about the town in coffee houses and public places, so none need miss the President's homilies of course, there were few in the country. Indeed, the provision of any kind of tv network, together with accompanying sets, is yet another story.

It was the good old Aussies again. Splendid chaps! They equipped the studio, put up cable links to the Cafés and tea-houses in town and several private homes, then arranged to broadcast to receiving stations in each village. They even put in relay stations in the hills to serve some valleys. A large dish-aerial on one of our higher hilltops received programmes from a number of world sources, including the BBC World News. Then they gave us a lot of outdated sets – though they were miracles to our people. So all in all we did quite well. That was in the rosy days before the President began to use television as a vehicle of self-propaganda, and latterly a means of oppression.

A visitor to any of the villages after dark would have been quite surprised. There they all are, the whole village, children on the dirt floor, adults on their own chairs behind, sitting under a shelter staring with rapt attention at a tv set on a high stand, showing a speech from Our Great Leader or some odd videos given us by the Australians – unofficially of course – of an assortment of British comedies and even a couple of 'I Love Lucy' shows. They simply went for a night out – that was all there was. They liked the colours. Even the Presidential videos became odd in the latter days. His studio would simply pull a box off the shelf. One day it might be the state funeral of the President's wife, next it might be their marriage – though in fact it was known unofficially that his wife couldn't stand him. They slept in separate rooms. Even more unofficially, the President was not capable...

So. We've had a revolution, a complete change of regime, all while the nation slept, so to speak, with a video ready and set to roll at 7 a.m.

As planned, the video went out, and apparently it was greeted generally with cautious interest in town. But by nine o'clock, people were beginning to come in from the villages. The buses would come into town, discharge their passengers, then race back for more. As time went on, the buses became fuller and fuller. They were home-made. Rickety contraptions built on old imported under-frames. They still are built here actually, but they're much better now. Quite stylish in fact. Anyway, into town they rolled, people crammed inside, sitting huddled on the roofs, kids hanging on the rails at the entrances. The buses were privately owned and operated. I remember thinking, the drivers will be making money today!

Meanwhile the Palace gardeners had a contraption rather like those used in warehouses to reach the higher shelves: a sort of scaffold structure on four wheels with steps going up to a small platform. They used it to pick the fresh seasonal fruit the President took for his breakfast. The Head Gardener was brought down from his tiny room in the attic under the roof and presented to me. I shook hands with him. It was an amicable meeting. He wheeled the contraption to the entrance gates, placing it in the drive, far enough back from the gates so that they could be opened inwards.

As the clock approached eleven, I could see from the palace windows, the crowds massing outside the palace gates. They were peaceful, yet there was a distinct mood of excitement and anticipation. My spies reported back to me you see!

At a few minutes before eleven I walked from the palace, down the straight drive to what was to become my pulpit by the gates. This itself was quite a novelty and gave a very clear signal: the ex-President had never gone anywhere without being surrounded by armed guards. I was wearing a plain darkish suit, and over it, the wide scarlet sash which had long been the symbol of the Presidential Office. I had eschewed the many gaudy uniforms which the ex-President had accumulated, each one designed by himself and hand-made by his tailor in Jermyn Street. As I mounted my pulpit and looked out ahead of me the whole of our tiny nation must have been there. The streets were full of people as far as the eye could see.

I spoke slowly and clearly into the microphone which had been set up, linked to two loudspeakers on the gate posts. I recall my words exactly.

'There has been a change of government. I am your new President. You have seen me on television. Now you can see me in person. Later today I will walk into town and will be happy to meet some of you. But right now, it is my pleasure and privilege to liberate our courageous fellow countrymen whose only crime was to desire something better for our country than our ex-President chose to provide.'

That was my pre-arranged signal, at which the released prisoners would walk slowly from the palace and down the drive in orderly fashion. I had told them, 'walk with pride!' They walked in twos, and as they came to my pulpit in the centre of the drive, they separated, passing one line on each side. The gardeners opened the gates slowly. I made breast-stroke swimming gestures to the crowd, calling upon them to make way. As the prisoners began to pass through the gates, the crowd obediently opening a way for them, I began to applaud, saying to the crowd, 'these men are our heroes who dared to oppose a cruel and repressive regime. We welcome them back to the land of liberty!'

The crowd went wild. Many of the prisoners' relatives had come early and taken up positions right by the gates. So straight away there were emotional reunions as families long separated were brought together again. Remember that many would have given up hope of ever seeing their imprisoned menfolk again.

I watched entranced from my pulpit. Tears came to my eyes until I could barely see. I have always regretted that our cameramen did not capture these moments. I stood there, enjoying and sharing the crowd's pleasure. It was their moment too.

As they become slowly quieter, I gave them a few serious words.

'We have all suffered hard times. But there must be no anger, no retribution, no vengeance. Our ex-President died of natural causes – he was already a sick man. His burial will be respectful, but without honours and only a brief ceremony. Now our country needs honest government: you will have it. Our country needs to grow, our people need to grow. We need jobs, we need employment. You will have it. We will replace oppression with collaboration. We can all prosper within our means. It is possible, and we will do it. I make these promises to you now.'

At this point the cheering and applause from the crowd became deafening. I realized that I had unleashed expectations. Now I had to deliver.

As the crowd calmed down once again, I finished, as I had planned to do, on a simple note, yet one which would send yet another clear signal. I held up my hands for silence. 'My friends', I said to them, 'the gates of the Palace are open, and from now on they will be open every day from morning until evening so that any citizen may stroll about and enjoy this beautiful park. I ask only that you don't all come at once! Otherwise the plants and flowers may be damaged. It is your park now. Please enjoy it.'

And that was it. For the moment. I strolled back to the Palace. The handymen wheeled 'the pulpit' round to the back of the Palace where it was stored. Reunited families returned to their homes to celebrate. Each of the prisoners had been given a sum of money to buy extra food or gifts for their families. Some of our more daring citizens accepted the invitation to enjoy the grounds, and began to pass cautiously through the gates.

I went back into the Palace, removed the Presidential Sash, took off my jacket and tie, rolled up my shirt-sleeves, and slipping out through a back gate in the surrounding wall I walked the short distance to our compound. The gate was opened for me by a tearful gatekeeper. He seized my hand warmly in both of his, then emboldened, he suddenly embraced me. He had known me since I was born. I returned the embrace. Normally protocol would never have permitted such a display. But this was a special time. 'You are our country's proudest son,' he said to me radiantly. I think he was proud himself, to be the guardian of the President's home. Once again, as I went into our house, I was reminded of expectations which must be fulfilled.

My mother embraced me emotionally. I think that, rather than any feelings of pride, she was simply glad I was safe. Father had slept late – much deserved after the events of the previous night. But both he and my mother had not been able to resist joining the crowds in town.

Shortly before 11 a.m. they had walked the short distance to a corner of the main street where we had friends who owned the town's largest tea-house and lived above it. Their upper terrace had a commanding view of the events which had taken place at the Palace gates.

Father embraced me warmly. 'Well, so far so good', he said, with a distinct and fully justified note of pride. 'What now, son?' he had asked me as we all settled down in our comfortable lounge for coffee and mother's home-made biscuits.

I told them that in the afternoon I would do what the Australians called a walkabout, meeting a few ordinary people, reassuring them that I was human. 'And after that?' Father asked, amid protests from mother that 'the poor boy needs to relax. Remember he was up all night too!'

'After my walkabout? I need to find out exactly what's been going on, in government, in financial matters.'

I looked at Father. He looked at me. ‘Ummm’ was all he replied. I suppose he had some idea of what I was in for and had a feeling it would probably be far worse than he or I could possibly imagine. Glad too that he was not in my shoes. And that was to prove pretty much on track, as I was to discover quite soon enough.

After allowing myself some time of relaxation, I prepared to go out on my Walkabout. I was keen to get it over, have an early night, and make an early, clean start next morning.

There followed some discussion as to what I should wear. Such things are important, especially for a first major appearance. The dark formal suit of that morning was not appropriate for an informal walkabout, but people must still know that I am their President. We settled on dark slacks, light blue shirt open at the neck, and my light cream linen jacket from Italy. I confess I was quite a spiffy dresser in those days!

That much was agreed. It only remained to decide whether the scarlet sash of office should be worn inside or outside the jacket. We settled for inside, with the jacket open. It allowed enough to show so that my position was announced without being too heavily asserted. So... thus togged up in my finery I strolled down the Palace driveway towards the gates, which were open remember. Already there were people strolling in the grounds. I smiled at them as I passed them and wished them Good Afternoon, to which they readily responded. It was as if we were all strolling along the prom-prom tiddley-om-pom in some Edwardian English seaside resort. Hard to believe that only one day ago this would have been unthinkable. I was happy, that the people seemed to have so readily accepted the change. Indeed, it all seemed to come unexpectedly naturally.

The town’s main street leads directly to and from the Palace Gates. Just in front of the gates another street runs at right angles. On the corner is the town’s main tea-house. Its large, partly covered terrace, raised a few steps higher than the pavement and surrounded by a low balcony rail, has a commanding view of the gates and the Palace itself. It was from the upper balcony that my parents had watched the morning’s proceedings, and it was this tea-house and its occupants which would be the first to greet their new President as he passed through the Gates.

And indeed, as I left the Palace Grounds I was immediately greeted from the tea-house opposite. The proprietor, an old friend of the family, noticed me as he was serving clients, and called over ‘Will you take a glass of tea Mister President?’

Indeed, apart from any considerations of duty which would have anyway suggested acceptance, I felt that at that very moment there was nothing I’d like better than a glass of hot, strong, sweet tea! As I mounted the few steps to the terrace, people reached out their hands to shake mine. I was feeling very moved, and I had to keep a strict hold on myself emotionally.

A man sitting in a prominent position next to the balcony rail stood up promptly. ‘Take my place, Mr President’, he said. I protested mildly, but he responded ‘if you sit here, Sir, the people will see you better.’ It seemed to make good sense. The Café crowd nodded and smiled at me. I wondered what they were thinking. I was soon to find out.

The gentleman sitting at the next table facing me leaned forward. ‘Excuse me Mr President’, he began hesitantly, ‘is our... old President really dead?’

Others sitting around nodded approval at what appeared to be a major issue on people’s minds. I answered ‘yes, he is.’

But this was not enough. ‘Will he be laid out... may we see him? Will there be a funeral? Will there be a public burial?’

Clearly the people wanted to see the man who had so oppressed their lives for so long firmly dead and buried. They wanted to see it with their own eyes.

Frankly it was not something I had anticipated. But no matter, their wishes could and would be fulfilled without any disruption of my plans for reconstruction. I told them that yes, the ex-President would lie in state in the Palace and open to public view. His burial would also be conducted in public. An announcement to that effect would be made before the end of the day.

As I moved on through the town, slowly making my way up the main street, people came out and began to cheer. I tried to speak to a few people but no one seemed to have anything specific to say, they were just glad that a long-endured tyranny had ended, and appeared to be convinced, for the moment, that the future would be better. Again I was reminded of the expectations I must fulfill.

I returned home through the narrow alleyways of the market which paralleled the main street. The traders are all very jolly chaps and I was jostled amicably and good-naturedly as I walked through the crowds. I had rarely ventured into the markets, and I remember being agreeably surprised at the breadth of goods on sale despite the near-impossible economic conditions then prevailing. It made me realize how ingenious and inventive, how enterprising people can be.

As I once more entered my home I felt encouraged. My country and its people were a strong and robust seedling. What they needed now was not to be trampled on, but to be given the right conditions to encourage and promote their growth. And that brought me back once again to my own responsibilities. Today had been a fairly relaxed overture. Tomorrow the work would start in earnest.

Chapter Seven: Obid and Mister B.

I had told my parents, as I retired for the night at an unaccustomedly early hour, that I would be up at five next morning and out of the house by six. There would be no need for me to disturb them or anyone. Of course my mother had other ideas. I awoke at five next morning to the sound of the alarm clock and the smell of fresh bread and coffee emanating from downstairs. I showered and dressed, and noted that the table in our little family breakfast nook, a rectangle sticking out into the garden with windows on three sides, was laid up for one. Thus invited I sat down, upon which the maid promptly brought me a plate of fresh fruit salad.

When I had almost finished, the cook came in – a large and ample lady with a most generous disposition – as indeed cooks jolly well ought to be! She placed a covered basket on the table, then standing back a little, she unveiled the contents dramatically, revealing the welcome sight and delicious aroma of freshly baked rolls. The coffee was also brought in – freshly roasted, ground and brewed. It is our own coffee, grown in the mountains. At one time it had been a useful export, but later only a little was grown for the benefit of the favoured few, the rest I imagine fell into ruin as trade was not encouraged.

I sat enjoying the comfortable after-effects of that simple but delicious meal, and reflected that it was a good start, whatever the rest of the day might bring.

I slipped into the Palace Grounds through the side door for which I had obtained a key, and walked for a good half-hour around the Grounds, enjoying the peace of the early morning. Indeed this was to become one of my regular customs.

I entered the Palace at seven and caused an immediate flurry of activity, as the word went around that the new boss had arrived – my predecessor never surfaced before ten of the morning. I went into ‘my’ office and sat down at ‘my’ desk.

Looking around and absorbing the scene for a few moments, I then cleared the desk of everything save for the desk lamp, placing my own black business case on the desk and opening it. It contained my entire world Mr Harvey. All my notes and plans carefully saved from the Attic Club sessions, a plain notepad and several ballpoint pens. Believe it or not, paper pads and pens were not so easy to find in the town, such was our condition.

One of my first thoughts was to open the heavy curtains obscuring the large window, so that I might have light and air. Drawing the curtains aside immediately aroused a cloud of dust, and revealed the old solid wood colonial shutters with an iron bar drawn across. I removed the bar and swung back the shutters, only to reveal... a barrier of vertical iron panels, also held in place by a horizontal bar. As I contemplated this further obstacle, and the fear it must have represented, there was a knock on the door. I had already become dimly aware of the sound of a crowd assembling out in the passage exchanging anxious stage-whispers. Perhaps now I would find out what it was all about and who these people might be.

I called to ‘come in’ and returned to my desk. The door opened and a tall imposing gentleman entered, dressed in a uniform somewhat resembling a cinema attendant, the sort who would stride out to the waiting crowd and say condescendingly ‘room for two more in the front circle’. He closed the door ceremoniously behind him, walked, almost marched the few steps to my desk, and stood to attention in front of me. ‘I am Obid, Sir, your Major Domo. I am in charge of your household Sir. Everything’.

I rose and extending my hand, and said ‘Good morning Obid. I am your new President’.

‘Indeed so Sir’, Obid replied, bowing slightly and ignoring my proffered hand which I withdrew, such, I assumed, being the correct protocol.

I sat in silence for a few moments. I felt that today of all days, anything that happened would probably be a revelation requiring a few moments' thought. I waved towards the window and the iron bars. 'I would like to have them removed, so that I can have daylight and fresh air', I said.

Obid bowed. 'It will be done Sir'. Again, a few moments' silence.

'You are in charge of the Palace household. Everything,' I said.

'Yes Sir', he replied.

'But I do not recall seeing you yesterday when I took over the office of President'.

'No Sir.'

'Any particular reason?'

'Yes Sir.'

'May I know of it?'

'If it is your wish Sir'.

'It is'.

Obid paused a moment, apparently assembling his thoughts into some sort of presentable order. 'During the late afternoon of the previous day, Sir, I received intimation from a friend... a friend loyal to yourself and your father Sir, that certain changes might... come to pass that evening.' He paused.

So, this Obid, whoever or whatever he might be, had been 'in the know'. Yet another revelation! 'Please continue', I said.

'Well Sir, at 9 p.m. of the evening in question, I visited the President's bedchamber as was the custom, bringing him his glass of warm milk infused with a measure of brandy.'

'Yes?'

'But instead of his two usual capsules which are necessary to steady and strengthen his heart, I gave him two capsules similar in appearance yet having no medicinal value.'

Obid paused, eyeing me closely, and taking my absorption of yet another revelation and its implications as tacit approval of his action, he continued. 'Upon leaving the President's chamber, Sir, I was overcome with a strong desire to visit my family in the mountains.'

'Ummm' was my only reaction, as this fascinating tale unfolded.

Perhaps fearing that my response might carry some slight disapproval of his apparent desertion, Obid continued with a hint of challenge in his tone: 'Self-preservation is a person's first duty, Sir. One cannot serve one's country when one is in the President's jail, or buried in the ground with a bullet in the head.' And who could argue with that.

After yet another pause for reflection, I regained my composure. 'Very good Obid', I said. 'I think that is all in order. Now if you please, the shutters, and let us have some light and air'.

Obid clapped his hands and two men in overalls appeared. Obid gestured them to the iron shutters, giving silent though eloquent indication that they were to be taken away. The men dismantled them, but had to carry them out one by one as they were obviously very heavy. Still I was deprived of daylight – by closed white venetian blinds which I supposed would have concealed the iron bars from public view. Clearly the previous occupant was scared, but didn't want people to know it. The blinds were raised, creating a flurry of dust in the process. Finally daylight! And a glorious scene it was too, the early sun on the flowering shrubs, made all the better in contrast to the dull interior.

I got up and threw open the window, much to Obid's disapproval. 'I do that, Sir,' he reprimanded me. Well, if he took his responsibilities that seriously, it couldn't be bad.

‘Now Sir,’ he said, introducing me to what I would discover as a habit of his: anticipating my wishes. ‘You will be wanting to meet your Palace Staff.’

That seemed like a good idea and I nodded assent. ‘Perhaps outside Sir’, Obid said as he opened the door and gestured me to step out. ‘There are too many to bring in’.

As I came out into the corridor I was greeted by a group of about a dozen staff members. Scanning the lineup, I noted that some of them, like the two cooks dressed in white, and the gardeners in their green aprons, immediately revealed their functions. Others were presented to me, their names, purpose and family background briefly explained to me. I made as if to extend my hand on the first introduction, but Obid coughed politely and indicated his disapproval. Oh well, go with the swim. For the moment anyway.

Finally came a row of six small boys, all similarly dressed. ‘These are your messengers Sir,’ Obid explained, ‘in case perhaps just occasionally your telephones might not be fully functioning’ – from which I gathered that malfunction of the Palace and possibly the whole nation’s telephone system could be a normal state of affairs.

I was learning. A revelation every minute indeed!

Obid dismissed the crowd with a single gesture, then ushered me back into my office. In low tones as he closed the door he said ‘At the extreme end of your desk to the right you will find a number of bell-push buttons Sir. Press the nearest and a messenger will come. Press the second and I will come. Press the third should you require refreshments, alcoholic or otherwise. The fourth need not concern us at this moment.’

I already knew better than to pursue it. Obid continued. ‘Press the red button situated above the others and the Palace Guard will be placed on immediate alert.’ Such was the way it had been! Obid paused. ‘We await your instructions Sir’.

Once again I had to re-summon my thoughts. I had an agenda, but this continuum of the unexpected kept throwing me off balance. I checked the ‘to-do’ list on my pad. Meet the staff – that was done. Next, the Palace Guard. I viewed them as a bomb waiting to explode. These rough and undisciplined farmers would be punch-drunk with their new quarters and exalted position and would soon want to show off. ‘The General’ too would need to be received and given orders.

‘I would like to have the Palace Guard parade in the Stateroom’ I said, ‘at 0800 sharp’, it being then twenty minutes before eight.

Being clearly more aware than I of the Guards’ current condition, Obid ‘corrected’ me. ‘Eight-thirty would be more suitable Sir, if you would wish them to look their best’.

‘Indeed. Eight-thirty then’. ‘It will be done Sir.’

‘I would also like the town bandleader here at the same time’.

‘That too shall be done, Sir.’

Well, if only half Obid’s promises were to be fulfilled, we’d be off to quite a good start.

There has always been a town band. They play with enthusiasm and a modicum of accuracy, especially when encouraged by some special function and a little liquid refreshment.

Obid asked if that would be all. I realized I had given him some commissions which he would need to attend to, but another item on my list required attention. ‘I think it would be advisable to pay the Palace Guard at least something’ I suggested.

‘Indeed that would be most wise Sir,’ Obid replied.

I felt quite cheered by such approval.

‘In which case you will need to see Mister B Sir’, Obid continued. ‘The accountant?’ ‘No Sir’.

‘Can he be brought to my office?’

‘No Sir. He lives in the basement Sir, and is not permitted to leave.’

‘Then how does he live, how does he eat?’

'He has washing, sleeping and toilet facilities Sir. Food goes down to him in a small lift from the kitchen. There is a walled yard in which he may exercise at his pleasure.'

'Then he is a prisoner?'

'In a manner of speaking Sir'.

'And he is the person I have to see in order to pay the Guard?'

'That is so Sir.'

'Then I will see him after the Guard.'

'Perhaps you should see him now Sir, and see the Palace Guard and the Band Leader at, say ten-thirty o'clock. In this way you will be able to pay the Guard after you have briefed them.'

'Yes of course. Please arrange it.'

'At once Sir. Permit me to instruct the Guard and other staff members. Then I shall return and conduct you to Mister B.'

Obid left me, and I was grateful for time alone to consider, or attempt to make sense of what seemed to be going on around me. A brief look at the gardens through the open window cheered me and I once more consulted my list. Two items remained, the key to the centre drawer of my desk which, unlike the other drawers, was firmly locked, and how to open the large safe which prominently occupied one corner of the room. I took up these two matters with Obid when he returned.

First, the middle desk drawer.

'That is locked Sir. It is always kept locked.'

'Yes I can see that. Where is the key?'

'The President has it Sir. I beg your pardon. The previous President has it.'

'Where, precisely, does he, did he keep it?'

'On his person Sir, in a body belt around his waist.'

'Then it will still be there?'

'I would imagine so, yes Sir.'

The thought of undressing the dead President did not appeal to me. Perhaps Obid...

'Would you care to....'

'Perhaps the undertaker Sir. He is on his way to attend to the body, according to your previous instructions. In fact I believe I see him now.'

'Then please, send him to me at once'.

'I will go and receive him Sir, and bring him to you.'

The undertaker was a small dismal man, though after our introductions, when he asked to be directed to the deceased, there was a distinct touch of enthusiasm in his voice. I told him first that there had been a change of plan. The ex-President was to be laid out in the Palace Stateroom with a glass lid on his coffin, and he was to be on public display for three days. The undertaker replied rather disapprovingly that the earlier plan might be preferable, adding that in his view the quicker 'he' was under six feet of soil the better. I explained patiently that it was important for the people to 'lay the ghost' and be certain that their oppressor was really dead. The undertaker caught my drift and agreed. I added that the funeral was also to be public.

As he made to leave, I brought up the matter of the body belt, shuddering slightly as I thought of it. But for the undertaker this was no problem at all. He had been advised by the doctor that the President had been found dead in his

bed, and if the ex-President was to lie in state, he should be dressed in uniform, to which I agreed. The body belt would be on my desk in a matter of moments, I was assured. And so indeed it was.

The belt having been brought, I opened it to find only a bunch of keys. Trying several likely candidates, I found one that fitted the centre drawer. I slid it open slowly and cautiously. A booby trap? Hardly! But the day had already presented so many surprises.

The drawer contained a loaded pistol and a small phial of cyanide pills. I was getting to know our ex-President better every minute. What else? A small locked cedar-wood box. Locating the right key I found it to contain another, larger key. For what? Who knows. There was also a list of names, future purge victims? Again I did not know, and in this case probably would not want to know. I did notice that one of our neighbours came near the top. Neither my father nor I myself were listed. If it was indeed a purge list, then it had clearly missed the target.

Carefully I pressed the bell designated for Obid. One of the servants appeared immediately, advising me that 'Mr Obid is fulfilling your instructions Sir, and will return very soon'. Yes of course, he would have been with the Palace Guard, possibly trying to rouse them from their slumbers! He arrived shortly after and I asked him about the combination of the safe. 'No one knows Sir, only the President – the ex-President.' Humm. That was a problem alright. I knew there was a stone quarry in the mountains, but inviting a couple of cowboys to dynamite the safe open would probably set the contents on fire if not the building too. I assumed there were papers in the safe, quite possibly money, which I was naturally anxious to preserve. 'You were probably the closest person to the ex-President Obid', I suggested encouragingly though without much hope. 'Can you offer any clue or suggestion?'

I could hardly believe my luck, Mr Harvey, when I got, not a negative shake of the head but a positive response. 'In his later years Sir, the ex-President was becoming a little forgetful. He once told me, if ever he were to forget the combination of the safe, I was to say the words Adolph Hitler. I really don't know what that means Sir, or if it is of any help'.

I gave no indication at the time, but I suspected that Obid's 'hint' would do the trick. You see Mr Harvey, in my youth, mainly in England, we had often watched war stories at the cinema or on television. And it was common knowledge to every schoolboy that the Allies could always open captured Nazi safes since the combination was invariably Hitler's birth date. The ex-President's birthday was well-known to everyone since it was the cause each year of compulsory celebrations. The safe had a six-figure combination, and I guessed it would be day-day, month-month, and the last two digits of the year. The year I did not then know, but my father would probably know it, or hazard a pretty close guess.

Obid interrupted my reflections with one of his polite coughs. 'You wished to see Mister B before the Palace Guard parades, Sir, in which case you may wish to proceed at once as time is advancing.'

Obid was right again! So we went off to visit Mister B, whoever he might be, in his basement prison, otherwise known to Obid as his 'lower quarters'.

Obid led the way, stopping in front of a door at the end of the corridor. 'You will need to unlock it Sir. Only you have the key. It is on the President's key ring.' I unlocked the door and held it open. As I did so I heard a bell ring down below. 'That is so Mister B can be ready for you Sir,' he explained, somewhat enigmatically, then adding 'I cannot go down Sir. No one is permitted.' And with that he ushered me in and closed the door behind me. I heard him walk briskly away. Clearly I had a few more surprises in store.

At the bottom of the stairs I came into a brightly lit room. In the centre stood an ancient but gleaming Heidelberg letterpress printing machine, and beside it, standing proudly to attention and beaming widely was an equally ancient man wearing a traditional printer's white apron. 'Mister B?' I asked. 'Indeed Sir. And you will be our new President. I will be happy to serve you Sir, as I have done your predecessor. Now Sir, what do you require today?'

My mind raced around in all directions. Obviously Mister B was a printer, and a printer of sensitive documents given the condition of seclusion in which he was permanently detained. But when I finally discovered what his duties were, my 'innocent' mind was given a considerable jolt.

For the moment I attempted to conceal my ignorance with a simple ploy. 'Oh, I think the usual please Mister B,' I said with as much casual confidence as I could muster.

'Eight packets delivered as sixteen halves, Sir?' he enquired.

'Yes I think so' I responded.

Mister B waited expectantly. Had I hit the wrong button?

'I will need the key, Sir' he said.

'The Key?'

'Yes Sir. It resides in a cedar-wood box. You will have it Sir'.

The mysterious cedar-wood box in the centre drawer in the Presidential Desk. 'Yes of course', I responded. 'My oversight.'

So I had to go back to my office and retrieve the key. Presumably it was customary to bring it in the box, perhaps to preserve it from the glances of passing servants. I returned to Mister B's domain carrying the box in both hands. Mister B indicated a very comfortable armchair in an alcove on one side of the print room. A small table beside the chair was further indicated as the place to receive the box, while I myself was to sit in the armchair from which I could see the press, as well as a tv set to my right.

Beside me was a shelf of videos, which Mister B indicated with a wave of the hand.

'If you would like to choose your viewing Sir...'

I hesitated, somewhat at a loss to comprehend this entire charade. 'Those with the red stars were always the ex-President's favourites,' Mister B suggested helpfully, indicating a line of well-thumbed boxes each with a red star on it. I scanned the selection briefly. Titles such as 'The Duke and the Chamber Maid', 'Blondes in Bondage' and 'Fifi's Frolics' revealed yet another fascinating aspect of my predecessor's character. There were others, too, of an even more explicit nature, the details of which need not detain us, Mr Harvey.

I told Mister B that he might proceed. Time, as Obid had so wisely observed, was advancing. In any case, I was dying with curiosity to see what would come off the press. But there was more. He asked for the key which I duly presented to him from the cedar-wood box. Clearly the Ceremony of the Key was to be conducted with due respect. With it Mister B unlocked a steel box on the wall, then threw the switch inside it. The press lit up and its motor began to hum. The tv set came on as well.

Mister B set the press in motion. Then he looked at me. 'You will not be watching the television set?' he asked. 'I think perhaps not,' I replied. I was rather mesmerized by the printing press, and did not want to miss the moment when its secret would be revealed.

Perhaps you, Mr Harvey, have already guessed what would be the outcome. I did not, until the first page came off the press.

Mister B held it up to examine it, then held it before me. Yes. It was one of our national banknotes, or rather one side of one. Satisfied, Mr B pulled a lever and the press rolled away printing banknotes eight to a page.

'I am afraid it will take a little time,' Mister B warned apologetically. 'I must run the machine slowly, having regard to the importance of the work. Also some spare parts have been made by Tulu, a local motor mechanic, and while they do the job, they are not of Heidelberg quality.'

'You do as you think best Mister B. I am fine thank you.'

When he was satisfied that all was running smoothly, and observing that I was not otherwise occupied, Mister B approached me somewhat deferentially. 'Might I ask a question Sir?' he enquired. 'Of course'. 'Well Sir, your present print order will pay the Palace Guard only. And I was wondering Sir will you be printing more? The people are very poor Sir, and they need money. Since you are our new President Sir, and a good man, perhaps....'

I motioned Mister B to bring a chair and sit close to me. 'Money of itself is no use,' I began to explain. 'It is useful for trade, for buying and selling goods and services. But if there are no goods and services to buy, then money has little value. Right now, we can continue printing money in small quantities, but not for very long. When there is more money in the market than goods, money loses its value. It becomes worthless paper.'

I was pleased to note that Mister B took my point at once. 'I recall the time, many years ago' he began quietly, almost dreamily, 'when one of these banknotes was worth something. Now it is just paper. We do not talk in banknotes but in packets. There are one hundred notes in a packet, twelve packets to a bundle. Some of our ladies go out shopping with their bags as full with money as they are with goods when they return.'

Suddenly realizing that his implied criticism of the nation's monetary system could have given offence, he hastened to add 'but of course you will know more of such matters than I Sir'.

I responded that it would be one of my more urgent tasks to restore respect and value to the nation's currency. Mister B beamed his approval. Then his expression became pensive. 'How would you achieve that Sir, if I might ask.'

Frankly Mr Harvey, I was quite pleased to have someone with whom I could discuss such matters. I explained that since money is a means of facilitating the exchange of goods and services, restoring the value of the nation's currency depended on creating jobs so that people were producing goods and services that could be bought and sold.

'So perhaps you will create many government jobs' Mister B suggested.

I smiled. 'No Mister B. A job of work means producing goods and services that people want and need and freely choose to purchase. That does not apply to most government servants. They are like the lilies of the valley. They toil not neither do they spin...' Mister B took up the quotation. 'And yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Luke 12:27 I believe Sir.'

'You know your Bible Mister B.'

'It is my constant companion in my confinement Sir.'

That seemed to be a good cue for something I wanted to say. I paused in order to give my words more weight.

'Should you wish to leave the print room at any time for a meal perhaps, to enjoy the gardens, to go into town for a glass of tea...' Mister B's eyes opened wide at the very thought. 'You are most gracious Sir, but I am not sure...' 'It is up to you Mister B. All I am saying is that you are now quite free to go where you please, provided only that we can arrange for printing work to be done when required.'

'But if I were to go out even for a few moments...' Mister B was thinking carefully – 'how would the premises be secured?'

'I will have a second key made for you, this very afternoon.'

Our conversation was interrupted when the machine stopped. 'You will excuse me Sir. I must print the reverse side.' The stack was carefully turned over and returned to the feed tray. The first-off was held up to check registration. Mister B was a craftsman.

The press rolled again, and we resumed our conversation. 'I thank you warmly Sir, for your kind invitation. But I have grown comfortable here. Also, I have been here more than five years. No one knows except Obid, and he must tell no one. My family and friends think I am dead. Perhaps to go out I might be a little fearful Sir'.

I believe I understood how he felt Mr Harvey. 'Well Mister B,' I ventured. 'Perhaps you will go out tomorrow. Many people come into town on a Saturday and it is very lively. But if you do not... On Sunday the band and the Palace Guard will march to church. I will follow behind with as many of my staff as I have managed to collect. I would be honoured if you would walk at my side. You may even wish to read a lesson in church.'

'I would like that Sir. And I am pleased that you will be walking to church freely and openly. In later years your predecessor was too afraid even to walk in the Palace Gardens.'

Mister B reflected quietly for a few moments. 'He once asked me, while I was printing, why the people appeared to dislike him. I really think he did not know. I told him it was because he took all the money while his people starved, and if anyone spoke against him they were put in prison. It seemed to make him a little sad.'

'So you were not afraid to speak out to him like that,' I asked, somewhat surprised. Mister B smiled. 'I was a prisoner Sir, presumed dead to the outside world. I had little to lose. And as the only person who could print the nation's money, I felt I had little to fear.'

The press stopped having completed its second run, and the stack was guillotined to produce piles of single-colour banknotes. They were red, with a background of fine wavy lines like real notes. I had to admire the work. 'The plates were engraved in London Sir,' Mister B offered. 'And immaculately printed', I answered, genuinely respectful of Mister B's obvious care. That clearly pleased him. Good. I needed all the allies I could collect!

Then I comprehended the meaning of 'eight packets delivered as sixteen halves'. The notes were expertly counted and packed into sixteen packages, each then wrapped carefully in plain paper. The wall-switch was turned off, the steel box locked, and the key duly re-presented to me. I returned it to its cedar-wood box.

'I will need the printing in the Stateroom immediately,' I said.

Mr B took the packets over to the stairs and placed them in a dumb waiter which he proceeded to haul up to ground level. 'Obid will be waiting as you leave Sir, and he will assist you.' I hesitated before leaving. 'I hope to have the pleasure of your company on the way to Church on Sunday.'

I left Mister B in something of a daze. As I opened the door at the top of the stairs, Obid was waiting just as Mister B had anticipated. Clearly this was a regular routine. 'To the Stateroom Sir?' Obid enquired, as he picked up the packets. 'The Stateroom', I confirmed.

No sooner had we entered the Stateroom, than the peace of the Palace was shattered by a commotion in the corridor. 'The General' was heard shouting 'Left Right Left Right Keep in step you 'orrible monsters' against a backdrop of random banging and shuffling. Obid opened the door, and I was pleased, quite gratified indeed, to discover that despite their inability to march in step, the new Guardsmen were all very smartly turned out. They filed into the room, lined up along the back wall, halted, and on command turned to face front. I saw Obid give 'The General' a sharp prod. 'Palace Guard awaiting your inspection, Saah!' he shouted loudly, saluting smartly.

Obid later confessed to me that he had gone to my father, asking if he would render assistance in preparing the Guard for Parade, a task which my father appeared to have readily accepted.

I inspected the Guard slowly, carefully and critically, checking pocket buttons, brushing the occasional bit of fluff from a uniform, tutting at a set of unpolished buttons, looking each man in the eye. 'This is your first formal Parade as Palace Guard', I said, 'and in general I think you have presented yourselves well,' adding to The General 'you may stand the men at ease now.'

Moving to the other side of the long table to give my words more weight, I embarked on the speech I had more or less prepared in my mind.

'He whom you call 'The General' has no legal or military title. He has however conducted himself with pride and courage, displaying all the qualities necessary for leadership. It is therefore my proud honour to designate him as of this moment with the style and official title of Commander of the Palace Guard.'

I stressed the title to give it due weight. The General, now Guard Commander, reacted as I had hoped with pleasure and pride. Yes Mr Harvey, you will think it theatrical. But this was necessary in the circumstances. And it had the necessary effect.

I then continued to address the men. 'You will of course be aware that the previous Guardsmen were hated by everyone. They could not socialize with the townspeople in any normal way. Indeed as time went on they would not dare go into town singly for fear of being knifed in a back alley. That is not the way things will be done from now on. It is not the way you will behave. You will not be feared, but you will still be respected because you will represent our country and our flag. You will be applauded as you march through the town on ceremonial occasions because you will be smart and proud. Mothers will want their sons to join the Guard, and small boys will want to be Guardsmen when they grow up. You will find your status rewarding. But it will require some hard work and discipline to make your drill perfect. If any man is not prepared to accept this challenge, let him speak now.'

No one spoke, as indeed I had anticipated. The men were standing smartly and proudly even when they were 'at ease', and I think the image I had created was one they found appealing.

Having given them a few moments to digest what I had said, I continued. 'Now I will give you your basic daily schedule. On weekdays, from Monday to Friday, at 07.45 you will parade for inspection in the stable yard. You will march smartly in formation to the Palace Gates which will be unlocked by the Commander of the Palace Guard. He will detail two men to open the gates wide, one man for each gate. Re-forming, the Guard will then march back and form up on the Palace Lawn where the band will already be in place. At 08.00 the Guard will salute while the national flag is raised and the national anthem played. At 6 p.m. in the evening the Guard will parade and salute while the flag is lowered. At 10 p.m. the Commander, accompanied by two Guardsmen, will march to the gates, there closing and locking them.'

I paused, giving them time to absorb my instructions thus far. I noticed their expressions of concentration, some of the men's lips moving as they digested their orders.

After a brief respite I continued. 'On Saturdays you are free to visit your families as there will be no formal duties. Whenever ashore, by which I mean outside the Palace Grounds, you will behave in such a way as to be a credit to your unit, to your flag and your nation.'

'On Sundays you will parade in the stable yard at 10.00. The Band may, at their discretion, perform on the Palace Lawn from 09.00 until 10.30. At 10.30 Band and Guard will march up the street to Church where the Guard will occupy the rear two rows...' I looked at them closely 'again behaving and conducting yourselves respectfully, especially during the Church Service.'

'Finally, I would ask you to consider your position as members of our society, especially as we are, for the moment, a poor country which cannot afford to pay people for doing nothing. Once you have familiarized yourselves with your new status and routines, I will be asking you to consider that in China, the People's Army pays its way by doing cleaning and building works. Even in the great United States, the Army Corps of Engineers attends to the building of dams and the taming of waterways. When you are ready, you too should consider how you can contribute to the community, while still retaining your status and position as members of the Palace Guard.'

Ignoring one or two expressions of distaste which greeted that last suggestion, I turned to the Guard Commander. 'You may bring the men to attention Commander.' When he had done so, I looked at each man in turn, then asked if all was clear. They all responded positively, though I must admit, slowly and with a slight note of apprehension!

I gave the Guard Commander a list of my instructions. I could see that the men were now turning their attention to the packages sitting on the table. 'The Commander will now distribute payment, one half-packet to each man.' Once that had been done I dismissed the men. I confess I heaved a sigh of relief once the men had left. But we were making progress – that was another duty crossed off the list.

Obid and I returned to my office. I looked at the safe, but it was getting on for noon and though I do not normally take lunch save for the occasional snack, the thought of home comforts, of Father and Mother sitting down to a light salad perhaps, and a glass of wine, it all appeared extremely appealing.

'I think we can leave the safe until after lunch Obid,' I suggested.

'As you wish Sir. Shall I send for the quarryman who handles the explosives?'

'Not for the moment thank you. There may be another way.'

Obid had given me plenty of enigmas that morning. I was glad to give him food for thought in return, and indeed I was satisfied to see the briefest flash of curiosity in his expression.

So I left the Palace Grounds through my little side gate, my head slightly reeling after what had been for me a full and demanding morning, quite apart from the many surprises some of which I was still trying to digest as I walked slowly home. So. The ex-President's death at the sound of his Palace Guard roaring away en masse on their BMWs had been 'encouraged' by Obid's look-alike heart capsules. I decided then and there that this particular piece of information would go no farther.

On my return home I was welcomed like a conquering hero. My mother of course said I looked exhausted which I think I probably felt, and Father put an arm round my shoulder and led me along the hall asking 'Well, how'd it go on your first morning, Son?' He poured us both a small glass of sherry as was his custom, and we both sat down while Mother fussed in the kitchen.

I told Father I had made the acquaintance of Obid at which Father slapped his knee and laughed. 'Obid! He's an absolutely splendid fellow of course. He knows everything and can arrange anything. The eyes and ears of the world. You will probably find, if you haven't already, that he knows what you intend to do before you know yourself. You'll be lucky if you ever get the better of him!'

'I also met Mister B', I said. Father looked blank. 'Mister B?' 'Another very useful member of the Palace Staff', I replied non-committedly. Frankly I really didn't feel like going into that whole saga just then.

I then told Father of my first formal encounter with the Palace Guard, and how surprised I had been at their smart turnout. Father of course smiled knowingly, replying modestly that he himself had a hand in it. I asked if he would consider some drill sessions in the stable yard, and to my relief he replied with considerable enthusiasm. He was after all a military man, with two years at Sandhurst behind him, and had quite probably missed the parades and discipline of army life. I gave him a copy of my initial schedule for the Guard which he perused carefully, nodding his approval. Then Mother called us to the table with strict instructions that the conversation would now be limited to family trivia only!

In the after-glow of a light but refreshing lunch, my mind turned once again to my office and the Safe. Anticipating that there might be money involved, I enquired of my parents, with some doubt I must admit, whether there might be such a thing as an honest accountant in town.

To my delight they both spoke at once. 'Mr Gupta would be your man,' Father said, and Mother nodded her agreement. 'The poor man came and cried on my shoulder,' Mother reminisced with a smile.

Father continued. 'He had been working for an English trading company in the days when we had any trade. It seemed that the boss was diverting income into a private account, and wanted Gupta to cover it up. Gupta refused and was dismissed. The company folded shortly after, mainly because political conditions became impossible.' 'And where might he be found?' I asked.

'Obid will know.'

Of course – I might have guessed!

We chatted on for a little longer, then I took my leave. Before doing so, I asked Father casually if he knew the ex-President's birth year.

He thought for a moment. 'Is it important?' he asked. 'Yes it is, rather'. 'Then hold on a minute'.

Father went into his study and picking up the phone, dialed two digits. I should mention that our compound was on a special circuit, also connected with the Palace of course.

'Hello Doc? Yes. I was wondering if you know the year our ex-President was born... Right, thank you'. Father waited, then wrote down a number on the pad by the phone and handed it to me. 'Thanks Doc. See you tonight? Excellent'.

Armed with what I was fairly sure would give me the last two digits of the secret combination, I left for what promised to be an interesting afternoon session with The Safe.

Chapter Eight: The Safe

I returned to the Palace to find Obid waiting outside my office. We exchanged greetings and entered the office. Obid coughed, his special cough which invariably indicated that he had something important to communicate. 'Yes Obid.'

'You may recall, Sir, that my function here is as Major Domo, in charge of your household Sir.' 'Yes indeed.'

'While I am willing, indeed most anxious to serve you in any capacity you may require, might I suggest Sir that a secretary should be procured. Behind the bookcase opposite you, there is a concealed door leading to the adjoining room, equipped with desk, typewriter and other items pertaining to administrative duties.'

'Excellent idea. Does one have any particular candidate in mind?'

'Miss Hovnanian Sir, performed the function to your predecessor's entire satisfaction for many years. She is of Armenian extraction and like all of her race, reliable, competent and efficient.' 'Then why did she leave?'

'She left, Sir...' Obid hesitated, slightly embarrassed I thought, then summoning courage, continued. 'She left when her employer's conduct towards her became... inappropriate. Sir.'

A fleeting image of red-starred boxes containing videos of Fifi's Frolics and other such delights came to my mind, shedding yet further light on my predecessor's character. 'Could she be persuaded to return?' 'I have no doubt she would be delighted Sir. Shall I order her for Monday, or is it your intention to work tomorrow?'

Yes of course, it was Friday. I had really quite lost track of the days of the week. All I knew then was that I was in Day One of my new job. 'Monday morning would be fine.' 'It will be done Sir.'

I must confess, Mr Harvey, that I had become quite excited at the prospect of opening the safe, rather like a small boy on Christmas Eve. I addressed Obid in a businesslike tone. 'Now, shall we proceed with the safe?'

‘Indeed Sir. But...’

‘Yes?’

‘There have been two requests for an Audience, Sir. I imagined that you might have prior duties this afternoon, so I took the liberty of suggesting that the two parties return at four and four-thirty this afternoon, if that is convenient, Sir.’ ‘Yes, I think that would be fine.’

‘You will be wanting to leave at 5 p.m., Sir, in order to prepare for Dinner.’

‘Dinner?’

‘Yes Sir. There is, I believe, to be a Dinner Party at your home tonight.’

That was typical of my family, Mr Harvey. No one tells anybody anything. Anyway, I suggested to Obid, thinking aloud as it were, that it might be in my honour. But it seemed I was being presumptuous, as Obid gave his warning cough.

‘I have no doubt, Sir, that your father’s notable achievement and your own most welcome accession to Office will be toasted in some appropriate beverage. However...’

‘Well?’

‘Well, Sir, you should understand – with all due respect of course, Sir – that social intercourse between your father and his close friends had been impossible for some considerable time, due to the watchful eye and increasingly suspicious nature of your predecessor.’

‘Yes I can understand that.’

‘It had always been the custom of your father and his friends to meet on Friday evenings for dinner followed by a game of cards. They would circulate around their various homes. Latterly, that became impossible lest the President hear of it and assume a conspiracy.... tonight will be something of an occasion for them, as they will be assembling for the first time in many years.’

‘I see. Well I am most grateful for that insight Obid. I will conduct myself accordingly. They have indeed earned their reward.’ ‘Precisely so, Sir. You are, if I may say so, Sir, most sympathetic.’

‘Now: the Safe’.

I had decided that I would get my own back on old Obid. No offence of course, but I couldn’t let the chap have it all his own way!

I was pretty sure the combination I had memorized would work and I intended to take the risk and give Obid a little show, and give myself a slight air of mystery. You see, Mr Harvey, I have this wicked streak!

So I approached the safe with suitable caution, felt it all over running my hands around its edges, then examined the plaque on the door, following the procedures of professional safe-crackers one sees in films. Kneeling down and placing my ear to the lock I tapped lightly. Holding up my hands, I rubbed my fingers on my thumbs, then, concealing the number from Obid, turned the lock to the combination I hoped would do the trick. I could hardly conceal my delight and relief as I heard a satisfying click and felt the door move slightly. ‘Good,’ I said casually. ‘Perhaps you could give me a hand to pull the door open.’

‘Of course Sir.’ Obid moved forward, and without appearing to meet his glance I noted the look of surprise and wonderment on his face. Of course he would ask no questions, nor would I give any answers. This round to me I think, Mister Obid!

One must occasionally allow oneself such childish pleasures, Mr Harvey.

However my little triumph was short-lived, for as we both swung the heavy door open our eyes almost popped out of our heads, as the expression goes. We were confronted with five shelves packed with bundles of money, Sterling Pounds, South African Rand, Swiss Francs. It was a deep safe and the entire volume was packed solid with money. There was a small, locked drawer at the bottom which no doubt held other delights. But the huge pile of bank notes, high-denomination bank notes as a cursory glance revealed, was a sight which held our gaze as if we were both mesmerized. We looked at one another in wonderment.

Looking back Mr Harvey, I believe that those few shared moments of revelation created some kind of a bond which was to remain between us, and in fact still does.

Regaining my composure somewhat I motioned to Obid and pushed the safe door closed, spinning the combination lock as soon as the door hit home, then returning to my desk.

‘This is the Nation’s money Obid, and must all be counted and recorded by a proper officer before witnesses. Do we by any chance have such a thing as an honest accountant in town?’

Yes, Mr Harvey, I know I had recently asked my father the same question. I was interested to see if Obid would agree, or come up with another alternative. But Obid replied at once. ‘That would be Mister Gupta. A most safe and reliable gentleman whose honesty is beyond reproach, as his present impoverished status will confirm.’

I suspect that Obid was anticipating a request for clarification of his somewhat enigmatic statement. However I knew what he meant. I guessed that after he was dismissed from the trading company he had failed to find other work. Indeed there would have been no work for an accountant as there was nothing in the way of major business on the island. However, adding yet further to the air of mystery my performance with the safe had created, I simply replied ‘Indeed,’ then adding ‘Can he be brought here, I mean, fairly quickly?’

‘I will have him summoned at once, Sir.’

‘Excellent. But perhaps it might be conveyed to him that the President... *requests* his services... at his earliest convenience, so as not to frighten the poor man.’

‘I will do it myself, Sir.’

‘No, I need you here. I will write a note and your senior messenger can go. I must not be left alone with the money before it has all been accounted for.’

‘I am sure our new President can be fully trusted,’ Obid said, with a reassuring note of genuine confidence.

‘It is not correct practice, and we must start as we mean to carry on,’ I replied firmly.

‘I understand fully, Sir. If you will write the note, it will be delivered at once. In the meantime, Sir, may I call for tea, if that would be appropriate?’

‘An excellent idea, and I would like you to join me.’

‘But...’

‘But me no buts Obid.’

‘Well perhaps just this once, Sir, as it is your wish.’

The messenger was sent for, the tea arrived, and at my invitation Obid sat down, at first a little uncomfortably, then relaxing somewhat. As we waited and sipped hot lemon tea, I coaxed Obid into telling me a little of his past.

Apparently he had as a young lad been taken under the wing of one of the Consuls in the twilight of the Colonial era because, as Obid modestly put it, he had shown promise and enthusiasm for his work. The Consul, ‘a titled gentleman’, took Obid back to England with him after the Union Jack had been lowered for the last time. There Obid was put to service in ‘one of England’s finest houses’. He took lessons locally to perfect his English, and as he rose through the ranks, was given a month’s leave of absence on full pay to study the butler’s art from a professional who gave private classes in such matters. His employer was dying of some internal ailment the details of which were not given to the servants, and calling Obid into his room one day as he neared his end, he informed Obid that he had bequeathed him a sum of money so that he might return as one of his new country’s proud sons.

Thus it came to pass, Mr Harvey, that I now had at my disposal a real English butler. They say life is full of surprises. I was certainly getting more than my share.

In due course a rather flustered Mr Gupta was ushered into the office, Obid having quickly signaled for the tea things to be whisked away. I understood his motive – one would not want the Office of the new President to appear lax and decadent!

Mr Gupta was asked if he would accept the post of Government Accountant, an offer to which he assented immediately, though from his expression I gathered he was wondering if there was any catch in it. But we had no time for such nonsense. There was work to be done. I sent Obid next door into the newly discovered (for me anyway) secretary's office for some lined paper. He returned with pad and pens, I sat Mr Gupta, slightly protesting, at the Presidential Desk, while Obid and I swung the safe fully open. Mr Gupta's eyes opened wide. And why not indeed! But again, we had no time for that.

'Obid and I will take out the money and lay it all out on the desk in front of you shelf by shelf Mr Gupta. You as Government Accountant will count and record it. I suggest you keep a different column for each currency. Obid and I will witness the proceedings.'

So we began. As the stacks of notes were identified as to currency and inventoried, they were replaced in the safe. And when we had finished, almost two hours later, I invited Mr Gupta to make a copy. All three of us signed both copies. One went back into the safe with the money, the safe then being locked. I asked Mr Gupta if he had a safe place to keep his copy and he replied that he had a personal trunk which was always kept locked. 'Due Process' had been established, as had a principle of honesty in government. Satisfied, I dismissed Mr Gupta, thanking him for his services and inviting him to start work on Monday morning. Obid and I then turned our attention to the two Appointments slotted in for the late afternoon. They both turned out to be brief, pleasant, and satisfactory to all parties.

The first was a three-person 'Deputation' (as Obid referred to them) of Teachers, two ladies one old, one fairly young, and a gentleman. They wished to inform me of the lamentable condition of the nation's schools, no books or equipment, buildings in advanced stages of disrepair, teachers unpaid and many working simply out of a sense of duty. Was the President aware of the importance of education, and was it the President's intention to do something about this lamentable state of affairs?

Though perfectly aware of the broad facts, I let them have their full say. I listened sympathetically and I believe they felt better having thus relieved themselves. I assured them that I was fully aware of the importance of education and that I would do all I could to remedy the situation as quickly as possible.

Life is not all bad, Mr Harvey, and I was to receive a welcome shot in the arm from the Teachers' Deputation. They informed me that if I truly intended to promote education, a significant first step would be to contact the United Nations Children's Organization (if I remember the name correctly) and a couple of charities. I was given names, addresses and telephone numbers.

It appeared that a major barrier to improving our educational facilities was not the lack of funds, but presidential greed. Funds had indeed been forthcoming in years gone by, but when inspectors and representatives of charities discovered that funds destined for the basic education of young children were being diverted to furthering the President's education in the finer points of gastronomy the funds were cut off at once, never to flow thereafter. If a new President were to make contact and give assurances that 100% of funds destined for education would actually reach their destination, the funds might begin to flow again.

I assured these good folk with all the force and sincerity I could muster, that this President would take for himself a modest remuneration consistent with his duties and that it would be made public along with all government accounts.

I told them that Mr Gupta had now been put in charge of government accounts with the strict instructions that accounts be accurate and public at all times.

I further assured them that first thing on Monday morning my Secretary, Miss Hovnanian, would make the contacts necessary to set the educational funds rolling again.

Thus satisfied, they got up looking quite pleased and prepared to leave. 'I need a member of my new Cabinet team who will be responsible for overseeing the nation's education. Do you have any suggestions?' Without hesitation, the two ladies turned to their male companion, laughing as they both suggested him simultaneously. He had been considering retirement, and would be happy to serve in any capacity.

Mr Warungu was a tall, very distinguished gentleman of Kenyan extraction whose immaculate English I secretly sought to emulate. His somewhat strict manner and bearing seemed to be combined with an air of kindness and infinite patience which I thought should make an excellent teacher – as well as an amiable Cabinet Member. I asked him to make himself available for a meeting in the Palace some time on Monday.

So! A Cabinet, or My Team as I liked to think of it, was starting to take shape.

The second appointment of the afternoon, Obid announced, would be the editor of our national newspaper.

‘I didn’t know we had one’.

‘We do not Sir. But we used to. And it is the editor’s hope, I would assume, that the paper might rise again – from the ashes of Censorship so to speak’.

‘That would be a splendid idea,’ I replied with enthusiasm.

‘Indeed it would, Sir’ was Obid’s fervent reply.

The Editor was type-cast for the role, a serious, slightly flustered gentleman carrying a bundle of papers and a large notebook, with several pens clipped into the top pocket of his somewhat creased white linen jacket. Oh yes, and a straw hat. He placed all his papers on my desk and launched into a history of the Island Chronicle and what an important role it had fulfilled in the Island’s life.

I’m afraid I had to stop him – and that was not easy, for he was a rapid speaker – and tell him that if he was planning to restart the Paper then he should go ahead. After a few moments of silence in which he digested this clearly unexpected information, he asked if it would be with my blessing.

‘No’, I replied. ‘You do not have my blessing for the simple reason that you do not need it. As of now we have a free press in this country. There will be no government censorship of any kind.’

After another short silence, he asked if he might have a statement from the President. I gave him a brief statement along these lines: ‘The President welcomes the return of the Island Chronicle which will surely assume once again the position of importance which it held in Island life for so many years. The President looks forward to becoming a regular subscriber in order to increase his awareness of events and opinions throughout the Island. A Free Press is one of several assurances of liberty which will form a feature of the President’s new government.’

‘Thank you Mr. President’, the Editor replied fervently, scribbling rapidly and clearly delighted with the outcome of his visit. ‘I will give your statement full front page coverage’. I replied to the effect that it might send wrong signals if The President is given too much prominence. Perhaps a single front page column would be better, while the main headline should celebrate the return of the paper itself, leading to a brief history of the paper with some historical photos on the inside pages. Also a quick coverage of the Island would give something for everyone to read.

The Editor responded with enthusiasm to my ideas, which pleased me as it would fit in with my ‘first impression’ ideas of eliminating the old presidential image of universal and heavy-handed power. But then his expression clouded somewhat. ‘There is one minor problem Mr President... we have at the moment no paper and no ink. They were all removed some time ago by the Palace Guard.’ Certainly a pretty effective way of silencing the Press. I looked at Obid. ‘Mister B?’

‘I would think so, yes Sir.’

‘Then would you conduct this gentleman to Mister B and see what can be done to tide him over until we can make a more permanent arrangement.’

With that the two departed, and Obid returned shortly after to report with an air of unconcealed pleasure that ‘we have a newspaper once more!’

‘You were a keen reader of the Chronicle?’ I asked.

‘Indeed, Sir. And I have made one or two small contributions myself.’

I tried to draw him out on the details but he would not be persuaded. Instead he advised me that I should be returning home to prepare for ‘the evening’. I thanked Obid very sincerely for his help, suggesting that it had been quite an eventful day – to which Obid replied with genuine feeling ‘It has indeed, Sir’.

Yes, Mr Harvey, there was a good bond of understanding between us, and I felt strengthened by it. I dismissed Obid, assuring him that I would indeed depart shortly for dinner at home.

I sat quietly. My mind had a lot to absorb. I was stirred from my reverie however, by a considerable amount of noisy shuffling outside in the garden. It was a quarter to six and the Guard was appearing for the hauling down of the flag on

the Palace Lawn. I looked out of the window, slightly dismayed as I watched their chaotic shuffling which I supposed passed for marching. I called the Guard Commander to report to me once the men had been halted and formed up.

‘Their marching could be improved,’ I suggested, especially since you will be parading them through the town on Sunday for Church.’

‘They are all idiots Sir,’ The General – now renamed Guard Commander of course – informed me with disgust. ‘How can they march when they don’t know their right foot from their left?’

‘Fortunately,’ I replied encouragingly, ‘they have a Guard Commander who is aware of the high standard required of a Palace Guard on public parade, a Guard Commander, moreover, who knows how to drill his men until they are perfect.’

Unfortunately I think I laid it on a little too thick and slightly stretched the bounds of credibility. For the Commander looked at me rather as if I had called for the stars. But I had a trick up my sleeve. My Father had already indicated his willingness to drill the Guard – indeed he had shown considerable enthusiasm at the prospect and had indeed indicated a few pointers. So when I suggested to the Commander that he might enlist my Father’s help on a more permanent basis I was able to do so confidently. The Commander appeared relieved and delighted, saying he would visit Father immediately after the Flag Ceremony. I gave him a few pointers as to how he might phrase his request, and he returned to the formed-up Guard on the lawn muttering his lines to himself.

Once again slipping out through my back gate I returned home. Shortly after my return there was a knock on the front door. I said ‘it might be for you Father’ and I was delighted to hear, from an adjacent room, the Guard Commander’s voice ringing out loud and clear in a proper military manner. ‘Commander of the Palace Guard reporting, Saah. Respectfully requesting your assistance in drilling the men tomorrow in the stable yard at your convenience, Saah!’

I heard my Father reply quietly that he would take a parade in the yard at ten o’clock next morning, followed by two hours’ drilling. As he returned to our living room I said I hoped he was not taking on too much. ‘Not a bit of it!’ he replied, with obvious relish.

Things were getting done, Mr Harvey. Progress was being made.

Chapter Nine: L’Après-midi d’un Faune

The atmosphere of my family home that evening was warm and friendly, and bustling with activity especially in the kitchen.

Our cook had fallen and broken her wrist, so she had naturally been excused kitchen duties until the plaster cast could be removed. Fortunately one of the evening’s guests was André, the Palace Chef, who despite being a guest, had taken total possession of the kitchen, occasionally barking commands at my mother as if she were an under-chef in a busy restaurant. Two maids were laying the table, my mother occasionally coming in and chiding them when a fork was out of place or a cruet missing. ‘No, no!’ I heard her cry impatiently, ‘take those flowers away and cut down the stalks. People can’t see one another through those high blossoms.’

I hasten to add, Mr Harvey, that Mother was always kind and courteous with her staff. It’s just that well, I think she was overexcited. It was, as I have explained, their first get-together with friends for several years.

I showered and changed, then returned to join my father in the living room. In Father’s view, cooking and table-laying was, and I suspect still is, women’s work. I felt refreshed and relaxed as my father and I sat quietly sipping sherry. ‘We’d only be in the way,’ my father said as he often did. ‘Best to let the womenfolk get on with things.’ I was certainly not going to argue.

‘Did you have a fair day?’ Father asked, more conversationally than pointedly. ‘I had a very full day,’ I replied, ‘and I’m still in the process of digesting and evaluating it – though I think on the whole that it went pretty well.’ ‘Good’ was Father’s only reply. But he sounded well satisfied.

We sat quietly for a while, then I began thinking aloud. 'One thing I'm not looking forward to...' 'And that is?' 'Oh, I don't know. Becoming a hermit, a stuffed object in a glass case. I enjoy being an ordinary human being.'

'You'll need to clarify that a little!' 'Well, I like walking home from work and living here. I don't really want to live in the Palace and sleep in the Great Presidential Bed. I want to be able to stroll around my home town like a normal human being, ride the buses up to the villages and the hills, go for walks...'

My father paused me with a raised hand. 'Just a moment there. You say you want to be like a normal human being. Aren't you one already?' 'Yes. But I suppose a President has to act like... well a President.' 'And what does that mean, driving around in a large black car with black windows and a motorcade, taking your walk in the hills surrounded by security men with machine guns?' 'Yes, something like that I suppose.' 'And you don't want to do that?' 'No.'

My father paused thoughtfully for a few moments before responding. 'I've known many politicians, diplomats and self-styled statesmen in my time,' he said slowly. 'And most of them are arrogant, pompous and self-opinionated. Not qualities I would want to see in my own son.' 'So what are you saying Father?' 'I'm saying that you are an ordinary person. You have an important job to do and I hope – I know that you will do it well. But you don't need to become abnormal to do it. If you want to live with your family, walk about your town and ride the buses like a normal citizen why should you not do so?'

I tell you, Mr Harvey, I felt totally overjoyed. A normal person! Yes of course! Why indeed not? Father looked at me and caught my obvious relief and delight. 'Good idea?' he asked, smiling. 'An excellent idea' I replied.

'You are head of an unusual business,' Father said. 'Every single person in our country is a customer of yours. Mingle with people. Walk with them, ride with them. Take tea with them. They will let you know how you're doing!'

'I'm sure they will!'

My Father turned to face me, now looking serious. 'And when you no longer wish to mix with people beware, for the next step is that you will not feel safe with them. And that will be the time for another revolution.'

His words caused a sharp pain in my stomach, Mr Harvey. He was right of course. But it must never get to that. And I'm pleased to say, it never did.

My moment of anguish was cut short by a knock on the door. The first guests would be arriving. We would be eight altogether. My father, Mother and self would be joined by, well, André the Palace's Swiss Chef who was still making his presence felt in the kitchen as the meal neared readiness and tensions mounted. There were four others to come.

Father's Number One had been known to the ex-President as the Supreme Commander, though he had nothing much to command. The President's physician, Doctor Samir, was an elderly gentleman known to us simply as Doc.

The City Manager was responsible for such things as telephones, water, electricity etc as far as he was able given the limitation of supplies and components; a retired Englishman who had stayed on ('I could never afford to live in England'). His name was Charlie Mulroney, and since CM was also the initials of his job, that had become his 'name' among his friends.

Finally, the Admiral – yet another product of my predecessor's love of Grand Titles. Actually he was supposed to captain the Presidential Yacht, though that magnificent vessel, of which I had caught a glimpse in my youth, had been laid up for several years. The Admiral was a retired Belgian sea captain called Mariss Jansons who was currently far more interested in the trials and tribulations of the island's dwindling fishing fleet.

So. That was to be our party for the evening, and before long our full complement, an all-male gathering save for Mother, were standing around supping sherry and savoury bits and very clearly enjoying their first gathering and their new-found freedom. I couldn't help noticing that each one would come up to Father, shake his hand and say quietly, 'Well done old chap,' or 'brilliantly executed,' whereas I just got a somewhat patronizing pat on the shoulder with rather fatuous comments like 'well, it's up to you now, young man' in tones which indicated very little confidence that I would ever achieve anything. I wasn't really bothered, Mr Harvey. It was their evening. They were a different generation. They were enjoying the moment. Their moment. And they all turned out to be quite jovial company.

In any case, while they were enjoying their new freedom of conversation and anticipating the resumption of their Friday card game, I had my own agenda. I managed a quick word with the CM. I needed to know the state of the town's infrastructural services. 'Desperate!' was his immediate reply. Black comedy aside, we arranged to meet on Monday to review the situation in detail. I hoped that on Monday I would have the secretarial and reception services of Miss Hovnanian so that appointments could be made in an orderly fashion. I also told the CM that I would need to make some

phone calls to England the next day, Saturday, in the afternoon. He suggested we should meet at the telephone exchange at 2 p.m., and he would try to ensure that everything was working smoothly.

I also learned quite a lot from the general conversation during the course of dinner, and was able to quiz a few individuals personally. I was sitting next to the Admiral, and with a little prompting on my part, he gave me the lowdown on the island's fishing fleet – mostly a catalogue of spare parts vitally needed and unobtainable for lack of money. I invited the Admiral to further conversation on this subject on Monday, at our mutual convenience.

Number One, who was in quite a jolly mood, looked pointedly towards me. 'You've met Obid I suppose?' he asked, obviously looking for some lighthearted entertainment. 'Yes indeed. A very helpful fellow.' 'Was he wearing his full Butler's Rig – tails and striped trousers?' 'Well no actually. It was a sort of purple getup...' At this comment everyone burst into fits of laughter. It was the CM who was permitted to tell the story since he had witnessed its origin.

I was told how Obid had been taken to England and trained as a butler, which of course I knew already. But there was more. Obid's great joy was his weekly visit to the Regal cinema, until like so many others, it had to close. The building was to become a supermarket and everything was sold off at a grand auction. Rows of tipup seats, huge velvet curtains, two enormous Kalee projectors with arc lights, the deep-freeze where the ice creams and iced lollies were kept, and a huge cinema organ which Obid's Consul sponsor had thought to buy and take back to his stately home... until he found it had five manuals and fifty thousand pipes or whatever, it was quite enormous. Anyway, Obid fancied the Usher's uniform, and when it came up on the auctioneer's block, Obid stood up. Everyone else just remained seated and waved their catalogues to make a bid, but not our Obid. He stood up – he is a tall and imposing figure – and called out in stentorian tone: 'I will take that, if you please, Sir'. The auctioneer was momentarily taken aback. He asked, somewhat uncertainly, if there were any other bids. There were not, and Obid got his trophy. He brought it back here with him and wore it at the Palace for a while, until the President, then becoming somewhat suspicious by nature, noticed the word REGAL on the uniform's shoulder. He ordered the word removed at once, and later banned the outfit altogether.

I suspect it was brought out in my honour, Mr. Harvey. And much appreciated it was too! Though I would add that it later gave way to a more somber outfit for daily attire.

There was some amusing sparring between the Doc and André the chef. The Doc was heard explaining to my mother, who was next to him, that the ex-President's heart condition was much worse than anyone knew. The Doc had obtained supplies of medicinal compounds which he prepared himself and inserted into jelly capsules. It was vital that two were taken each night before retiring. André had become disenchanted as the culinary ingredients he was given to work with became less and less exotic, and overhearing, asked pointedly why the Doc had not put 'something else' in the capsules, or even just nothing at all if they were that important. I felt my face colouring slightly as I recalled Obid's treatment of the vital capsules 'on the evening in question'.

The Doc's rejoinder was to the effect that if André so disliked the President, why had he continued to offer him culinary delicacies rather than 'something a little stronger'. André swiftly responded. 'You have your Hippocratic Oath, Doctor. It is your job to preserve life. Well. I am personal chef to my Master, and it is my Epicurean Oath to give gastronomic satisfaction'.

I must say here Mr Harvey, that this light hearted banter was all given and taken with the best of jovial spirits. Anyway, that little exchange brought forth laughter and a short round of applause.

Then my father spoke. 'Gentlemen, I know we would all wish to thank my wife and André for an excellent meal.' Applause, accompanied by hands banging on the table. 'And now...' he faltered. Then turning to me he said 'Son, I am going to ask you to forgive a lot of old men... you see, we could never meet like this. The Guard was a kind of Secret Service and they even tried to blackmail our servants. The President had his spies everywhere. We could never...'

I stopped him.

'I know Father. You and your friends would like to go into the next room with a glass of Port and enjoy your Friday card game.'

My father, and his friends, looked somewhat surprised. 'Oh yes, I know all about it,' I replied casually. 'The President has his spies everywhere!'

Dead silence. Then everyone burst out laughing and banging the table. As the hilarity died down and the company began pushing back their chairs, Number One, who was at the head of the table, stood up, and raising his glass ceremoniously, called out 'Our New President!', to which everyone duly responded with warmth and enthusiasm.

As Father's friends left the dining table, chuckling and patting me on the shoulder as they left the room one by one, several asked pointedly if I would join them. I declined with thanks, pleading a heavy day behind me and the prospect of another one ahead. One or two reacted with slight surprise, perhaps wondering why anyone elevated to the position of Head of State should ever have to do anything. Generally however, my polite decline was accepted as if expected. They knew as I did, that this was their private reunion, something very special which only they, after years of oppression and forced separation, could truly enjoy.

So I said my goodnights and retired to the seclusion of my own room where I admit I sat in something of a daze for a while, there seemed so much to absorb, so much for my mind to get to grips with, to sort and to put into context.

I took a hot bath, as has always been my regular evening custom Mr Harvey. *Qui lavat peccata diei*. I always feel that a hot bath before retiring washes away the sins of the day. I would never willingly take to my bed without it. And so, as the storybooks say, to bed.

I had set my alarm for 6.30 a.m., rather late for me. I got up, showered, dressed, and took a stroll around the Palace Grounds, having asked one of the maids to take a tray of fruit, a roll or whatever was available, and a thermos of coffee up to my room. When I returned it was waiting for me as requested.

I spent the morning in my room, reviewing past events, going over my notes from the Attic Club, assembling my thoughts and plans for the immediate future, which would in fact be that afternoon. It was a pleasant room Mr Harvey. I had a bed which made up like a sofa during the day, a couple of easy chairs, and my desk under the window which looked out onto the garden at the back of the house, our own private garden. Quite extensive. Beyond that was the wall which surrounded our compound. Fortunately it was almost completely concealed by bushes – oleanders, hibiscus, and some low date palms. The wall is still there, but the barbed wire along the top was very quickly removed!

Actually it was fortunate that my room faced the garden rather than the front of the house which looked almost directly onto the Palace. For at 10 a.m. sharp the Palace Guard began parading in the stable yard. Up and down, up and down they marched, my father barking orders, often echoed by The General who was anxious to learn the ways of command, being as he was now, the Guard Commander. 'Left right left right – get in step there, arms straight, fists closed, thumbs out, swing those arms right up NO not so high, level with your belts – left right left right smarten up there, body straight, head high, chin up – WAKE UP that man!'

They were drilled for two and a half hours Mr Harvey, non-stop, without a single break. And I have to tell you, that when they paraded up the street to Church next day, uniforms clean, buttons and black boots shining, everyone in step, white-gloved hands all swinging to precisely belt height... well, a smarter body of men you'd be hard to find.

But I am jumping ahead. There is something else I must tell you about that morning. At about eleven o'clock my mother came in with a cup of coffee and some home-made shortbread fingers. She was very good you know. Left a person in peace, except for some small refreshment just when it was needed. She sat down beside me. 'Penny for your thoughts' she said – an old English expression you know!

I sipped my coffee and nibbled on a shortbread. 'I was just thinking... well I'm trying to assemble a cabinet, a group of people each with specific duties.'

'That sounds like a pretty normal custom. I mean, every Prime Minister or President has his cabinet ministers.'

'Ah, yes, but that's the problem I was wondering about. I don't want to call them Ministers.'

'Any particular reason?'

'Yes. It gives them airs. It has connotations of superiority. Right from the start, I want to stress their duties, not their status.'

'That seems very reasonable. So what we're looking for is another name.'

'Exactly.'

'So tell me now... you have, say, a Minister of Roads. Describe to me his function, what you expect of him. In a few words.'

'Well, I'd say, he's the person in my government responsible for roads, new roads, upkeep of existing ones.'

My mother and I looked at one another. We both had the same thought. *Responsible* – that’s the key word. So could I call my cabinet ministers ‘Responsibles’? Why not? The Responsible for Agriculture. The Responsible for Education... Why not indeed?

In fact Mr Harvey, that simple title has been a tremendous success. Instead of people cautiously pushing forward one of their more daring members and approaching a *Minister* in fear and trembling when something needs doing, people will speak out.

‘You are the Responsible for Education. Why have you not done this or that?’

Frankly, I think all government ministers should be re-named Responsibles. That’d get them down off their high horses! They’re all arrogant incompetent fools!

And for that, I am unapologetic Mr Harvey. Look at Great Britain. Its politicians fight to get into government. Then they squabble and fight over jobs. Are cabinet posts allotted on the basis of knowledge or competence? Not a bit of it. Cabinet posts are ranked in status and importance, and one is moved up or down, up if you back the Prime Minister, down if you appear to threaten him. Does the Minister of Transport know anything about transport? Yes of course – he is thoroughly familiar with the cushioned and curtained all-leather luxury of his chauffeur-driven limousine complete with television, surround sound and a well-stocked bar. I have ridden in such a vehicle Mr Harvey. But does the Minister of Transport know anything about road conditions, buses or trains? Not on your Nellie – that’s another English expression, but don’t ask me what it means!

Now. Where were we? Ah yes. Saturday morning. I and my mother had just christened our future Cabinet Ministers as Responsibles. Yes of course. That was an important decision. But the morning was not the main part of my day. I had a light lunch then repaired to the telephone exchange where, you may recall, I had an appointment with CM who was hoping to have everything working. Fact was, I had some important calls to make to my friends in England.

My father was always, as he is now, very keen on classical music. Of course he has since enlarged his collection, but at that time he had only a few LPs as they were then. He would circulate them with one or two other friends of similar tastes. One of his favourite pieces of music was Debussy’s *L’Après-midi d’un Faune* which he always translated humorously as *An Afternoon on the Phone*. And that was exactly how I spent that particular Saturday p.m. Fortunately the phone system was working perfectly and equally fortunately my old friend and Attic Club mentor Dr Roberts was at home when I called, with plenty of time to talk to me. In the end, we talked for over an hour and a half, with a crystal clear line.

My first surprise, a slight disappointment in fact, was that the news of our regime change had not reached him. Indeed, how would it do so? Our neighbour countries ignore us, the rest of the world is unaware of us. I remember the first thing Dr Roberts asked was – ‘can we speak freely?’ I answered that of course we could – quite jovially. Only then did I realize that he was wondering if this was a clandestine pre-revolution call or a post revolution celebration. Actually of course it was a post revolution call for backup.

Apart from our academic, working relationship we had become personal friends, and for a while we talked about family and mutual acquaintances, enjoying our renewed contact. Then he asked me how the Revolution itself had gone, so I had to tell the story. And how was I faring as President, he wanted to know of course. I had only been in Office, what? a couple of days, but there was already so much to tell, I simply invited Dr Roberts and his family for a visit. I assured him he would be put up in the Presidential Palace! He did in fact take me up on it less than a month later.

Then we got down to the essential business: two items in fact. First, he was to put the word around the charities that our country had a new President who was, for the time being anyway, scrupulously honest and would ensure that his staff were too. So they could send some goodies if they felt like it.

Second, he was to sell our labour at whatever price it took to get those sons of fun, the garment trade, to set up their factories here, as quickly as possible. Dr Roberts also said he would send a report of our revolution to the newspapers. Our friends would read it, and a few spotty schoolchildren might scurry to their atlases to find out where we were. Anyway, that was that.

I felt quite exhausted after that long chat. But I had two more calls to make – though they would both be shorter and easier.

First I called our Consulate in Madrid – though as I have already explained, it was a Consulate only in name. I was surprised to be told that the Consul had already learned of our regime change – I do hate the word revolution. Apparently our little network of unpaid and thoroughly neglected diplomats was all a-buzz with excitement probably hoping, as my perceptive friend the French Ambassador would later suggest to me, that they would at last get recognition and perhaps

even some pay. Back pay, perhaps. But I'm afraid I have little sympathy for the Diplomatic Corps, my only sympathy being for those poor taxpayers at home who keep them in luxury.

For what do they do, may I ask, apart from serve cocktails and canapés to one another. Even the larger countries cannot justify a diplomatic corps today, not if one's criterion is the benefit to the ordinary citizen who has to pay for it.

Bear in mind that the whole concept of a diplomatic corps took root in the late 1800s and early 1900s when monarchies were falling throughout Europe, and the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans and the Middle East was on the wane. Those were the days of secret treaties, *agents provocateurs*, international intrigue, plots hatched out in the sleeping compartments of the Orient Express... an elegant white-suited gentleman, two swarthy unshaven henchmen and a suave Russian beauty in a tight black evening dress, with a long cigarette holder and a huge diamond ring concealing a phial of poison which she would deftly tip into your champagne when your head was turned... Those were the days indeed! Apologies, Mr Harvey. A little carried away there!

The fact is that in those days of Empires the stakes were high, but communication was as slow as a train or a ship. So a senior Ambassador needed to be a Minister Plenipotentiary, full of power Mr Harvey, from the Latin *plenus* meaning full, and *potens* meaning power. He would be fully conversant with the secret agenda and aspirations of his government, probably in possession of a leather bag full of money, and would have full powers to conclude treaties, secret or open, which would further his country's interests. Today this sort of romantic nonsense is a thing of the past. Certainly, international treaties and negotiations still take place, the more shameful ones still cloaked in secrecy, but a team can fly halfway across the world in a matter of hours, remaining in constant contact with their home governments. Diplomats are dinosaurs from the past, unnecessary, and extremely expensive.

But we digress once more. You really must try harder to keep me to the point! I was on the phone to Madrid if I remember rightly, and the real purpose of my call was to ask the consul to contact my old friend from the park – whose name I confess I had already forgotten if indeed I had ever known it, I'm terrible with names – and arrange for him to be flown back home. I would send money for the purpose. It was a personal whim, I know, but remember it was this fellow and his story that had turned me from a Playboy to a President.

Next I telephoned our Ambassador in Paris. He too had heard the news and was attempting to congratulate me while his wife in the background was calling 'is he alright, is he safe, was he injured in the fighting?'

We chatted for awhile, as friends, not as President to Ambassador, then the Ambassador said 'Oh by the way, I had Jean-Luc here yesterday – you remember the artist who designed the coat-of-arms over our front entrance. As soon as he heard of your revolution he came up with a brilliant scheme to make your – our – poor country some money. He has become quite famous now you know.'

The scheme was in fact quite... well, amusing to say the least. The Ambassador had a small collection of old photos of our main town in the early 1900s, especially the colonial buildings and the historic part of town which had been the Indian Quarter. Jean-Luc's idea was that he would design a set of postage stamps featuring these old prints.

I had protested that our people never wrote letters and our sale of stamps was minuscule. But that was not the idea, Mr Harvey. These stamps were not intended for use on letters. Oh no. They would be destined for a much nobler and more rewarding purpose. They would be made up into sets, including some high-value stamps, for sale to international stamp collectors who would pay face-value plus a premium for first-day cover. Since the substantial proceeds, after deduction of minimal printing costs and a modest design fee, would go to our nation's coffers with neither investment nor even effort on my part I could hardly say no, and in fact these sets still surface now and then at stamp auctions. There's another little insider snippet for your book!

Anyway, I had told my mother I would be home for tea and the thought of home-made English-style scones with home-made jam suddenly began to call. I went home quite well satisfied.

Our Saturday Tea was in fact a High Tea, our last meal of the day so the maids and cook could go home early. We chatted about generalities and neither my father nor my mother asked any tiresome questions like 'how was your day?!' After tea I felt very much like a long chat with my old tutor and neighbour. But he was away on what he called a 'money-foraging expedition'. He had a number of academic connections in Britain and Europe, and would often be called to fill in for a term. With his qualifications he was never short of offers for long.

So I sat around doing absolutely nothing – and enjoying every minute of it! Then, as if that wasn't enough idleness for a new President, we watched a video. Mother wanted 'High Society' with Grace Kelly; Father never objected because he usually slept through most video movies anyway. And for me, it was just light enough to be undemanding, but lively enough to keep my mind off other things – I could say Affairs of State if I felt like being a bit pompous!

After the film I said how nice it was to relax as I seemed to have been so busy. Mother smiled sweetly and said 'of course, dear,' while Father laughed and said 'you've only been in Office three days!'

It seemed quite incredible, but of course he was right. It was almost impossible for me to believe that only a few days ago I had been leading a happy, carefree life swanning around in 'Gay Paree'. Indeed I had been dining with our Ambassador and his wife at that very moment on the previous Saturday. A lot had happened in the past three days. And there would surely be plenty more to come.

But tomorrow was Sunday. A pleasant Sunday breakfast, a walk to Church, back for traditional Sunday lunch, then perhaps I'd take my little VW Beetle up into the hills for a nice long quiet walk on some of the trails my father had shown me when I was younger. Yes, I promised myself, tomorrow would be a nice quiet Day of Rest.

In the event of course it would turn out to be nothing of the sort. But it was a pleasant thought to go to bed with.

Chapter Ten: A Goat and a Beetle

The day started peacefully enough. I got up just before seven, a little later than normal, showered and took my usual stroll around the Palace Gardens. Family breakfast was at 8.30, after which we usually sat around reading magazines which came by subscription from various sources, generally a month or so late.

Just after 9.30, Father excused himself, returning later in full military uniform. Mother looked up at him admiringly as she always did when she saw her 'dashing Colonel' in full rig. 'I'm going to inspect the Guard, then give them some final drilling before the Church Parade', Father announced as he left. You will recall, Mr Harvey, that the Band would lead the Guard in a Parade through the town and up to our main church for morning service.

My mother also retired to her room to get herself ready as the town clocks started chiming ten. There were several chiming clocks in town and they were all correct to plus or minus ten minutes, which meant that each hour, a clock would strike anywhere between ten to and ten past. I was already dressed for Church, except for my jacket and Presidential Sash, so I continued my reading. Then I heard the sound of music. It was a few minutes after ten. I went upstairs to what we called our Day Sitting Room which faced towards the Palace, and there on the lawn was the Band in a half circle, playing to a gradually assembling audience. It was a lovely scene, Mr Harvey, the grounds, the flowers and shrubs, the neatly cut lawn, the band playing and people enjoying the music in the sunshine – it had a wonderful air of normality about it. Then I heard an impatient knock on the front door. I called 'I'll go' to my mother – the maids had cleared breakfast and gone home to get ready for church. We all went to church, Mr Harvey. We were, and are, a strong Wesleyan community.

I opened the door to an excited Editor, holding up an unfolded broadsheet in the wind like a kite. 'Our first newspaper in seven years,' he said breathlessly, 'just off the press. First copy for you to see!'

It was indeed an exciting moment. We spread the sheet out on the dining table. The Editor folded it carefully in half so that we could see it in its proper form, explaining that it had been too wet to fold before. The front page headline proclaimed 'The Island Chronicle is BACK!!', followed by a brief history of the paper since its founding in 1854 with a reference to the back page of historical photos. One column on the front page announced that 'following the death of his predecessor from natural causes, our new President Macumbie-Reynolds has assumed office. He has pledged honesty, openness and efficiency in government, as well as guaranteeing freedom of speech and the press. A new Palace Guard and Guard Commander have also been appointed, following disclosures of irregularities among the old Guard in the execution of their duties.'

I would mention here, Mr Harvey, that I had in mind to attract some foreign investment, and the prime consideration for anyone investing in a developing country is stability.

Inside the paper, the double spread featured pictures of our villages, and usually, the Headman. 'This afternoon I will print, then distribute to the villages for sale tomorrow morning. I've been working twenty-four hours a day on this, Sir.' 'Well', I replied laughing, 'you should be well rested after seven years' inactivity!'

It was ten-twenty-five. Father returned, looking well pleased I might add. Mother came down, I put on jacket and Sash, and we all walked the few short steps to meet up with the Band outside the Palace Gates. The Band stopped playing and formed up in two ranks. The stable yard gates opened, and wow! as they say these days. I could hardly believe my eyes

as the Guard marched smartly towards the Gate, immaculately turned out, perfectly in step, gloved hands swinging uniformly to belt height. The Guard formed two ranks behind the Band under my father's supervision, then the Parade set off at ten-thirty sharp towards the church. My family, self, and our proud Editor walked behind, and as we progressed along the town's main street we were joined by many townspeople, all dressed up, looking relaxed and happy. They would say Good Morning to us, the gentlemen raising their hats. It was a most charming and sociable procession indeed.

One rather sad note I should add, Mr Harvey. As the procession began I heard a soft 'Good Morning, Sir' behind me. I looked around and it was Mister B. I was delighted that he had conquered his apprehensiveness and decided to emerge from his 'lower quarters'. But he was looking rather sad. I asked if all was well and he told me that when he had come out for the first time and gone to the corner teashop he had learned that his wife, believing him dead, had married again. He said he was going to church to ask the Lord what he should do. I said I considered him as a personal friend, and he could talk to me any time as man to man.

Anyway, to return to our Sunday morning. The church was already filling up as my parents took their seats in the front row as was their custom. The Palace Guard would occupy the rear two rows. The Band meanwhile remained outside playing some favourite hymns with many of the congregation inside joining in. I went around to the vestry door at the back – I wanted a few words with the Reverend.

The Service went through its usual, pleasantly familiar routine which all of us present had grown up with, knew by heart, and loved.

The Reverend gave out the routine sundry notices at the end of the Service, including an announcement to the effect that 'our recently deceased President will lie at rest in the State Room of the Palace where any members of the public wishing to pay their last respects may view the mortal remains between the hours of two and six this afternoon. His body will be given a Christian burial tomorrow at sea, attended by myself and Captain Jansons.

I would mention, Mr Harvey, that we are a good Christian community. Our burial ground is sacred to those interred there and their living families, and we would not want to risk any disturbance – and believe me, if our ex-President were to be buried there, not only would many protest, but some also would have strong personal reasons to desecrate the grave.

Then the Reverend called upon our new President to say a few words. I can recall exactly what I had said. I spoke briefly, slowly and clearly, so that my message would be heard and understood.

'My Dear Friends, I stand before you as your new President. With my right hand upon the Holy Bible, I swear to you that I will serve you to the best of my abilities, honestly, openly, and using all the knowledge of the arts of government which I have learned during my studies in London.

'Many of you may say that you are poor. But in truth you are rich, for you have brains to think and hands to work. With land to cultivate, with money made available to invest in machines for production, and with fair trade, and justice in all things, we can and will prosper.

'The People need good laws by which to live. But the rulers who make the laws must also be subject to laws – the Laws of God.

'Seven hundred years ago, a book was written in England which laid down the rules and principles of honest government. I will quote to you from it.

"The power of justice comes from God. The power of INjustice is from the devil, not from God. A Ruler will be the minister of him whose work he performs. As long as he does justice he is the minister of God, but he is the Devil's minister when he commits injustice or injury."

'I promise you my friends, I will never do the Devil's work.'

Sir Joshua paused, reflecting silently. I kept my promise you know, Mr Harvey. I have never done the Devil's work.

Again he was silent. Then, after a few minutes' reflection, he resumed again with renewed energy.

So. We had a lovely service. The hymns were played by the Band outside the open doors – they were too noisy to bring inside! And everybody sang lustily with full voice and in full four-part harmony, just as they always do. That in itself is a truly uplifting experience. I myself sing bass, though I have always felt that the tenor part is more fun!

After the Service – yes, there was some business to do even then and there! I cornered Obid and the undertaker, both of whom had attended the Service of course, to arrange for the public Laying-in-State of my predecessor in the Palace Stateroom. Having received assurances that all would be properly taken care of, I put the matter out of my mind. Best

place for it, Mr Harvey. Anyway, we had a nice walk back, in procession as we had come. It was so wonderfully informal, so... so very natural. For a start, I simply wanted normality. And I think that's what everyone else wanted too.

Our family enjoyed our usual Sunday Lunch, after which my parents would normally take a siesta. I told them that I wanted to take my little VW Beetle and escape into the hills for a long, quiet walk. 'You will have to go to the garage for it', Father said. 'One of the tyres was flat, and Tulu took it away. He said he would need to try and find something to fit.' You see Mr Harvey, one couldn't just pull exactly the right size and shape off the shelf!

So I walked around to the garage. There was only one. It was owned by a huge African, very black, and usually covered in oil and grease. I had only met him once when I was small. I remember him towering over me, looking down at me as if I were a small ant on his garage floor. But he was respected as a first class mechanic and engineer. He also built our small bus bodies on a standard truck chassis without plans of any kind – they were sturdy, totally reliable, and quite stylish they were too.

As I approached the garage down its small back street, Tulu was standing out in front looking very proprietorial. 'I Tulu', he said. 'You son of Macumbie. You President,' adding in a commanding, almost threatening tone 'you make things better. Now BAD.' I mumbled something about hoping indeed to make things better, but I was ignored. With a wave of the hand, Tulu indicated my Beetle. 'Tire good. Son work on engine,' he tapped his ear 'engine make good music now. You pay. Half packet.'

I was quite taken by surprise. It had not yet occurred to me that I should carry a pocketful of our funny money around with me. 'Tomorrow?' I asked cautiously. Tulu replied with a loud 'hurrumph'. 'Before, people poor, President rich. Now people poor, President poor.' He paused for thought, then 'Pay tomorrow, OK. After tomorrow, BAD.' I made sure that Obid arranged payment first thing next morning – an advance on the President's first paycheque, I would call it.

At that point, a tall thin young man with a medium pale complexion and thin-rimmed glasses emerged from the back. Tulu reached out and putting an arm round his shoulder, pulled him out to stand in front of me. 'My Son!' he said, with evident pride. 'Study engineering in Germany. He make drawings, I build. Good buses, trucks. For people, and take to market. Now buses small, carry too many people. Danger. Roads bad. You make better.'

I had the feeling that I could never win a conversation with this man. But I attempted to hold my own, suggesting lamely that soon we could get some bigger buses, perhaps from India. 'NO!' Tulu replied in a voice like thunder. 'No buy buses. I make big buses. I make two already. Good buses. Look good. Very smart.'

'Where are they?' I replied, with genuine interest, 'I would like to see them.'

Tulu turned aside and spat disdainfully. 'Number One Bus in mountains. Village keep chickens in bus. Very bad.' Quite disgusted, Tulu obviously had no intention of elaborating any further.

His son, hitherto silent and clearly somewhat embarrassed, now introduced himself quietly with a polite 'I am Rowland, Mr. President. I am at your service.'

'Then perhaps you could explain... the bus?'

'It is simple Mr President, Sir. The villagers are holding the bus as hostage until their road is mended – there has been some serious subsidence. In truth, Sir, I am pleased, as I would not want a large bus driven down that road in its present condition.' 'And how long has it been in that condition?'

'Many months!' Tulu replied to my question. His son added 'Since the big rainfall two years ago.' 'Two years???' I asked incredulously. Father and Son remained silent, the son simply nodding.

Fearing that I was about to be lambasted by Tulu once again, I cast around for something to draw his fire. 'And what about the other bus?' I asked. 'You said there were two.'

Tulu waived his hand behind him. 'Sitting by side of road outside of town. Bus waiting.'

'Waiting for what?'

'Driver BAD. Very bad. All bus drivers BAD. Drink too much. Drive bus into rock at side of road. Break axle.'

'So how long will it take to get a new one?'

‘Axle come from Bombay. Come from Durban. They want good money. Ryals, Rupees, Rand. Not packets of paper. You give money, axle come.’

Yet another round to Mister Tulu.

Frankly Mr Harvey, I had had enough of a hammering. I wasn’t even going to promise money – I knew it would simply be met with disdain and disbelief. Had I not already established myself as the Penniless President? I said I would take the car now. Rowland asked if he might take a short ride with me as he wanted to listen to the engine. Welcoming the chance of a relatively civilized conversation I readily invited him along. Tulu disappeared without further ceremony, and walking behind me, his son guided me as I backed out, kicking tools and various auto components out of the way. Once outside in the street, he got in and we headed out towards the hills.

A short distance out of town we saw a very smart bus parked by the roadside. ‘Is that Tulu’s bus?’ I asked. ‘Yessir,’ Rowland replied proudly. ‘Father built it from my design.’ As we passed I could see distinct signs of occupation. ‘Are there people living in it?’ ‘Yes Sir Mr President. They have nowhere to go. We let them live there. It is better than children playing in the bus. They can be quite destructive.’

I was not going to comment. What could I say? Anyway, my mind was on other things. I had taken a liking to this young man. He was about my own age, intelligent, knowledgeable about roads and engineering matters, amiable, communicative, just the sort of candidate I needed for the Cabinet I was slowly trying to assemble.

I pulled the car into the side of the road and turned to face him. ‘Look,’ I said, ‘well, first of all, I’m Joshua, and my friends call me Jay’. I held out my hand. He hesitated, then smiled and as we shook hands he replied ‘I am Rowland. My colleagues in Germany call me Rollo.’ ‘Right,’ I replied. ‘Now, the thing is, I am trying to assemble a Government Cabinet, a group of people responsible for various tasks and areas of government. I need someone to take responsibility for Roads and Transportation. Will you take the job?’

After a little polite blustering he agreed. I was pleased. Another one in the bag! I asked if he would continue riding with me, to which he replied with a smile that in view of his new government appointment that would be quite appropriate. I explained that I had intended to go into the hills for a walk, but now considered myself ‘on duty’! ‘We will take the road to the village where your bus is being held,’ I said. ‘That way, we can see the damage.’

‘The villagers are very angry. Will you feel safe to go there?’

Quoting what my father had said to me recently, I replied ‘When a President is afraid to go among his people, then it is time for him to resign. And after only three days on the job, I’m not quite ready to give up yet.’ We both had a good laugh over that, as we headed up into the hills.

We came upon the area where the road had fallen away, and Rollo immediately exclaimed that it was worse than when he had seen it a month ago. We negotiated the narrow stretch of road very carefully, both holding our breath. We were quite relieved to get past it. A little farther up the road, and Rollo suggested we take a turn to the left, uphill and deeper into the mountains. ‘I have something else to show you,’ he said.

As we drove on up the road it began to narrow, with grasses and tall sugar canes encroaching on both sides. Finally the road became almost impassable, as bushes were pushing up through the thin tarmac surface coating. There was a wider place where vehicles had turned, and Rollo suggested we turn and park there. Together we walked farther up the track. Very soon we came upon a huge landslide which completely blocked the road.

There was no way around it. ‘Up there,’ said Rollo, waving beyond the blockage, ‘is the Valley of Solomon. Five years ago, before the road was closed, that valley produced much fine fruit of many kinds, also tea and coffee, not in large quantities, but of excellent quality. Now many of the villagers have gone and their houses lie empty. Those who have stayed are old, and live only from what they can cultivate.’

‘Did you say five years?’

‘Yes’.

‘We have much work to do.’

‘Yes.’

We drove back to the main, or rather the less-insubstantial road and continued towards the village which was our chosen destination. As the village came into view I asked Rollo how I should introduce him, what was his full name. ‘My father uses the old custom of his ancestors. There is no family name. My name is simply my own name, and that of my father.’

So my full name is Rowland Tulu. By the way, if you are wondering about the Rowland part, I was named after Sir Rowland Gibbons, one of our past Governors I believe. It was the fashion!

As we arrived at the start of the village's one and only street, really just a space between the huts, I parked, then reached in my pocket for my Official Presidential Sash which I had taken to carrying permanently in reserve. It may have looked a little incongruous against khaki slacks and a plain blue short-sleeved shirt – I had after all intended to do some mountain walking, rather than engaging in Presidential business! As we got out of the car, Rollo said 'better stay close together,' and I replied 'yes. And look confident'. Much to our growing surprise however, as we walked slowly up the road towards the large communal meeting hut at the top, people began coming out of their homes smiling and waving to us. By the time we reached the Meeting House our path was lined with smiling faces, many people were clapping their hands.

The Headman came out of the Meeting House, stepping down onto the road for the House was raised, and lifting his arms openly towards us exclaimed 'Welcome! Welcome Son of Macumbie, our new President. Welcome!' And with that, he ushered us into the Meeting House and gestured to some cushions on the floor – a mark of honour in their society. I bowed to the Headman. Then, indicating my colleague, I said 'this is Mr Rowland Tulu. He is the member of my new government responsible for roads and transport.' The Headman burst out laughing. He was a large, plump man, and he was almost rolling about with amusement. Looking at Rollo he said 'you will have plenty of work, my friend!' I should mention, Mr Harvey, that Rollo was considered on the same level as the Headman. I on the other hand was a step higher and would never be addressed in so familiar a fashion.

Refreshments were brought, and we sat discussing pleasantries, one's health and the health of one's family. It would have been quite inappropriate to launch directly into business matters, if indeed they were to be discussed at all. It is quite common for business matters to be concealed in parables and other roundabout devices. That is done to avoid confrontation which we consider impolite and inappropriate – indeed generally unproductive.

After a while however, I did mention that I would investigate the financial situation with regard to mending the roads. The Chief held up his hand. 'We do not need money Sir. We want to do the work ourselves. We enjoy making everything better in our village. We work together as a group, and we sing. Our problem is that we need tools. Shovels and picks. But I think that for the big work, where the road has fallen away, we must have an engine, for it is too much for the human hand alone.'

As we walked back to the car, having taken our leave of the Headman, I reflected that rather than tax people then pay them to work, it would be much easier if they paid their taxes directly by working, if that was what they wanted. Certainly I would immediately set about acquiring any materials they might need.

I was still wondering in the back of my mind, why our reception had been so cordial. As if in answer to my unspoken question, a woman stepped out from the crowd lining our path and grasped my hands. 'My son is in new Palace Guard. He told us. You are good man. A Good President.'

I recall smiling warmly to her and taking her hands in mine. I said quietly 'your son is a fine young man. When the road is repaired you must come down to visit him and to see the Guard on Parade.' Of course I did not know her son from Adam, but the dear lady was so happy, I was glad I had perhaps told a little white lie.

We reached the car and were about to get in when a man appeared through the crowd holding a small goat in his arms. Its legs were tied loosely together. He thrust it to me and I instinctively accepted it, while those around applauded warmly. What could I do but bow graciously and accept – to more applause. The animal was inserted with some difficulty into the small back seat of the Beetle and we departed, leaving behind us the sound of cheering and clapping. Our passenger, meanwhile, was wriggling around and making quite a bit of noise. There was also a fairly pungent odour. Both the windows were already wound right down, and the goat eventually settled with its neck on Rollo's shoulder and its head sticking out of the window.

I negotiated the subsided section carefully, then we could both relax. 'By the way,' I said, 'we never saw the bus.'

Rollo replied: 'I caught sight of it behind the Meeting House, but I said nothing. I think they might have been a little ashamed.' 'Yes, perhaps you're right. But using a new bus to keep chickens...'

'Yes, it is unfortunate. When I checked it two months ago it was in a bad condition inside. The chickens sleep on the backs of the seats and leave a lot of mess. Also there is straw on the seats for them to lay eggs. I told the Headman I was sorry to see it in that condition and he agreed. But he said that since neither the road nor the bus would ever work again they found another purpose for it. I think they truly believed they would become isolated, lost like the Valley of Solomon.' 'Well,' I replied, 'we will show them otherwise.'

We drove on for awhile then Rollo said 'I believe you had intended to take a walk in the hills.'

'Well yes, that was the original intention.'

'So why don't you pull off here by this turn. There's a really nice walk here. And we can take the goat. If he has any business to do, better not to do it in the Beetle!'

'Good thinking Rollo!'

So I parked, and we set off up a small track with the goat, its legs now unbound, following alongside on an improvised rope leash. There were clear signs that the road had once been well-made, but no longer. 'It is my favourite walk,' Rollo said. 'And there is something I want you to see.'

We must have walked for about half an hour, often pushing our way through bushes and sugar cane. I was enjoying the exercise, and Rollo was striding ahead so confidently, it had to be worth the effort! Finally we came to a clearing, and there to our left stood a most wonderful villa. It had not been used for years, but it was well preserved save for one of its window shutters hanging loose.

What made it so wonderful? Because it had a very special air, a feeling of peace and tranquility. Around it was what had clearly been a well-kept garden. In front and slightly to the side was a large banyan tree with a bench seat surrounding its trunk. From it one looked out across the lower hills to the sea beyond, while an off-sea breeze picked up the scents of the many flowering trees and bushes below.

Truly, it quite took my breath away. 'Is it not magnificent?' Rollo said. 'Every time I come here I feel better, I feel warm inside. To live here would be my dream.'

'Do we know who owns it?' I asked.

'It was built by the father or maybe grandfather of our present Ambassador in Paris,' Rollo replied. 'But I do not think he appreciates it. He has never visited. He has never cared for it, nor sent anyone here to look after it. Each time I come here, I do some small works to preserve it.'

Of course I knew only too well that our Ambassador in France had sworn he would never return to his country. Perhaps something might be done...

As we drove back into town Rollo asked 'What will you do with Uncle Tom?' 'Uncle Tom?'

'Yes. The goat. He has a beard exactly like my Uncle Tom.'

'I don't know. It's a major problem for me.'

'Why so?'

'Well first because I cannot accept gifts. No member of the government may accept gifts.'

'But it is the custom.'

'Maybe. But it must stop right now.'

'But why?'

'Because gifts become bribes and bribes get larger and more accepted and more essential if things are to be done. Then the people get poorer and government servants get richer.'

'I see your point', Rollo conceded.

'Also, I have another problem. I really don't know what I am expected to do with this animal, but there is no way I would kill it. I am vegetarian, so nor would I eat it.'

'It could become a Palace Mascot, like the military regiments have', Rollo suggested.

'Rollo, that is a brilliant suggestion! Yes, Uncle Tom shall become our Palace Mascot.' As if in response, there was a gurgling sound from behind accompanied by a long grunt and a somewhat overpowering odour. We both couldn't help laughing.

We arrived back in town and drove straight into the stable yard. We extracted the goat from the Beetle, untying its legs which had again been bound for the return trip, and using the rope as a collar and leash, as we had done when we had taken it with us on our walk. The goat was presented to the *Sice* – that’s the Hindi/Arab word we use for the groom who looked after the horse. He was instructed to clean the car and take charge of the animal. ‘This is Uncle Tom,’ I explained, with as much seriousness and dignity as I could muster. ‘He is to be the Palace Mascot.’

‘Uncle Tom, Sir?’ the *Sice* enquired with a little hesitancy. ‘Yes. Uncle Tom’, I replied.

‘A fine animal, Excellency. But I think you will need to find a different name for... *her*,’ the *Sice* replied.

Rollo and I walked away chuckling to ourselves. ‘We’ll need to meet tomorrow,’ I said as we parted, ‘to try and get things started on the roads... and everything else that needs doing! I am hoping to get some kind of a Government Cabinet together.’

‘Just send a messenger round when you’re ready,’ Rollo replied. ‘I will be there. I’m as keen as you are to make a start with my new job.’

‘Then please make a list of the equipment you will need to do the work – you may assume that sufficient funds will be available for earth-moving equipment of modest proportions. We must have enough power to get the roads clear and make them safe as quickly as possible.’

We shook hands warmly and parted. As I came into our house my father was complaining roundly that the electricity had only just been restored after three hours. Mother said supper would soon be ready and asked absently if I had enjoyed my walk in the hills. ‘Very much, thanks’ I replied, and left it at that.

I gave warning that I had a quick phone call to make. There was an extension in my room. I managed to get through to our Ambassador in France and briefly recounted my day’s adventures, mentioning specifically that I had seen the villa and what a wonderful place I had found it to be.

The Ambassador responded at once: ‘If you would care to adopt it as your own, I would be delighted to have it cared for. I hold many happy memories of the Villa Yolanda from my younger days. And yes, it does have some magic about it.’

I replied that much as I personally loved the house, I had been taken to see it by a young man who would now become a part of my government, with responsibility for roads and transportation. He it was who had cared for the house and maintained it. I said it was his dream, one day to have it for his own.

‘*Mais absolument mon cher!*’ the Ambassador cried with unconcealed enthusiasm. ‘He must have it. I will find the papers and my lawyer will enter the change of owner. What is his name exactly?’ I spelled it out slowly. ‘Excellent. I will see to the documents tomorrow and send them at once. Then it will be all official...’ his voice trailed off a little, then he continued ‘I have only one request.’

‘And what is that?’

‘It is that I may feel in my heart, that should I ever return I may stay in the house for a few days as an honoured guest.’

I said I was sure that would be more than acceptable, and looked forward to seeing Rollo’s face when I could present him with the Title Deeds in his name.

As we say in church Mr Harvey, and so endeth... another day.

Chapter Eleven: The Cabinet Takes Shape.

Monday Morning, and the start of my first full week In Office. I sat down at my desk at eight o’clock promptly, a habit I intended to maintain. At that hour, the Palace gates would have just been opened, and the flag-raising ceremony would be taking place. I wanted to establish a sense of order and routine Mr Harvey, and with it, a sense that the Palace routines were open to the public. I would then set aside thirty minutes for orientation and planning the day – as far as it was possible to do so.

Obid appeared at once. Having cast off his cinema usher's uniform, he now stood before me resplendent in a dishdasher, the traditional long white Arab robe, its collar highly decorated with gold thread. Over it he wore a plain black jacket with a richly embroidered crest on each lapel. I was quite stunned!

'Very smart Obid, if you will pardon a personal comment,' I ventured.

'Thank you Sir.'

'Might one enquire as to its origin?'

'I moved for a while among the Trucial Sheikhdoms, Sir,' Obid replied, his tone indicating that no further explanation would be necessary, or offered.

Having enquired politely as to my weekend and my present health, Obid asked what I had in mind for the day. 'I really need to arrange a series of meetings...' I began.

'Then Miss Hovnanian would deal with that, Sir. She has been here, in her adjacent office, since seven thirty, and I have done my best to provide her with every necessity pertaining to her work.'

'Excellent, then perhaps you could ask her...'

Obid's discrete cough interrupted me. Excusing himself as he reached slightly in front of me, Obid indicated the fourth bell push at the end of my desk. 'This will summon Miss Hovnanian, Sir.' 'Right.'

'If I might...'

'Yes?'

'Miss Hovnanian has indicated to me, with due respect of course Sir, that should it be your wish, she would prefer to be addressed as Miss Angele, a nomenclature to which she has become accustomed.'

'Excellent. Thank you, Obid, for conveying her wishes.'

Obid paused. 'Now if you will excuse me, Sir, there are housekeeping and maintenance duties requiring my attention. Of course, you may summon me at any time.'

'Yes of course. Thank you, Obid.'

When Obid had left, I sat for a few moments reviewing my notes and trying to establish an order of preference, whom I should see first. Or should I go for a full meeting of everyone I had managed to rope in so far?

I pressed the button for Miss Hovnanian, who emerged at once through the 'secret' door behind the bookcase. 'Good Morning, Sir.'

'Good Morning Miss Angele. Please take a seat.' I indicated the chair opposite me across the desk. 'I need to arrange some appointments for today.'

'Very good Sir. You do have one already.'

'Oh?'

'Yes Sir. It is for nine forty-five with the reverend Gentleman, Sir, and Captain Mariss Jansons.'

For a moment I was quite at a loss. Then I remembered the scheduled burial at sea of the late President – something I had fully intended to bypass entirely. 'There is a note for you, Sir,' Miss Angele said, passing a folded sheet of paper across my desk. It was from my father. It read: 'I'm not sure what you have in mind, Son, but I really feel that you should attend at the burial of our late colleague, as a matter of correct protocol.' He was right of course. But in any case I must tell you, Mr Harvey, that at no time have I even for one moment considered disobeying my father.

So much for my day's schedule. I had actually wondered if I was perhaps being a little over-optimistic, thinking I could exercise anything more than a minimal control over my life at that stage! OK, if that was how it was, then I'd have to go for a full Cabinet meeting in the afternoon. I say 'full Cabinet' because it sounds good. What I really mean is that we gather together my small assemblage of captive colleagues for mutual introduction and to initiate at least the beginnings of what might come to be called a government. My list for Miss Angele consisted of the following: the CM, or City

Manager, Rowland Tulu, Mr. Gupta, Mr Warungu, and Mariss Jansons whom I would of course be seeing shortly anyway. The meeting would be set for two p.m. that afternoon.

I also passed to Miss Angele the list given me by the Teacher's Deputation of names, addresses and telephone numbers of the institutions which had in the past provided educational assistance. I explained what it was all about and dictated a letter requesting that assistance be re-considered in the light of our regime-change. I suggested to Miss Angele that it would be appropriate if Mr Warungu, as the Member of Cabinet responsible for Education, should sign the letters himself. In preparation perhaps she could get our master printer, Mister B, to run off some 'Cabinet Office' stationery. Might as well try and do a professional job, eh Mr Harvey?!

With immediate business settled, Miss Angele disappeared behind the bookcase, clearly delighted at having started a serious job with a real meeting to set up. I, meanwhile would go home to dress in appropriate black ready for the Burial at Sea. Not quite the fun way I would have hoped to start my first full day!

Still, all good things come to an end as they say, and sure enough the Burial Ceremony was duly completed and we left the fishing boat which had served as our transport. Captain Jansons whispered quietly that he needed to talk to me privately and urgently, so I invited him to walk back with me.

As we returned to my office in the Palace, Obid came to greet us. 'Might I ask, Sirs, if the gentleman in question has finally been laid to rest?' 'Yes he has,' the Captain and I both replied.

'That is good news,' Obid replied somewhat enigmatically – though we both understood what he meant – adding reflectively 'May God rest his Soul'. Then, quickly reviving, 'I will bring coffee Gentlemen. Burials can be somewhat fatiguing events.'

I sat down at my desk and gestured the Captain to sit facing me. 'Now Captain, what's on your mind?'

'It is the Morning Star, Sir, the tramp steamer which plies the coast and visits us once a week.'

'Yes of course. Though I never knew its name. What about it?'

'Well Sir, it seems that Captain Elder has long wished to sell it. But now he is becoming ill, I suspect through too much liquor.'

At this point Obid knocked and entered with the coffee. 'Obid, did you know the Morning Star was for sale?'

'It has been so for some time, Sir, but there are no buyers. Now I believe her Captain is becoming anxious, as his health is deteriorating.'

I smiled as Captain Jansons caught my eye. 'There is nothing Obid doesn't know!' I explained to him.

'If you will excuse me, Sir' Obid began, preparing to leave, but I suggested that he should stay, and Captain Jansons nodded agreement.

'Won't you please sit Obid?' I asked. But no, he would remain standing. Once a butler!

Captain Jansons continued. 'My concern is that he will sell. Perhaps to another buyer down the coast, or even for scrap. And we do very much depend on her. Frankly, if one goes by appearances, she is only good for scrap. The engines are badly maintained and the ship is filthy, from the deck to the disgusting crew quarters. I had the misfortune to travel aboard her to Durban one time. It was not something I would repeat. But now I have said that, the engines are basically sound, and with cleaning and maintenance they would perform well. Also with some major cleaning and painting, she would be a smart vessel, as I knew her many years ago.'

The Captain paused. 'So what have you in mind?' I asked. 'I am thinking, Sir it is not my affair and I have no idea of the nation's or the government's finances, but if it would be possible for us to purchase the vessel, our trading would be assured.'

As the Captain was speculating about our finances, Obid and I caught one another's eye. But of course, nothing was said. The contents of the safe were presently known only to Obid, myself, and Mr Gupta, and so it would remain until suitable priorities had been established.

Obid asked 'Might I speak, Sir?'

‘Absolutely yes, please go ahead.’

‘Well Sir, the ship has a very bad appearance, and one would say it is worthless. Also there have been no interested buyers for several months since Captain Elder has been making enquiries up and down the coast.’

‘Then we are in a strong position as potential buyers,’ Captain Jansons responded with relish.

‘Begging your pardon Sir,’ Obid replied, ‘if Captain Elder were now to find that he had an interested buyer, especially if it was a government, then Sir, the price would become quite impossible. He is a greedy man, Sir. And a very bad man. He will steal from anyone.’ Obid had uncharacteristically become quite vehement.

‘Is he really that bad?’ I asked.

It was Captain Jansons who replied. ‘Many of our people left the Island, hoping to make their fortune elsewhere, for there was no work here. Some were never heard of again. But a few were successful and now send money home. It comes in plain envelopes, wrapped in sheets of paper. So our people, many parents and old people, have all kinds of foreign moneys, and they cannot spend them. So they give them to Captain Elder, who takes them to Durban and exchanges them for Rand. Then he buys what the people need. They give him lists.’

‘Sounds like a very useful service to me’.

‘Indeed it would be. But the Captain takes half of everything for himself. When I went with him to Durban, we went out on the town and he became drunk...’

‘That is normal,’ Obid interjected with disgust.

The Captain continued ‘He confessed to me proudly that he regards his weekly shopping lists as his major source of income.’

We were all silent for a while, the Captain and I finishing our coffee.

Then I made my decision. ‘We will purchase this vessel Gentlemen,’ I said. ‘This is how we will do it. You Captain Jansons, will make a fair estimate of the vessel’s value in its present condition, allowing for the work that must be done to make her presentable and properly functioning. You will be fair, but not over-generous in your pricing. I will leave that to your judgment.

‘You will be provided with the money in bundles of notes – South African Rand. You will invite yourself on another trip to Durban.’

‘No! I couldn’t stand another journey on that disgusting...’

‘Hear me out, please. You will go to Durban and in the evening you will invite Captain Elder to dinner and tell him you have a contact who might be interested to buy. Then you will say no more. After dinner you take him up to your room and give him brandy, just enough to soften his rough edges. You will say that your buyer has a figure in mind, and you will tell him what the figure is. He will argue it is not nearly enough and that he must have at least double. But you will not respond. You will let him have his say, then you will take out the money and lay it slowly on the bed, bundle by bundle. And watch his eyes widen.

‘You will ask him to count a bundle, and let him handle the notes. Then you simply say, *that is the offer, take it or leave it*. And I’m willing to bet you anything you like, that he will accept.’

Obid and Captain Jansons burst out laughing.

‘Captain Elder will not be able to refuse!’ Obid said.

‘You are a clever man, Sir,’ the Captain added.

‘I know it will work,’ I said, ‘because when I was young someone played the same trick on me and I fell for it!’

We all had a good laugh, then became serious once more. ‘I must have papers all ready for him to sign,’ the Captain said, thinking forward. ‘And a pen. But I wonder where he keeps the ship’s log, which he must transfer to me...’

‘It is always on his person Sir,’ Obid replied. ‘He never parts with it.’

'I would further suggest,' I continued, 'that as you and Captain Elder go ashore at Durban, you quietly advise the crew to stay onboard, so that you can make a quick getaway as soon as the deal is done.'

Obid volunteered 'If you will let me know just before you plan this adventure, Sir, I have a friend among the crew and can appraise him of what is planned. He, and indeed the whole crew, hate Captain Elder, and they would be delighted to learn that they have a new Master. Perhaps I could add, with your permission of course Gentlemen, that under new ownership the crew will be a little better paid, and their quarters thoroughly cleaned and refurbished.'

'Absolutely,' I confirmed.

I stood up and the Captain followed suit. Reaching across the desk we shook hands. 'Let it be done as quickly as possible,' I said. 'Fix your price and the funds will be ready. Do we have a lawyer in town?'

'We have the firm of Peabody, Simkins and Trott,' Obid volunteered.

'Very well. And which of the partners would you suggest we contact?'

'There is only Mrs Salamah bint Saad, Sir. The original partners returned to the Motherland with the last Union Jack, and are probably long deceased. However Mrs bint Saad is a distinguished and fully qualified lady, also highly competent.'

'Alright. Then we must have her draw up the appropriate bill of sale at once.'

It was twelve noon. I called Miss Angele and asked if she had managed to set up the meeting for the afternoon. She had indeed arranged for everyone on my list to be present. I advised her that the meeting would be held in the Stateroom and asked that she be present to take the minutes. I could see she was well pleased and proud of her new appointment.

Finally, I turned to Obid. 'We are having our first Cabinet Meeting in the Stateroom this afternoon...'

'That is excellent Sir. With your permission, I will now return to my duties as your Major Domo, duties for which I am qualified and to which I am pleasantly accustomed. But should you require my services at any time, you have only to press the bell or call a messenger Sir, and I will be present at once.'

I was somewhat relieved at his response. He had made it quite clear to me that Major Domo he was, and such he wished to remain. Obid had been so much a part of my early activities, and I admit, totally indispensable, and I felt that both he and I were well content with the arrangement. But in not offering him a Cabinet Post, would I risk hurting his feelings? Now the matter was settled to mutual satisfaction.

Before he departed, the usual polite cough indicated that Obid still had something on his mind. 'I do have one request, Sir...'

'Yes Obid?'

'In the past Sir, it has always been very difficult to obtain money for household requisites. The late President was not forthcoming. If you were to authorize Mister B, Sir...'

'Yes, you clearly need to have a budget.'

'I am trained in household book-keeping, Sir, and will maintain full and accurate accounts which I can, from time to time, integrate with Mr Gupta's accounting procedures.'

'Excellent Obid. Please send Mister B to me and it shall be done.'

Obid disappeared and in a matter of moments Mister B presented himself. He was looking very happy, and recalling his sadness on Sunday, when he had told me his wife had married again, I asked after his welfare, and whether he had seen his family. He replied with enthusiasm. 'I was concerned when I heard that my dear wife had re-married, presuming me dead. But I then discovered that she had married one of my boyhood friends whose wife had died. They married for mutual companionship, and so that my children would have a father. As soon as the news became known that I was alive and free, it was they who came to the Palace to seek me. My wife and children were overjoyed to be reunited, as of course was I. My friend took me aside and whispered that he had never had relations with my wife, and that he would leave our village. I absolutely refused, and I think that all of us together are now a very happy family.'

Good news indeed – I was really very happy for him. I instructed him that Obid was to have a weekly budget, and that accounts were to be kept, both by Mister B and Obid, for integration with Mr Gupta’s accounts. Good. That was another procedure set in motion.

And so I returned home for a well-earned lunch.

Back at the Palace at a quarter to two, I found that everyone was already assembled in the State Room, chatting away and getting to know one another. Splendid! I myself moved around, talking briefly to each in turn, making personal contact.

At two p.m. precisely I called the meeting to order. ‘Miss Hovnanian, Gentlemen. It is my intention first to introduce you one by one, then attempt to assemble ourselves collectively into the nucleus of a Cabinet. But first I have a proposal for your consideration. It is normal for Cabinet Members to be called Ministers. I am not enthusiastic about this title. I feel that it gives us inflated status which is not good for us and only succeeds in alienating us government servants from those we are supposed to serve – the citizens of our country, our customers. In seeking an alternative title for the Members of Government responsible for specific areas of administration, it seemed to me very appropriate that you be referred to as Responsibles. I know that it will be a little unfamiliar at first, but it is my suggestion that we adopt this title on a trial basis. I feel sure that it would, if permanently adopted, facilitate an easier communication between government and citizen. Do we have any dissenting opinions?’ I looked around. There were none. ‘I thank you for humoring a new President at his first Cabinet Meeting!’ I said, to which everyone smiled pleasantly. It was a good beginning.

I then introduced my new Cabinet Members individually: the City Manager who would be called upon as Responsible for Utilities, as electricity and other infrastructural amenities spread across the island; Mr Rowland Tulu, Responsible for Roads and Transportation; Miss Angele Hovnanian the President’s Secretary who would take the minutes; Mr Gupta, the Government Accountant; Captain Mariss Jansons, Responsible for Marine and Fishing; and Mr Warungu, our Responsible for Education.

Since I was the only one present for the moment who knew what was going on, I then outlined what we had achieved thus far. My priorities were simple: food, clothing, shelter, and foreign currency. We would focus on opening up blocked roads so that both people and their produce could once more get to market. I asked Rollo for, and was immediately given, a list of equipment he considered adequate for the work ahead. Captain Jansons was preparing an inventory of components needed to bring our fishing fleet into full working capacity. I indicated that ‘some funds had come to light belonging to the late President’, which would be used for these initial acquisitions. A full financial report would be prepared and made public by Mr Gupta in due course after all the ex-presidential documents had been inventoried.

Regarding education, there are international and charitable sources of materials available together with financial assistance; this was cut off under the previous regime due to reported misuse of funds. I looked enquiringly at Miss Hovnanian who responded by holding up five sheets of paper and five addressed envelopes bearing our nation’s stamps. They were passed to Mr Warungu with the request that he read one of the letters out loud – they were all the same save for the address and opening salutation. Having done so, he then took out his pen and to a short round of applause, signed each one ceremoniously. It was by then almost three p.m., and since the weekly seaplane was due on Mondays at around this time I sent for Obid, entrusting these important letters to his care.

Finally, I turned the spotlight, so to speak, on myself. ‘I think it only proper that I should make broadly clear at the outset what my own intentions are. At this moment I have absolute power in our small country, simply because I am the inheritor of a ruler who had dispensed with all forms of government. It is my intention, first to establish a Cabinet, of which those present form the beginnings. Second, I am preparing a Constitution. We need to have laws applicable to our citizens so that they can live in a just and peaceful society. But we also need laws applicable to government, so that it fulfils its basic duties but does not exceed them. That is the function of a Constitution. Once the Constitution has been drafted, it will be passed to the Cabinet and circulated to the Village Chiefs for approval.

When approved, it will be safeguarded and enforced by an independent Constitutional Executive of Elders and Justices, who will be responsible only to the Constitution itself. All functions and servants of government will be subject to its rules, including, and I stress this, the President.

Pausing to give added weight to my words, I continued: ‘I hereby place on public record, that I have given myself three months to set up this constitutional framework, after which my own powers will become subject to constitutional control. The Constitutional Executive will have full powers to make investigations as to conduct and finances of all government personnel and departments.

Allowing a few moments for mental digestion by my colleagues, I suggested that the Cabinet should meet every Friday at 2 p.m. in the Stateroom, to which everyone nodded assent. I asked if there was any other business. There was not, and the First Cabinet Meeting of my new government was adjourned.

Perhaps mutually reluctant to bring to an end what was, after all, a significant new beginning for our nation, my Cabinet colleagues stood around chatting amiably. Captain Jansons caught my arm and whispered that he had both the required evaluation of the Morning Star's fair value, and the legal documents pertaining to the bill of sale and exchange of ownership. He had taken the precaution of having a blank space left both for the vessel's name, which he himself would fill in later as a precaution against a loose-tongued lawyer, and the monetary amount, which might perhaps be subject to negotiation! I took a note of his financial requirement and asked him to come to my office in a quarter of an hour.

The Captain hesitated. 'Might I also satisfy my own requirements at the same time? I have a list of spare parts needed to get our fishing fleet operative again. The list is small, but the components are vital.' I assured him that the funds would be provided, then went to my office myself, taking Mr Gupta with me and collecting Obid on the way.

You can probably guess what happened next, Mr Harvey. Yes, we swung open the safe once again, took out the necessary Rand of which there was sufficient and more. The money for the Morning Star's purchase was assembled into twenty bundles, designed to make an impressive display on my desk, and subsequently on a bed in a Durban hotel room. In due course there was a knock at the door, and Captain Jansons entered. One could see by his expression when he saw the money laid out on the desk, that it was an impressive sight!

'I think it's going to work!' he said, with obvious relish.

'I will be giving you a good excuse to go down to Durban,' I said, giving him Rollo's wish-list of tools and equipment. 'You have additional funds for this purpose. We need this material and equipment as soon as possible to get the roads open.'

'Understood!' the Captain replied. 'I will arrange this, and the spares for the fishing boats, as soon as we dock. Then in the evening, the... other business will, I hope, be concluded satisfactorily. I'll leave with the Tuesday sailing tomorrow afternoon.'

The Captain took his leave. Finally the total amount of withdrawal was duly recorded by Mr Gupta, both on his personal copy of the accounts, and on the copy kept in the safe. The transaction was witnessed by myself and Obid, and the safe closed once more.

So Monday came to a satisfactory conclusion, at least at the office anyway. I left the Palace Grounds and called at the garage, inviting Rollo to take a walk with me. I told him in confidence of the plan to acquire the Morning Star, and that the order for his equipment was in hand.

I felt we had a bond of friendship and that I could trust him. He was quite excited at the possibility of getting started so soon. I also hinted that he would need to look at some longer-term planning of transportation patterns in the immediate vicinity with an eye to a possible small industrial estate with a road to the harbour, and some planned residential expansion around the town.

I remember asking him if perhaps city planning might be a little outside his field. 'Absolutely not!' he replied. 'A city is a machine which must be planned like a machine if it is to function properly.'

A splendid chap indeed, Mr Harvey! For is it not one of life's Great Truths, that you can judge man's greatness by the degree to which his ideas accord with your own?!

Chapter Twelve: The Envelope

As I sat down at my desk on Tuesday morning I wondered what the day would bring. I was becoming resigned to the fact that, while I could make every effort to plan my day, the 'wild cards' usually took preference.

I did however, have a project in mind, providing I was allowed to get on with it. I had taken the precaution, the previous evening, of contacting Mr Gupta and asking him to come to my office at 8.15 a.m. I buzzed for Obid and when he arrived, told him of my project of the moment: it involved tackling the last mystery of the safe – the locked drawer at the bottom. Mr Gupta arrived a few minutes early and we set to work. I opened the safe, and trying the remaining unused key on the late President's private key ring, opened the drawer. We extracted the contents, placed them on the desk

which I had cleared, and took inventory, Mr Gupta writing down the details which Obid and I would witness, as we had done for the money.

In the event there was not all that much. We found a large diary, and a very large envelope containing photos of the late President and his wife – mostly in their happier days. Another large envelope contained a set of plans for what looked like a housing development which I set aside to peruse later.

One item however was to cause considerable interest. It was another envelope containing bank statements pertaining to a Sterling bank account in London, and the balance on the most recent statement was quite substantial. This would be useful. We could always send South African Rand down for exchange in Durban on the Morning Star, but purchases from Britain would be greatly facilitated if we could draw on a Sterling bank account. The account was in the late President's personal name – but of course! So certain formalities would be needed to transfer ownership.

'I really think, Gentlemen, that we need a lawyer permanently on the Palace Staff... In addition, once we begin to establish legislation, we will need to ensure that it is formulated in correct language, clear and avoiding ambiguities. Would Mrs Salamah bint Saad fill the position do you think, Obid?'

'Admirably Sir. She has charm, wit, a clear mind and a sharp eye, as well as all the necessary expertise. Would two p.m. this afternoon suit, Sir?' 'Yes, the sooner the better.' 'Then perhaps you would push the bell for Miss Hovnanian Sir, so that she may arrange it.'

We completed the inventory formalities and replaced everything in the safe except for the development plans, also the details of the bank and account number which were detached from one of the older statements, to be referenced in the letter to the bank. Mr Gupta took his leave, his contribution being completed.

Obid looked hesitant. 'Might one enquire as to whether there are any plans for the late President's diary and photographs, Sir?' Obid's expression seemed to indicate this was of more than passing interest.

'Eventually I am hoping, with the aid of our newspaper editor, to set up a national archive...'

'And these items would be added, and publicly displayed?'

'Yes. But perhaps after a delay of ten years or so.'

Obid smiled broadly. 'A very sound stratagem, if I might say so Sir.'

I opened up the set of plans and spread them out on the desk. 'Any ideas what these are Obid?' I asked.

'These are plans for a Housing Estate Sir, which was to be established on a hillside, in the form of a traditional hill village. The pathways would lead down to a small harbour, where the millionaire residents would store their yachts. Sir.'

I looked over the plans again. 'It's quite a scheme. But looking at the plans the houses are not all that large. Certainly not millionaires' mansions by any means.'

Obid explained. 'No Sir. The idea was that the houses would be relatively small and cheap to construct, their appeal to the millionaire buyers being the assurance that they would be in the company of other millionaires. Also they would pay virtually no taxes, either personal or on the companies they might choose to establish here. The attraction for the two developers, and the President, was that the sale of cheap housing to wealthy buyers at very high prices afforded a substantial profit which, when divided three ways...'

You see. Mr Harvey, Obid's knowledge was inexhaustible!

'So what happened to the scheme?'

'To begin at the beginning Sir, one of our compatriots left the Island to make his fortune, and succeeded. He returned with plans to take our most scenic land along the coast and build an empire of homes in a village-like setting for wealthy buyers, complete with harbours for their great yachts. All was about to proceed along those lines, when the gentleman concerned made a false move. He formed a liaison, Sir, with the President's wife. The President and his wife were all-but separated and lived in different wings of the Palace. But the President heard of the liaison and his manly pride was roused. In truly melodramatic fashion he burst into the Lady's bedchamber one night and discovered the two of them... cohabiting Sir. Anticipating some such chicanery he had taken the precaution of arming himself, and without a word he shot the man and killed him outright. He was buried at sea. Eventually of course the man's business partner, having been unable to contact him, arrived from London to find out what was going on, for he had put up a large sum of money to cover construction materials and machinery. The President, feigning annoyance, said that the man had disappeared as

had the money. And that was that. Ironically Sir, the President was telling the truth. The man had disappeared in the ocean's depths, while the money also had disappeared – into the President's safe.'

I sat fascinated by yet another revelation, each one seemingly more incredible than the last. After a few moments I was brought back to reality by Obid's polite cough, followed by 'There might be another matter, Sir, if you have time...'

'I have time Obid. Fire away.'

'Well Sir, one is reluctant to bring up relatively trivial matters until one is sure that the more weighty business of state...'

I shrugged. 'If you think the matter worth raising at this stage Obid, then I would imagine you are doing so with good reason.'

'Thank you for that expression of confidence Sir.'

Obid paused, then gaining confidence, proceeded. 'It is just that the people's lives are somewhat devoid of... diversions, Sir. Our radio and television programmes became very minimal after the satellite dish was dislodged during the storm.'

'And when was that?'

'Some two years ago, Sir.'

'Can it be fixed?'

'Tulu says he can do it Sir.' 'Then why does he not?'

'No one is permitted to touch radio or television equipment without the President's permission, Sir.'

'Then you have it.'

'Thank you Sir. It will be attended to with all possible speed. And your name will be blessed throughout our island, Sir.'

'Well that can't be bad. It must be the easiest job I've had yet.'

'Indeed so Sir.'

Obid paused hesitantly. 'There is also the cinema Sir.'

'The cinema? I never knew we had one.'

'We do, and we do not, in a manner of speaking Sir. I mean that we have one, but it is not currently operative, nor has it been for some time.'

'Am I right in suspecting our late President again?'

Obid smiled. I could see exactly what he was thinking: 'At last, our new President is getting up to speed!'

'Tell me about it.'

Obid continued, obviously pleased at my encouragement. 'Well Sir, we have a fine cinema. Rather too small, of technical necessity, but very well equipped. A properly constructed projection room with two 16 millimeter Bell and Howells and a crossover box, an excellent sound system, comfortable tipup seats, and a silver bead screen – with curtains.'

Obid paused, perhaps wondering if he dared pursue the matter. I gave him some encouragement. 'You seem very well informed on all the technicalities!'

'I am the projectionist Sir.'

A finger in every pie, it would seem, Mr Harvey! But the matter interested me. 'OK, so let me get one or two points clear here. First, why too small of technical necessity?' I asked.

'We employ 16mm machines Sir, and they have a limited throw, that is, distance between lamp and screen. The normal cinema is much larger, and uses 35mm film with huge arc lights.'

That much I could follow. 'So why do we have 16mm?'

'Mainly for historical reasons, Sir. The cinema was established in the colonial era. Films were sent out in the diplomatic bag once a week. Travel and educational from the Foreign Office, and films of a lighter nature by the British Council. This informality of transportation is possible with 16mm film which is light and not combustible. 35mm film is much more bulky, and being very highly combustible, is subject to strict transportation regulations.'

So, we were getting close to the bottom of it. Now for the punch-line, as comedians call it. 'Alright, I'm with you so far. Now tell me why the show stopped.'

'After the decline of the colonial era, we improved our offerings by obtaining pictures from distributors in London. The President began to favour us with his presence, after a private box had been installed at the rear of the theatre. Things went very well, until the President's declining popularity discouraged him from making public appearances. So he stopped coming and closed the cinema.'

I could see the situation clearly, but sought confirmation to conclude the tale.

'Dog in the manger, eh?'

'Begging your pardon Sir?'

'If he can't enjoy it, then nobody should.'

'Precisely so Sir.'

Yet another piece in the jigsaw puzzle image I was building of my predecessor.

'So what needs to be done to get the show rolling again?'

'First of all Sir, your permission. Since it was closed by residential Decree.'

'You have it. Next thing.'

'A couple of hours' cleaning. Our ladies will do that.'

Obid was by this time becoming quite excited. I encouraged him. 'Good. Next?'

'I could begin at once Sir, but on one leg as it were. The lamp in my Number Two machine needs replacing. Also, while I do have a few old reels to hand it would greatly enhance our presentations if one could once again order from London...'

'And that would require?'

'Access to a London bank account Sir.'

I smiled and Obid caught my eye, and no doubt, my drift. 'Well as it happens, we will shortly be in the position of having one.'

'How very opportune, Sir.'

'Just so.'

'And could the account be used for the purchase of a lamp, and film rental Sir?'

'It could indeed.'

'Thank you Sir. With your permission I will request Miss Hovnanian to prepare letters to our old distributors, so that they may send us their latest catalogues.'

'Please do so, sooner the better.'

No doubt feeling that he had done quite well enough for one morning, Obid excused himself, leaving me to peruse the fascinating set of plans which I proceeded to open out on my desk. By the time I was ready to go home for lunch, I had the picture fairly clear in my mind. I thought it might be interesting to go to the location and survey the site that afternoon, as soon as Madame Lawyer had done her stuff. And since the building project involved roads and

construction, I called at Tulu's Garage on the way home to invite Rollo to come with me. But as I turned the corner I saw Rollo emerging from the Garage with a rucksack on his back and a large bundle slung across his shoulder. 'Hey Rollo, what's this? Where's the Expedition off to?'

'I got a good budget for the equipment I need, and I really thought I should go to Durban and select it myself, to make sure I get the best equipment for the job.'

'Good idea. But why the gear?'

'I have food and a sleeping bag. Captain Jansons warned me not to eat the ship's food and not to sleep in the bunks below decks as they are full of fleas and bed-bugs. So as you see, I am going well prepared!'

'Good thinking!'

I wished my friend Bon Voyage, with a whispered 'Come back with lots of good road-building stuff on board the Island's very own Morning Star!' We shook hands and went our separate ways, he to the port to meet Captain Jansons, and I home to lunch. Reflecting on the morning's events, I hoped my parents wouldn't ask me what sort of a morning I'd had.

Fortunately, they didn't.

The afternoon, I had hoped, would be fairly quiet, and against all possible odds, so it turned out to be. There was, of course, one important appointment for 2 p.m.

Mrs bint Saad arrived promptly, and having made one another's acquaintance, we got down to the matter of the ex-President's Sterling bank account. Mrs bint Saad scanned the details of bank name, address, and account number briefly.

'That should be quite straightforward,' she said in a businesslike tone. 'We will need the Death Certificate of course. I will provide testimony that the late President and named account-holder died *intestate*, and that the account should now be changed in favour of yourself Sir, as the new President.'

I stopped her there of course, as I wanted the account to be in the name of our Government, with myself, Mr Gupta, and Mrs bint Saad with her agreement, as signatories, all to sign. I explained that I would be establishing honest and open government, to which Mrs bint Saad replied somewhat acidly that it would be a novel, though certainly welcome change, adding that the necessary documentation would be attended to at once. She stood up and offered her hand. We shook hands, and she was away. Obviously no time to shilly-shally! I felt that once the ice was broken, and that once I had established my credentials as an honest President, we might get on quite well.

Then I turned my attention to a few details which had come to my mind over the last few days.

First, I summoned Miss Hovnanian. I advised her that she should now act as Receptionist as well as Secretary, and should receive telephone calls and messages, also make appointments. For the present time however, there would not be too much for her to do, and I suggested that she should invite the members of my Cabinet one by one and at their convenience, to provide her with a short biography – such details of course, as they might wish to divulge – which could then be shared with other Cabinet members and also given to our Island Chronicle. I felt it important that people should begin to see the nucleus of a government; I had no intention of taking my country into another dictatorship.

Miss H seized my intent at once. 'Perhaps a photograph of each member would be useful too, Sir, since some of our people are unable to read...'

'An excellent idea Miss Angele, thank you. No doubt Obid knows a good photographer whom we could engage for the purpose. We want good quality pictures.'

'I will see to it Sir. I will also include telephone numbers for our own reference, since the telephone system is now working more reliably.'

'Well that's good news. Any particular reason why?' I asked this because I had no recollection of having been asked for money, Mr Harvey!

'Before, Sir, the telephone technician was working without enthusiasm...'

'And now he's enthusiastic?'

‘Yes Sir’.

Well, well. Wonders never cease. I did not pursue the matter further. Ours is not to reason why etc etc!

I then sent for Obid. ‘You are my Major Domo Obid, right?’

‘I am indeed, Major Domo to the Presidential Palace Sir.’ Obid was always a stickler for detail.

‘Might I ask whether this duty is fairly onerous?’

‘Not over-burdensomely so, no Sir.’

‘Then I wonder if I might prevail upon you to undertake, for the present time anyway, an additional role, that of Advisor to the President...’

‘I would consider it an honour, Sir. I am aware of the fact that you have been away for some time, and that the details and events surrounding our town and our nation are not always familiar to you. I have therefore endeavored to be of some small service in this respect.’

‘Actually Obid, I would put it a little stronger than that! But we will not bandy words. I should warn you, however, that there will be no extra pay attached to the job, not until I can get the nation’s finances into some sort of order and generate a little more economic activity. Right now we need to watch our pennies.’

‘Quite so Sir. Indeed rumor has it that even our new President does not currently receive a remuneration.’

‘A poor state of affairs indeed.’

‘Quite so Sir.’

You see Mr Harvey, that Obid and I were discovering a shared inclination towards that very English brand of humour which neither expects nor receives any acknowledgment. Anyway the matter was settled. My purpose in formalizing this arrangement was to elevate Obid, as it were, from a senior household servant to more of a governmental status.

I suggested that Obid should celebrate his new position by sitting opposite me rather than standing. After taking a few moments to accustom himself to such familiarity he agreed.

‘I have a couple of questions for my new Advisor,’ I began. ‘First, I have noticed that as one leaves town, there are what appear to be warehouses and small factories which are closed, boarded up.’

‘Indeed so Sir. There is little trade now, so the warehouses are empty. As to factories, we did begin to develop our own manufacturing in a small way, but as our economy declined from low to zero they faltered and died.’

‘A sad story indeed.’

‘Quite so Sir.’

‘Can you give me an example of one or two of these failed enterprises?’

‘Let me see. Yes, one of them is a bottling plant with juice-making machinery. It used to produce pomegranate juice, a most excellent, tasty and refreshing beverage Sir, much loved and very popular. Unfortunately, the pomegranates came from the Valley of Solomon which has for some time been inaccessible. Also the bottling machinery lacks spare parts and was only functioning intermittently with much wastage.’

‘What else?’

‘Well there was also an enterprise run by our ladies, The Home-style Cake Company. They made delicious sponge cakes which they sold in their own small shop.’

‘And why did they close?’

‘Our people can barely afford maize for bread, Sir. Like Marie-Antoinette’s good citizens, they found cake a little beyond their means.’

It was somewhat as I had expected, and having a couple of real examples focused my mind.

But I was also curious as to Obid's knowledge of French history! 'You are well-read, Obid,' I ventured cautiously, not wishing to appear patronizing.

'During my service in England, Sir, I was eventually elevated to the position of Head Butler, and found myself at once in a strange and unfamiliar situation. To begin with, it is not customary for the Head Butler to mix socially with the rest of the staff, so one spends much time alone in one's private quarters. And although one theoretically has considerable spare time, especially if one's household is well organized and one's staff reliable, one is expected to be there should any sudden problem arise.'

'So you spend much time alone...'

'Very much so Sir. Fortunately my employer, who as I have mentioned, brought me to England and furthered my career, invited me, no, insisted that I have free access to his enormous library.' Obid gazed into the distance. 'Shelf upon shelf of matching leather-bound volumes, giving an initial impression of unrelieved tedium.' He paused reflectively. 'But then, dipping into one or two at random, I began to discover that the historical exploits of kings, the many plots to overthrow them, the conditions people lived in, the tales of brandy smugglers from France... these held much more fascination than any of the contemporary, what I believe is known as pulp fiction, Sir.'

'So your time was well spent...'

'I look back upon it with much gratitude Sir, together with the small legacy of learning it has left me.'

We both sat in quiet reflection, Obid with his memories, I with the thought that compared to Obid I was something of an illiterate! Obid was the first to return to reality. 'You mentioned that you had two questions for your new Advisor, Sir.'

'Yes indeed. My second question relates to this proposed housing development,' I patted the folded plans on my desk. 'I am thinking of carrying this plan through more or less as it stands.'

'So you will be selling homes to millionaires Sir. How jolly.' Obid spoke without enthusiasm – indeed, I noted a touch of sarcasm. But that was not what I had in mind.

I should explain, Mr Harvey, as I explained to Obid, that I was, as it now appears, in the forefront of the move to what is now known as eco-tourism, where the environment is respected, and tourists mingle with locals on equal terms, rather than living in five-star palaces with fences around them so that they will not be contaminated by the natives. My idea was to build these houses as planned. Sixty percent would be for local residents, the other forty would be for tourists, who would share the same life, use the same neighborhood restaurants, cafés and tea shops, and thus meet as equals. Obid observed that while such a project would not bring in so much foreign currency, it had much social virtue.

And so I came to my second question. Who would be a suitable contractor to undertake this project?

'There are only two such persons,' Obid replied. 'A man called Abdullah, and there is also Sheikh Hafudh el-Qadhi. Mr Abdullah was to have undertaken the project, had it gone through as planned.'

'Then he would be our man to take it up now?'

'Mr Abdullah is a most despicable man in every way Sir,' Obid said with unaccustomed vehemence. 'Any association whatsoever with this man would most certainly reflect very badly on your fine reputation. Sir.'

'Tell me about him.'

'He is greedy and a cheat. If he were to handle this project, he would use the cheapest of materials and encourage fast, shoddy workmanship. He would employ the poorest men and pay them nothing. He has been known to employ men for a month and more, then dismiss them without any pay on some small fictitious pretext.'

'Sounds like a nasty piece of work.'

'Indeed Sir. And that is precisely the sort of man whom the original developers would favour. They wanted cheap, fast construction. And once they had sold the properties they would care little if faults in construction should begin to appear. For they, the developers, would gather up their monies, dissolve the company, and be far away in the Bahamas.'

'You seem to be intimately aware of their dastardly plans, Obid.'

Obid hesitated, as if summoning up his courage. 'If one positions oneself in the office of the President's Secretary Sir, standing close to the bookcase connecting door, one cannot help but overhear...'

Obid left the rest to my imagination, though he soon hastened to assure me that such was no longer his practice. I myself was reflecting, meanwhile, that I had done very well indeed to recruit this walking information-source as my Presidential Advisor. 'So if we are to go ahead with this village development then, you would recommend the services of Sheikh Hafudh el-Qadhi?'

'Yes indeed Sir, most wholeheartedly. But be prepared Sir, that when the news comes out, you will receive at once a visit from Mr Abdullah. He will talk to you most sweetly. He will speak to you of his high reputation and tell you what a magnificent project you have, and how he considers it a matter of divine providence that he personally should bring it to a perfect fruition. Then adopting a somewhat conspiratorial tone and lowering his voice, he will advise you, in complete confidence, that Sheikh Hafudh el-Qadhi is incompetent and untrustworthy. Finally, as his... *pièce de résistance* is the appropriate term I believe, he will offer you personally a substantial sum of money in cash as soon as you confirm what is, of course, the wisest choice by selecting Mr Abdullah as your contractor.'

I will now jump forward a little in our story, Mr Harvey, by telling you that yes, it all happened exactly as Obid had predicted. And no, I was not swayed from my decision, not by his sweet words, not by the aspersions he cast upon his opponent, nor by offers of money. I could hardly have done otherwise... I had given my Presidential Advisor full permission to position himself in the Secretary's Office next to the bookcase connecting door during that meeting...

Anyway, that concluded my office business, and I set off, plans under my arm, to walk the site and visualize the project in detail. There, I was to spend the rest of the afternoon, and I confess, Mr Harvey, I greatly enjoyed myself!

Chapter Thirteen: The First Priority

Yes indeed, on the previous afternoon I had actually enjoyed myself! But having said that, please do not think for one moment, Mr Harvey, that I was not enjoying the challenge of my new occupation. I had a nation to build, people to feed, to house, to educate, and above all perhaps, provide jobs for. I felt I was making progress, and I knew the rewards would be immeasurable. Most importantly perhaps, I truly felt that a great privilege had been given me. I was grateful for it, and I valued it.

On this particular morning, as I reviewed my current agenda while taking my usual pre-breakfast stroll around the Palace Grounds, it seemed to me that I had set a number of things in motion which really had to come to fruition in their own time. Certainly I had many other projects in mind, but it was important that everything be done in the proper order. It would have been unwise, for example, to initiate building works on my new village project, despite the need for jobs, housing and foreign currency. For if I paid workers to build, what would they spend their money on? We had no economy worth speaking about. One idea in my mind was to make a list of all our failed industrial and productive enterprises with a view to resuscitating them. But that would have to wait until I could find someone I could entrust with that task. I made a mental note to keep a weather eye open for just such a worthy.

For the immediate future, as soon as the roads into the mountains were opened and the produce of the villagers and the land started to flow, a market would be created. But for that to happen, Rollo needed to come back with the necessary tools and machinery, either with the regular scheduled boat next week, or perhaps tomorrow, if our ruse had succeed and Captain Jansons had purchased the Morning Star.

As soon as I was settled in my office to start my official day – my mind was hardly ever 'off the job'! – I called for Miss Hovnanian to see if anything had come up requiring my attention. I was pleased to be told that Mrs bint Saad had called in earlier to deliver a large unsealed envelope addressed to the bank in London. Opening it, I found a sheaf of papers, presumably all being necessary to transfer the title of the Bank Account. They were held together by a paper clip, the first sheet being a set of terse hand-written instructions telling me where to sign, and indicating where a witness was required. And so I dealt with this. Miss Hovnanian, to her obvious delight was called upon to sign as a witness. The envelope was duly sealed up and given into the secure hands of Obid for the Thursday plane.

There appeared to be nothing else requiring attention nor indeed any immediate prospects, so with mountain roads now on my mind I left the office, climbed into my little VW Beetle and set off into the hills, not northwards, as I had already

explored some of that area, but to the south, where a small road led up to two somewhat remote villages and the old stone quarry. I felt quite free-and-easy, almost as if I were playing truant from school.

One of the benefits of being President of a small, totally inconsequential country, Mr Harvey, is that one may indeed take off into the mountains, safe in the knowledge that if, during one's absence, a Major International Incident might arise, there are other nations much grander than ourselves who would not only feel obligated to take action, but would revel in the prestige of re-ordering the world. And indeed there is nothing that better enhances a politician's prestige at home, especially when his domestic policies are in a shambles, than being photographed mingling, smiling and shaking hands with world leaders at some prestigious international gathering.

And so I was on my way. Once one leaves the main coast road, the track up into the mountains becomes very rough indeed. As my little Beetle bounced along I was reminded that the Volkswagen concept of independent suspension for each wheel had been part of the earliest original designs, and had been tested rigorously on a track composed of cobble stones all deliberately set at different heights. I smiled to myself as it occurred to me that we might earn a little hard currency by offering this particular stretch of road to the major car makers to test their suspension.

At the edge of the first village, I parked and put on my Presidential Sash. The whole village seemed empty. There was not a soul to be seen. But as I walked slowly up the road towards the usual Meeting House at the top, people began coming out of their homes, peering at me curiously.

'Are you our new President?' one man called out.

'Yes I am,' I replied.

Another man came forward and bowed very low. 'I am your servant, President,' he said.

I replied 'No, I am your servant. It is my job to bring justice and prosperity to our country. I am here to serve you.'

Noble words, Mr Harvey, and totally true of course. But I don't think the fellow understood a word of what I was saying. They think in terms of hierarchy and allegiance, you see. If I was the Headman of all Headmen, then one should show allegiance and bow before me. We were still in the days of the medieval monarchs. In time I would change that. I was determined to do so.

As I reached the Meeting House the Headman stepped out to greet me. It was the same village layout and the same performance in all our villages. He bowed and gestured me to enter the Meeting House. I had already heard a lot of shuffling inside, and as I entered and my eyes became accustomed to the shade I saw that what I presumed were the village elders, if not the entire population, were formed up on two sides, the Headman sitting at the head between them. I was gestured to sit, again on raised cushions, beside but a little higher than him. Once again I was reminded of the importance of protocol especially in the villages.

For what seemed like ages we chit-chatted about nothing in particular. Refreshments were also brought. I became aware that this procedure was not a total time-waster as I, with my supposedly sophisticated ways might have thought. In fact as I looked around as far as an eye can see while only barely turning the head, the rows of people on either side were watching me closely, sizing me up. No Mr Harvey, they were not sizing me up for the lunchtime stewpot, I'm glad to say we had advanced well beyond that!

Actually it subsequently occurred to me that in their own minds a single State Visit with refreshments and ceremonial chitchat was probably all they would expect to get out of their new President, or indeed from any government functionary. That would not, after all, be such an unusual occurrence in our part of the world.

Eventually I decided to move the conversation on a little, and made a comment to the effect that the road was somewhat in need of repair, and that the necessary machinery was already on its way from Durban – 'Big City' as the Chief translated to the assembled company in local dialect, prompting an outburst of polite applause.

Then suddenly a young man who had been sitting at the top of the line on the right of the Chief sprang to his feet. 'What is it to us,' he cried, first towards myself and the Chief, then to the assembled company, 'if the road is rough or smooth? Why should we want to take this road? We have no work here, no jobs. We produce nothing, so we have nothing to take down to market. And since we have nothing to sell, how can we buy? We have only our village and our people and what we can grow and make for ourselves here. We have no need for a road. If it were not there at all, our lives would be no different.'

'SIT DOWN!' the Headman barked at him in their village dialect.

Then turning to me with eyes cast down, 'I am sorry Excellency. My son has no respect, no manners. He does not respect even his own father and his own people that he brings disgrace upon us, and insults our honoured guest.'

I replied quietly 'He is young. He is impatient and impetuous. And yes, his conduct is disrespectful. But he is right. If a man has no work his life stands still. He cannot ever improve his lot. It is my job to bring a good road to your village, and work too. And this I will do. I promise it.'

The conversation returned to lighter matters as ruffled feathers settled down. More refreshment was brought, and a man stood up from the crowd and began to recite an impromptu Ode to the President in a half sing-song voice. It was an aspect of my country's culture with which I was not familiar. Indeed how could I be, after having been brought up in the Compound of the Elite? When the man had finished we all, myself included, applauded quietly, accompanied by various murmurs of spoken approval. The Chief smiled, explaining that the fellow was a man of learning and a great poet. The mood was relaxed once more.

The time came when I felt that honour was satisfied and that I might consider departing. I thanked the chief for his reception and complimented his village and his people. As I rose, the chief and assembled company rose with me. The Chief and I bowed to one another. I said 'With your permission, Chief, I would like to make my peace with your son. Though outspoken, I believe that he is a fine boy.' The Chief beamed, and with a sharp gesture brought the boy over to me. I say 'boy' Mr Harvey, but though younger than myself it was only by a whisker of a couple of years or so.

I took my leave of the Chief, then invited his son to walk with me to my car. He had what I wanted, you see, a single-minded desire to create employment.

Though people had lined the short street as I was leaving, my car was parked a little distance away and by the time I and the Chief's son reached it we were alone. 'What is your name?' I asked.

'Kareem Sir,' he replied.

'I am forming a Cabinet, a group of people responsible for various functions of government. I call them Responsibles, for that is what they must be. I need a Responsible for Village Affairs. I would like you to take this job.'

'But Sir, I wouldn't know what to do!'

'I believe you do know very well what to do. You have seen the essential basis of economic activity, that the first priority is the need for work, for jobs. You will visit all the villages regularly and tell me what they need. Together we will create jobs, and your people will work and trade and prosper.'

Kareem was silent. I watched him closely and was pleased to see that he was taking in, and considering everything carefully in his mind.

'Kareem, I have given you much to think about. What I would like you to do now, is to go back to your home and say nothing to anyone. Perhaps you can go somewhere quiet where you can think, and your mind can accustom itself to what I have said. But I will tell you now, that destiny has given me the job as President. There is much to be done, and I intend to do it. Is it new for you, to be part of a government? Of course it is. And it is new for me too. We have the beginnings of a team, a good team, people like you who see the challenges but who want to get things done. Together we will succeed.'

'I will do as you ask, Sir' Kareem said, after a few moments.

'Do you have any relatives in town?' I enquired.

'Oh, many Sir.'

'Anyone you might stay with, someone to give you a room perhaps?'

'Yes Sir. I would be welcome. But I would need to pay for my bed and food, Sir. Otherwise it would not be proper.'

'Of course. But you will be paid for your work.'

'Then I will surely consider the whole matter, Sir.'

I offered my hand and after some hesitation he accepted and we shook. 'We will work as a team,' I said, 'we will all be equal in the face of the work we must do. Tomorrow I will send someone to you. Tell him, if you do not accept the job. If you do accept, be ready with whatever you need to stay in town a few days.' And I left him with that thought.

As I tootled back down the mountain road, speeding recklessly and bumping the very stuffing out of my poor old Beetle not to mention myself, I felt highly pleased. I had another Responsible in the bag. And I was confident he would quickly shape up as a useful and active member of the team.

Reaching the coast road I pulled off down a short lane to what had always been one of my favourite beaches. It was quite deserted and I stretched out on my back in the sun. My Presidential Sash had long ago been removed of course. Though I intended to bring informality to my Court, I would not want the new President to be caught in such an unseemly, unpresidential position!

I enjoyed the sunshine for a while, then sat up and looked around me, at the beach, the silver sand, and the backdrop of green mountains behind. Ours was, and is a beautiful patch of nature, Mr Harvey. And that thought would spur me on to make its economy and its prosperity match its natural beauty. All in all, I returned home for a lunch break feeling very satisfied indeed. Which was fortunate, as the afternoon was not to prove so felicitous.

It started well enough, as there was simply nothing which demanded my immediate attention. So I sat in the Palace Gardens idly watching the four gardeners at work. As I watched, it began to dawn on me that we seemed to employ gardeners from sunrise to sunset, and that they were always different people. Well with such long hours and fresh enthusiasm each day, no wonder the gardens always look so good!

You know, Mr Harvey, I have always been quite good at 'managing' people – I seem to have a knack of getting them on my side and then, I have to admit it, getting what I want out of them. I suppose that making an effort to treat people politely and with consideration might help. Also, I have always made a point of appreciating what people do. Good efforts should always be acknowledged. It makes people feel good. And, to be a little mercenary about it, appreciation helps to ensure that good work continues!

So I walked over to where the men were working, replanting a flower bed. They immediately stood up, almost to attention as I approached, wiping their soiled hands on the green aprons they were wearing. I couldn't help noticing that what I could see of their clothing was very ragged.

'You are doing a fine job,' I said.

'Thank you Sir,' one of them replied, and they all bowed slightly.

'You work long hours?'

'Yes Sir.'

'I hope you are well paid.'

That remark appeared to create an air of uncertainty, and none of them seemed prepared to respond. I waited, unsure how to continue the conversation, if at all. The men, however, obviously thought I required some further contribution from them, and one of them said, tentatively, 'The President does not destroy our homes, Sir.'

That of course threw me into some confusion. 'Why would the President want to destroy anyone's home?' I asked incredulously.

'Because they are very poor and dirty,' was the reply.

Another man spoke: 'If four of our men work here in the Gardens from sunrise to sunset every day all our homes will be safe.'

They were now becoming slightly emboldened, and yet another spoke: 'We take turns to come for a day each Sir. All the men come in turn.' Silence.

'This President has no intention of destroying anyone's home,' I assured them eventually. Silence again. None of us was quite sure what to say or do next. 'Where do you live?' I asked them.

'Barker's Yard Sir,' was their answer.

I thanked them once again and left them to their work. Returning to my office I sent for Obid and enquired about Barker's Yard.

'It is a bad place, Sir. And the people there are bad.'

'Perhaps the people are bad because the place is bad,' I ventured.

Obid was undeterred. 'It is unhealthy Sir. It is not a place for you to go.'

'In that case, I should have gone there much sooner. Tell me where it is.'

'I will conduct you Sir, if it is your wish.'

'No, just tell me roughly where it is. Is it far?'

'Not at all Sir. It is beyond the Port, round a promontory in the rocks.'

'And why is it called Barker's Yard?'

'It was operated by a Mr Barker, many years ago. He had a concession to bring down wood from the forest. He made a yard where he could cut it. There was a sawmill. He employed people very cheaply. They built shelters around the mill. The mill stopped several years ago when the President demanded more money for the concession. Mr Barker went to the mainland and did not return.'

'So the shacks and shelters remain.'

'Yes Sir. It is dirty and unhealthy. There is no drainage or water. There is mud between the houses. The people would have made their revolution, Sir, but they have no spirit. They work in the Gardens here, and they are left alone.'

Clearly feeling that the topic was now closed, Obid excused himself. I went out into the garden and asked one of the men to take me to his home. He was quite horrified at the suggestion, but seeing that I was totally serious, he agreed.

'You will not destroy our homes?' the other three chorused.

'No, absolutely not,' I assured them. Though in fact that was to be exactly what I did, and fairly quickly too.

It was a slum in the fullest possible sense of the word, Mr Harvey. Ramshackle homes built of bits of tin and plastic. Children playing in mud, the smell of sewage everywhere. As I walked around with the gardener, people would peer out through tattered curtains, or I would catch glimpses of eyes watching me through holes in the makeshift walls. It was quite a devastating experience on a par, I think, with the conditions in which I had found sixty-two political prisoners on my first presidential morning after the changes.

The gardener stopped by one of the shacks and held a plastic curtain aside. 'Please Sir, this is my home.' It was dark inside, and at first I could barely see. The man introduced me to his wife, and indicated two somewhat emaciated small boys on a tattered carpet. 'Our children Sir.' The man's wife was a tall, proud woman with the most gentle expression. She immediately offered me a seat on an upturned packing case covered with a piece of cloth, and a glass of tea from a pot standing beside a small mudbrick oven.

As I left and returned home I promised myself I would have them in new houses within six months. And I kept that promise, Mr Harvey.

Putting this promise into practicalities, we proceeded as follows. It so happened that a neighbour of mine, the son of one of my father's 'Club', had just returned from architectural studies abroad, fired with enthusiasm to build low-cost housing from local materials, equipped with what I believe is called 'appropriate technology': simple clay ovens, toilets that generate methane gas, that sort of thing. He and I and Rowland put our heads together and pretty quickly drew up plans. Basically, this worked out as houses built around a square which runs down to the water, with a couple of wings on each side of houses facing onto the waterfront promenade planted with trees, and with benches for people to sit upon.

We began at the outer edge of the plan where there was no existing development, demolishing and replacing as we moved along.

First, the men and women made bricks. Our island community has the ability to produce cement, and there is sand in abundance. The whole community went to work. Foundations were laid according to the survey lines. I should explain that all our houses at that time consisted of a walled courtyard with the dwelling inside. They worked on the homes for

five days each week. On Saturday they all did the other communal work, digging drains, piping water from a small dam higher in the hills, laying paving, putting up posts for public lighting, laying electricity cable – of which the City Manager fortunately had a small stock.

It was not then, as you see it now. Much improvement has gradually taken place. But if tomorrow is better than yesterday, that is enough to be going on with!

This brings to mind our system of land tenure, with which you may not be familiar.

We start from the basis that all land and natural resources are natural, which means quite simply that no person can claim ownership, though of course we recognize the natural right of personal property ownership which comes from making something with your own intellect or labour. We regard all land as the domain of Nature's own original creation. We may assume the right to use it, with equal rights for all as our own laws of justice require. But our respect for Nature and our Planet requires that we do so using land sparingly, without longterm damage or pollution, and with good stewardship so that our land, its beauty and its resources may continue to be enjoyed into the future.

The villages already use this system of what one might call 'tenure in trust', and have done so as long as anyone can remember. Some of our farms are cooperatively worked, some are nominally owned by our historically wealthy citizens – a legacy from the previous President – but that simply gives them the honorific title of 'Landowner', and here again, the lands are worked cooperatively, though in one or two cases the 'owner' takes an active interest in its management. Overall, our Natural Resources team check that land-use is conducted according to law, and they also give frequent advice on agricultural productivity.

The main point I would stress is that there is no land speculation, no constant escalation of land prices, which after all does nothing except place a burden upon land uses and those who consume its products. Wealth and prosperity for individuals, for a community, for a nation is a wonderful thing. It provides comforts, nourishment, health, and liberation through knowledge. But wealth should be earned by hard work alone, productive, honest work. These days there are far too many ways of making money without producing anything consumable in return. That, if I might venture to suggest, is one of the world's major challenges today.

Fortunately it is not something *our* laws permit.

Chapter Fourteen: The Seven O'clock News

I breakfasted early, then took a long walk around the Palace Grounds, eventually settling on one of the benches, enjoying the very early sun, and the scents of the flowers and bushes. As my eye wandered around these beautiful grounds – for which many thanks to our erstwhile colonial masters! – I caught sight of a large black lady sitting on a chair outside the Palace Gates. She had placed herself centrally and facing the Palace, as if she planned to be a one-woman blockade. I wandered over and greeted her.

'When the gates are opened, I am going in to see the President,' she said defiantly. 'I will sit and wait until he sees me.'

I was respectably, though not very formally dressed and not at that moment wearing my Official Sash – I was not on duty till 8 a.m., Mr Harvey! – so she would not immediately know who I was, if ever. But then she looked up at my face, stared more closely, and stood up uttering a short cry: 'Lordy, here's me talking to the President hisself. Please excuse my manners, Sir.'

'That's quite alright,' I assured her. Then 'At eight o'clock the Gates will be opened. You are welcome to come into the Palace. Ask for Miss Hovnanian. She will bring you to me. You will not have to wait.'

'Thank you Sir. You are good man. I will speak to Miss Hovnanian. I know her. She is too thin. She does not eat enough.'

Not wishing to become involved in my Secretary's dietary arrangements I excused myself, assuring the lady I would look forward to seeing her very shortly, for it was then barely ten minutes to eight o'clock.

Entering my office, I spoke first to Obid who was waiting in case I had any instructions. I told him briefly of my journey into the hills yesterday, of the ‘affair’ with the Headman and his young son Kareem, and my intention to give the lad a try in my Cabinet.

‘I know the young man myself Sir, though I confess I have not seen him for a couple of years. He was always a little outspoken. But he has enthusiasm and initiative. He has started several small schemes to improve his village and the people there were pleased.’

‘So you think he might be a good choice for my Cabinet then?’

‘I would say yes Sir. Many in government talk and do nothing. He will think, talk little, then he will do what has to be done.’

I then told how I had left him, that someone would come either for his refusal, or to bring him back, and I asked Obid to instruct a reliable member of the Palace Guard to go and fetch the lad on his motorcycle. ‘It will be done at once Sir,’ was Obid’s customary answer.

I informed Miss Angele, who was also awaiting any instructions, that ‘a lady’ would be coming to see me almost immediately. Obid smiled momentarily before saying ‘I will leave you alone then, Sir.’ I guessed he might be thinking ‘the President is only a man after all’ or something of that nature – which was fine with me!

The lady was shown into my office and I motioned her to sit down opposite me. ‘First, perhaps you could tell me your name.’

‘I am Augusta Sir. I am the Homestyle Cakes Lady.’

‘Yes, I have heard of your enterprise.’ August looked well pleased, and settled herself more comfortably in her chair.

‘Tell me more about it.’

‘I started with one of my sisters. Our cakes were very popular. Later I took on more ladies. We became six.’

‘Were they also your sisters?’

‘Lordy no Sir. I do have five sisters, but they are not in town. Some have gone away, two are in the mountains. It was only my younger sister, April, who was with me.’

‘April and Augusta – two months of the year!’

‘Oh, we are all months, Sir. The oldest is Marcia, born in March. Then April, Gladys Mae, June, Julie, and myself in August.’

‘And that was all?’

‘Bless me, yes Sir. Who would want a daughter or a wife called September?!’

Of course. Silly question. But this story fascinated me, and Augusta, now thoroughly at home, seemed quite willing to chatter on indefinitely. ‘So the timing had to be quite precise, I mean, one child in a different, chosen month each year?’

‘My mother would be told Sir. The Good Lord would tell her when it was time.’

‘And her husband agreed?’

‘She had many husbands Sir,’ Augusta continued cheerfully, ‘and my mother would find one who was ready.’

‘And all her children were daughters, no brothers?’

‘No brothers Sir. As it had been foretold. She would have six daughters, one for each of the warm months.’

We both paused, Augusta having exhausted that particular part of her life story, and I, well, it was quite a story in itself!

Resuming our interview, I suggested that perhaps she might be wanting to start up her business again. That indeed was her ‘greatest wish’, she told me most earnestly.

‘So why did you close before?’ I asked. I knew the answer: the economy had deteriorated and so had her market. But I wanted to talk it through with her.

‘There was no work. People had no money for cakes,’ she replied, predictably for me.

‘And even now, there is no work,’ I said, goading her on to see where she would go.

‘But you will make work, you will make jobs Sir’, she said confidently. ‘Everybody says so.’

Hmm. Everybody says so. We must make sure they are right. ‘What sort of jobs would people do?’

‘For the men I cannot speak, Sir. But I have many friends who would do many kinds of work. A restaurant, a bakery, sewing, knitting, painting... we have many talents. We only want to use them. And very soon, we will all be working.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes Sir. Everybody says so.’

I sat and thought for a while. Augusta sat happily silent, looking around my office, probably enjoying the President’s attention which she had evidently not anticipated when she began her vigil outside the Gates. I had decided straight away that this enthusiastic and energetic lady should be roped into my team, perhaps into the ‘Ladies Department’ of the Business Development team I was hoping to set up. But she would need to have some basic understanding of economics.

‘So let us say that you ladies have all produced some nice cakes or bread or paintings or embroidery and you are all sitting in the market with your goods spread out in front of you. Will people buy?’

‘Of course. We make very good things.’

‘But how will they pay?’

‘With money Sir.’

‘And where will they get the money?’

‘You will provide it Sir,’ she replied confidently.

‘You are right,’ I said. ‘But it must be done very carefully. If there are cakes and no money, people cannot buy. But if there is money and no cakes, the money is useless. Right now we have no economy at all. We must build it slowly, small businesses first, then larger ones. And as the economy grows, we must provide more money or credit so that people can trade with one another.’

‘I was right,’ Augusta exclaimed triumphantly. ‘I told my ladies, I will see the President. He will start our baking again, and there will be money in the market for people to buy our cakes! I will go back and tell them Sir. And we will make many new recipes.’

Augusta eased herself out of her chair – she was a lady of fairly ample proportions – excused herself, and prepared to leave. I got up to open the door for her.

‘I would like you to come and see me tomorrow in the morning. Bring me a list of all your ladies and the ideas they have for business. Of course it would not involve detailed plans and costs at this stage, just ideas they have which could work.’

‘I will do that Sir,’ Augusta said, with obvious relish, and hurried on her way muttering ‘Oh My!’ as she swirled down the passage.

This bright enthusiastic lady had brought a refreshing breeze of confidence with her. Yes, things would get moving. People would work. There would be money. After all... Everybody says so!

There seemed to be some kind of a rumpus going on somewhere in the Palace, but all was soon quiet again. As I looked out of the window I caught sight of Augusta marching determinedly towards the gates. There was a tap on the door and Obid entered.

‘I must apologize, Sir, if you were disturbed.’

‘Not really, but I did hear some noise...’

‘It was the lady Augusta, Sir. She decided to go down to the Guardroom – her son is one of the Guardsmen. I tried to stop her, but she is not a lady to be stopped.’

‘So what happened?’

‘It seems that the men’s apparent excess of leisure – they were all sitting around watching a video and eating chipped potatoes – was rather too much for Augusta, who proceeded to give them a thorough scolding, and told them in no uncertain terms to get up off their... backsides Sir, if you’ll pardon the reference...’

‘Good for her! Perhaps they’ll change their ways!’

‘Perhaps so Sir. The lady Augusta is very persuasive.’

I decided to sit in the grounds for a little, but first I thought I’d try a telephone call. I buzzed Miss Angele and asked for the number of the Island Chronicle. I picked up the phone in my office, an ancient black British Post Office model, and much to my surprise and delight, heard a dial tone. Now a dial tone is what you, Mr Harvey, would normally expect to hear when you pick up a telephone receiver. But our old 1924 Strowger equipment had long been non-functional. More common would be for the technician, if he was there and sober, to connect one manually. Somewhat gingerly I dialed the Newspaper’s number, listening entranced as the selectors slowly and deliberately clicked their way through each digit. I had already been told that our telephone technician was now working with enthusiasm. Did his enthusiasm know no bounds, I wondered?

The clicking stopped and there was a pregnant pause. I confess my heart stopped with it. Surely this wonder of wonders could not disappoint when so close to success! Then I heard a voice: ‘Island Chronicle.’

‘Joshua Macumbie,’ I said (everyone seemed to know my family by the Macumbie name).

‘Who?’ asked a rather puzzled voice.

‘Joshua Macumbie, your new President. Have you forgotten already?!’ I added mischievously. I brushed aside the Editor’s embarrassment. In time he would get to know that my adopted English sense of humour was not to be taken too seriously!

‘When do you plan to go to press with the next edition?’

‘Actually, I was hoping to contact you, Mr President, Sir, or your Office, because as things are at present, some government news is rather what people want to hear.’

‘I quite understand. When would the paper normally appear?’

‘It used to be Fridays, for the weekend.’

‘Well I hope that you can get back to that soon. But for the moment, I can brief you fully tomorrow, Friday, say about four in the afternoon. I will have quite a lot for you. Then the paper can come out on Monday as it did this week.’

‘That would be splendid Sir. I will be there on Friday at four.’

‘Wait! There could... possibly... with a lot of luck be some news down at the Port this afternoon.’

‘You mean the Morning Star, Sir?’

‘You had heard then?’

‘Captain Jansons hinted, Sir, in the greatest of confidence. I suppose he was thinking that if he is successful, it would be a moment for all of us to share and to celebrate.’

‘It would indeed.’

I walked out onto the long verandah and sat on one of the whicker chairs, now slightly the worse for wear, which had hosted the posteriors of consuls, governors and their eminent guests in days gone by. Despite their age, one had to admit

that these chairs were comfortable, and I settled back for a 'think' – there was always some new incoming event or revelation for me to absorb, and failing that, my next project to plan.

But my thoughts were soon interrupted by the sound of a loud motorcycle screeching to a stop outside the Palace Gates. A young man with a rucksack on his back who had been riding on the pillion seat looked around rather dazed, unclasped his arms from about the driver's waist, climbed gingerly off, standing unsteadily on the ground as the motorcycle sped off, wheels scorching the tarmac. I quickly saw that it was Kareem, and walked down to greet him. I had to put an arm round his shoulder, he seemed so unsteady. We walked together up onto the verandah and sat down in the whicker chairs. Obid, who must have heard the motorcycle (who hadn't?!) came out onto the verandah.

Taking one look at Kareem he disappeared, returning moments later with a mug of hot, sweet milky coffee.

Kareem took a few sips, then turning to me and Obid said, shakily, 'It was a difficult journey. I was afraid.'

'The mountain road is very rough and bumpy I know,' I said by way of consolation, and so that the lad would not feel too embarrassed at his condition.

'Coming down the mountain road was very fast,' Kareem said, 'but when we came to the coast road I have never seen such speed. I could not breathe, the air was going past my face so quickly. I was sure that I would never arrive to begin my new job. I prayed to God all the way.'

I caught Obid's eye and we exchanged quick smiles. Obid excused himself and I sat with Kareem. We said nothing as he quietly sipped his coffee, hands clasped around the mug. When he had finished he seemed a little better.

'Perhaps I might take a little walk, Sir,' he suggested.

'Good idea. Take your time. Have another sit if you feel like it. Then we can talk.'

I went in and buzzed for Miss Hovnanian. 'You will have another client for your Cabinet list and biographies,' I said.

'That poor boy. I hope he will soon feel better,' she said sympathetically.

I should mention that Miss Hovnanian's office next to mine, or rather, next to the office of the President, also looks out onto the verandah.

'And with any luck there will be yet another member tomorrow, a lady by the name of Augusta.'

'Augusta the Cakes Lady?'

'That's right.'

'Oh, she is a wonderful lady. And so organized, so efficient. She gets things done.'

'That is exactly the sort of person I need in my Cabinet.'

'Does she know yet?'

'No. I will invite her when she comes tomorrow morning.'

'She will not refuse, Sir, and she will not let you down.'

Excellent! Another in the bag.

Meanwhile Kareem had returned to the verandah, obviously recovered and back to his old self again. 'If you have time now, Sir, I would like to be told my duties.' Yes, that was Kareem alright, fully back on form.

I told him he would have the title of Responsible for Village Affairs. Kareem's job would be to visit each of the mountain villages, first to introduce himself in his official capacity – he would be given a letter of introduction for each Headman – then to make an inventory of essentials – clean water, sewage disposal, school building and teacher availability (in conjunction with Mr Warungu) and road conditions liaising with Rollo. He would also identify business and agricultural potential and what would be required 'to get things going'.

'I understand Sir. But I do not have a way to visit these villages, especially as the buses...'

‘You will find a man from the Palace Guard who can take you. Preferably a man from the village you will visit, if possible, as he would know the way.’

‘I would go with any man Sir, except the one who brought me down here today.’

‘Fine. You are now a member of Cabinet. You can choose whom you will. Obid will assist you if necessary.’

Kareem seemed quite satisfied, and ready to jump into action. I further reassured him. ‘Soon you will be photographed, and Miss Hovnanian will take down some details of your life and background. Your information together with that of all my Cabinet Members will appear in the Island Chronicle on Monday next. So people will know who you are and will respect your position. Then you can begin. Encourage people to come out with ideas. Take notes and keep records so that we can start the necessary action as soon as we can.’

‘And when would that be Sir?’ Kareem asked, his youthful impatience starting to show!

In reply I slowly explained that a non-existent economy must be started carefully, like starting a fire with small sticks, then moving on to larger logs. ‘First, when we have cleared the mountain roads, and with your encouragement, people will start coming down to market with fruit, vegetables, milk and cheese, chickens, and things they have made. In that way, we will start our economy once again, then moving on to larger projects, more goods and services. And again based on your information, we can ensure that the essential needs of each village are supplied. You will see how we will do it. You will learn. Now, do you know where you will stay in town?’

‘Yes Sir.’

‘Then why don’t you go and settle in. Perhaps some lunch, for I see it is about noon. Come back this afternoon and Obid will fix you up with transport. Also, be here at 2 p.m. tomorrow, Friday afternoon for your first – and my second! – Cabinet Meeting in the Palace Stateroom. Oh, and yes, you will receive some payment!’

And with the thought of a welcome lunchtime break in mind, I slid out myself through the small back gate.

My lunch breaks in fact consisted more of a break than a lunch. It was refreshing to have a change of environment, with a chance to let the morning’s events settle in a little. I always returned revitalized, ready for the new challenges and new revelations which by now were becoming a regular part of my day.

Actually, it being Thursday, this afternoon could be quite interesting – or not. Life can be very contrary, Mr Harvey, full of surprises you don’t expect, and then nothing at all when you’re hoping for a bit of excitement. On Thursdays the overseas seaplane calls, and we never know what will be on it. One might expect a mystery passenger, perhaps seeking anonymity and a refuge from justice, or a document in the Diplomatic Bag from our closest on-shore neighbour sending us greetings and a declaration of war should we decline to accept their sovereignty – yes, both have happened before, Mr Harvey!

Also, and very much more significantly, the Morning Star was not normally due until the following Tuesday, since it works on a weekly schedule. If it were to appear today it would mean that Captain Jansons had successfully purchased it for the Nation. So excitement among those few of us ‘in the know’ was running fairly high!

Unable to contain my curiosity and having little to do at the office I wandered down towards the Port after lunch, retaining my Presidential Sash in the hope that I might be doing some official business. As I turned the corner into the Port area I confess I was somewhat disappointed, for the scene was one of total moribundity, with no sign of activity whatsoever. Indeed there was no one to be seen, save for our unofficial Harbour Master, an aged retired fishing captain with a weatherworn face wearing an ad hoc uniform and a cap bearing the legend Harbour Master which he claimed he had won in a late-night card game at Capetown. He spent most of his day either in the fishermen’s café overlooking the port, or sitting on his favourite cast-iron bollard.

As I approached he got up to meet me, welcoming me to the Port and offering his services should there be anything I might require. I replied vaguely that I was simply making an unofficial tour of inspection, a statement which the Harbour Master ignored completely.

‘You’ll be looking for the Morning Star Sir,’ he said quite matter-of-factly as if it were common knowledge.

‘Well if it comes today,’ I replied.

‘Oh, she’ll come in Sir,’ he replied with complete confidence. ‘Captain Elder is a greedy man and he can’t do the work anymore. And Captain Jansons knows his business alright. The Morning Star will soon be sighted over yonder.’

In fact it was the seaplane which came in first, a little ahead of schedule. The Harbour Master stood up and blew his whistle loudly, the usual signal that something was happening in the port. One of the fishermen appeared from the café and rowed out to the plane. The pilot emerged with a satchel around his shoulder, then turned to assist... a passenger? I tell you Mr Harvey, my heart leapt with excitement and joy, for it was my old friend from Madrid! As he and the pilot were being rowed ashore I turned away and surreptitiously removed my Sash. I didn't want to overpower my old friend with formality. I hastened to the edge of the dock and reached down to heave him up, leaving, I'm ashamed to say, our very old friend the pilot to fend for himself! We embraced warmly, both truly happy to be reunited, and he I think relieved to find a friendly welcome on his return after a long absence.

The pilot normally repaired at once to the café and I simply gave him a wave. In return he threw a pouch to me – our Diplomatic Bag no less! I tucked it under my arm, threw my other arm around my old friend's shoulder and headed him off towards the sanctuary of the Palace Grounds. He told me how the Consul in Madrid had sent the young boy who delivers his newspapers into the park, calling the name of our country. When my friend emerged from his bushes he was told that the Consul had important news from home and that he was to come to the Consulate at once. When he arrived he was told that there was money for his passage and that he was to return home. As we passed through the Palace Gates he stopped and looked enquiringly at me. 'How did you manage to raise the money for my fare – and by air too? And how do you now dare enter the Palace Gardens – surely we will be shot by the Guard.'

I sat him down on one of the benches. First I had to get a small formality out of the way – I don't think I had ever known his name, and if I had, I had certainly forgotten it now. 'Did we ever exchange names?' I asked.

'No, probably not!' he smiled, continuing 'well, my friends in Spain all called me Nando, and now I am very accustomed to it.'

'I'm Jay,' I replied, and we shook hands on it. 'Now,' I began, 'I have a confession to make... you see, well the fact is I'm now the President.'

Nando gasped, looked at me in near-horror, then made as if to stand up. I put a hand firmly on his shoulder. 'Nando, listen to me. First, I am not like other Presidents. I am a very ordinary President. People know me and talk to me in the street. These Gardens are open to the public during the day. I intend to work for the people, not for myself. And I do not stand on ceremony, least of all with my friends, of whom you are most certainly one. Second, I want to tell you that it is because of you that I am President today.'

'Me???'

'Yes my friend Nando, you.' And I told him how it was my meeting with him and his story which had miraculously converted me from Playboy to future President. 'Your native country let you down, my friend. Your own people have now made me President so that I would put things right. I will see to it that your homeland does not let you down again.'

We both sat quietly, each with his own thoughts. Then I said 'Well now you have arrived, you will want to return home. You told me you come from a mountain village. Tell me which one and I will arrange transport for you to go home.'

'I come from the Valley of Solomon,' he replied, 'and I can't wait to see it again!'

'Ah. Well, that could mean a slight delay. You see my friend, your valley has been cut off for some time by a rather large and quite impassable landslide. But already I have got preparations underway.' Then I had to tell him everything, about the Morning Star, about Rowland Tulu ('I know him well, he is my friend' Nando interjected), and about the equipment and machines we were waiting for, possibly any minute – maybe! 'Even if the equipment comes today, it will be a couple of days before we can open up the Valley of Solomon.'

'Maybe I can find a room in town while I wait...'

'Nonsense my friend. You will stay with me in my home, as a guest of honour.'

'I will stay in the President's home?'

'For goodness' sake drop this president nonsense. I am inviting an old friend to stay for a couple of days, that's all. We will hear no more of it.'

Again we sat quietly, then I remembered the Diplomatic Bag still tucked under my arm. Excusing myself, I opened it to see what was inside. No, it was not a Declaration of War! But very interesting and very much what I was waiting for. It was a special delivery from one of my former Attic friends in England telling me to expect a visit 'immediately if not sooner' from a representative of Amalgamated Textiles International who were keen to set up a clothing factory and take advantage of our low, low labour costs. I was given some hints as to how best to negotiate, which I would study at

leisure later. Since the gentleman in question was not on today's seaplane, the earliest he would get here would be next Monday, so I could prepare over the weekend.

The second of two envelopes was a genuine diplomatic communication, this came from our Embassy in Paris. It was addressed to Mr Rowland Tulu. I was quite excited, for this, fairly thick epistle would, I felt sure, contain the deeds and titles to the mountain Villa. The Villa Yolanda. You're in for a surprise, Rollo my friend!

The relative peace of the garden was pierced by the sound of a shrill whistle – was it my imagination? – or was it louder and more excited than normal? Could it be? It had to be the Morning Star. I stuffed the two letters back into the diplomatic pouch and passed it to Miss Hovnanian through her open window. Then, grabbing hold of Nando, we both dashed excitedly, and in quite an un-presidential fashion, down to the Port. And there, rounding the headland, was the Morning Star. As the Port came into the ship's view, the ship's whistle began to blow continuously, and some rather tatty flags were hauled up her radio aerial wire. I grabbed hold of a young boy and told him to fetch the Newspaper Editor at once – but at that moment the man himself appeared round the corner. He hastily took some photos of the Morning Star coming into port, then turning to me said 'It's ours then!'

'Guess so!' I replied delightedly. While the Morning Star slowed as she approached the quayside I took the opportunity to introduce Nando and explain very briefly how he had worked his way to Spain, only to return now after many adventures. It would surely make a wonderful story, I suggested. The Editor agreed, and it did!

The Morning Star's deckhands were now throwing out ropes, to be secured against our old cast-iron bollards by many willing hands. As the ship was being finally secured I hurriedly pulled the Official Sash out of my pocket and put it across my shoulder. As the gangplank was lowered, I held up a hand to Captain and Crew not to descend. Instead, I walked up onto the deck and met Captain Jansons. 'Is she ours?' I enquired.

'Yes Mister President Sir. She is ours!'

We shook hands warmly, then I turned to the now quite considerable crowd on the dockside, holding up my hand for silence. The Editor took a couple of photos, after which, motioning Captain Jansons to stand beside me, with the crew surrounding us both, I gestured to the Editor for another photo, and looking up briefly at the windows above the Port Café I was delighted to see our TV Cameraman. 'Did you get all the equipment?' I whispered to the Captain.

'Yes, all of it. Young Rowland got what he wanted and I got the parts for the fishing boats. Oh yes, and I lowered our offer price on my own initiative and Captain Elder accepted it – couldn't resist the site and feel of all that money, just as you had predicted!'

After we had completed what I believe is now called the Photo Opportunity, I motioned the TV Cameraman to keep rolling and addressed the crowd speaking loudly and clearly.

'My friends, the Morning Star now belongs to us, to our Nation, to all of us.' I had to stop as a loud cheer broke out. Holding up my hand after a few moments I continued.

'This will mean some real changes. First, we will clean and paint the Morning Star to make her a proud representative of our country.' More cheering. 'Second, our long-suffering crew members will find their accommodations cleaned and improved and their wages increased.' Of course a cheer erupted from behind me!

'Finally I have to tell you that, I am very sorry to say, Captain Elder was not an honest man. He was taking your foreign currency which your relatives sent you, he was exchanging it in Durban to buy what you needed, but he was taking half, yes half of the money for himself.' Boos from the crowd with exclamations of dismay. 'I can tell you now, that this immoral and despicable practice will not happen again, so you will find that from now on your money will be worth a lot more.'

At this point Mr Harvey, loud and prolonged cheering pretty much put a stop to any further pontification I might have been planning! I shook hands again with Captain Jansons, then with each member of the crew in turn. At last we felt able to make our ceremonial descent down the gangplank!

Back on the quayside I looked for my friend Rollo, who now emerged down the gangplank and we shook hands. 'Did you get the stuff?' I asked.

'You bet!' was his answer, 'some really good machinery, just what I wanted. Also I got the replacement axle for the wounded bus.'

Nando was standing behind me and I started to introduce them – but of course they already knew each other and after embracing warmly they were soon exchanging news, though I knew that each of their stories was far too long to tell in a

few moments. I invited my two friends back to the Palace so we could talk quietly in the garden. I reminded Rollo that Nando was from the Valley of Solomon, and we both agreed what a great idea it would be if Nando could be there – and first through when the road was opened.

‘I think we should go up and clear the road to free the bus first, because that is the shortest job. Bring it down here and turn it into a bus again, not a chicken house! Then we’ll get over to the Valley of Solomon. We’ll work straight through, dawn to dusk until the work is done,’ Rollo promised.

We talked for a while longer, during which Nando told us the story of his ‘new’ name. It seems he had made a small ‘camp’ for himself in the Madrid park bushes which had been called Hernando’s Hideaway by his friends. So of course he became Hernando, or Nando for short. Then Nando said he would like to take a walk around town, and remake its acquaintance. I reminded him he would be staying with me and my family until the road was opened.

Rollo immediately launched into an excited inventory of his new toys. He had shopped around and was really pleased with what he was bringing home. ‘I have a really powerful excavator. It has a loader to shift soil and debris, also to grade the road surface. The driving unit is reversible. Behind there is a back-hoe, a long grabber arm which can pick up and move or place rocks. There is an attachment for pneumatic drilling into rock faces and a pneumatic hammer to bang reinforcing iron strips into the ground. It is a truly wonderful machine, second-hand but in excellent condition and a really good price,’ he enthused. ‘I have picks and shovels and smaller items for the villagers to use. And the machine can drag a roller, which my father will make.’

‘How will he do that?’

‘Simple. Lie two or three oil barrels on their sides, in a line end to end, drill a hole right through them for an axle pole, put a bearing on each end for towing, then finally, fill the barrels with concrete. Instant roller, almost free!’

Rollo turned to me looking serious.

‘I want you, please, as my President to order me to keep the equipment in the Fire Station.’

‘Fine, if that’s what you want, I order it. But why?’

Rollo began to smile. ‘Well, frankly and between ourselves, if my father gets his hands on it, he will want to know exactly how it works and it will be in pieces in an hour!’ I guessed he was right, and we both had a good laugh!

I had let Rollo have his say, get the excitement of his new toys out of his system. Now I had to give him his letter from Paris. It would need his full attention – at least so I hoped. I called through the window to Miss Hovnanian for the Diplomatic Bag which she passed out to me.

First, I pocketed the letter from my Attic Club contact about the clothing project. Then, ‘There’s a letter come for you Rollo,’ I said casually, handing him the envelope. After he had got over his surprise and examined it from every angle, he got around to opening it. I just sat quietly, rather holding my breath for the explosion I knew would come sometime, probably fairly shortly.

I watched through the corner of my eye as Rollo leafed through the documents, frowning as he studied them closely. He looked up, staring straight ahead. ‘I must read you this letter.’ He began to read out loud, slowly, trying to come to terms with its contents.

‘My dear friend Mr Rowland Tulu, I have been in Paris for many years and am very settled here. It is my home now. My wife is French, we have a wonderful home and many friends. I do not think I will ever return to the island of my birth, though I remember it with the deepest affection. So also do I remember our family’s beloved Villa Yolanda, built by my great-grandfather and named after his Sicilian wife. I have often thought of it, saddened by the thought that it was lying unloved and neglected. Now I have been told that you, my very dear friend, have been watching over it and caring for it. So it is my sincerest desire that it should be yours, to hold in perpetuity for yourself and your heirs or appointees, as my Lawyer says in his legal way. So I have made arrangements. With this letter you will find much paper which lawyers like because they get paid for every word! You must keep the document safe, for it is your title to the Villa Yolanda. She is yours now. Take good care of her.’

I could see that Rollo was overcome with emotion and I turned away – I knew exactly how he must feel, having loved and cared for the Villa for so long with only a dream that he might ever own it.

I gave him time. Eventually he turned to face me. He was frowning deeply, an ‘I’m trying to figure this out’ kind of frown. ‘Did you do you know of this?’ he asked, motioning to the letter and sheaf of papers?

‘Yes,’ I said simply. ‘I stayed with our Ambassador in Paris before well before I became President. He is a wonderful and kind man. When you read me his letter, it was exactly what I would expect of him.’

‘So it is you as well as him I must thank for this wonderful gift.’

‘The Villa Yolanda will be very happy to be lived-in again,’ I suggested. Rollo was quiet again. We both sat enjoying the peace of the garden, both I am sure turning our thoughts to the Villa, and its return to past glory.

Then, suddenly Rollo seemed to have a new thought. ‘I have something most important to tell you!’ he said excitedly. ‘While I was studying in Germany I have made a wonderful friend. Her name is Krista. We became very close. Her family have a large farm in the country and they invited me every weekend. It is a wonderful place, truly. Krista is so intelligent. She has a degree in agriculture, also organic farming.’

Rollo paused, his expression clouded. ‘If I had asked her, she would have married me. She would have come here with me as my wife.’ His voice tailed away.

‘Why did you not bring her then?’ I asked. Rollo laughed. ‘Bring her to what? To a mechanic’s life in an impoverished country? To live with me in one room above the Garage, sharing a kitchen and bath with my father, with every towel, every surface oily and greasy? How could that be possible?’ He paused again before continuing slowly. ‘But now, do you know what I am thinking?’

‘Tell me!’

‘I am thinking that now, I have a job, and if I could get the Villa ready very quickly maybe work on it in the evenings and at weekends then I can send for Krista. I know she will come. I am sure!’

I sat quietly for a few moments. I had some other ideas. Rollo nudged me, laughing. ‘Hey, Jay, you could be just a little enthusiastic about my plans!’

‘I’m sorry Rollo, but actually I was thinking I need to get our agriculture on a serious productive footing, and I need a Cabinet Member who will be Responsible for Agriculture and Conservation.’

‘You mean Krista?’

‘Exactly. From what you say, she would be ideal for the job. You would live in the Villa, and...’

‘Wow!’ was all Rollo could manage to say. ‘You know, if I telephoned her now and told her everything, and asked her to come, she would say yes. I know she would. I am very sure.’

‘So do it. Go into my office, sit yourself in the Presidential swivel chair, and telephone her. The phones are working well now.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes really. And while you’re about it, why wait for the Villa to be ready? You can both stay in the President’s Suite. I’m not using it, I live at home.’

‘You really mean that?’

‘Of course. I wouldn’t joke about affairs of the heart, and certainly not about my Cabinet Members! Go and phone now. Tell her to come any time. Tell her everything. Look Rollo, I have a couple of things to do and it’s getting late in the day. Go and phone, and when you have an answer, be sure to telephone me at my home. Obid will give you the number, or Miss Hovnanian. I will ask her now to give you what you need. Talk to Krista as long as you like, tell her everything.’

I called an instruction to Miss Hovnanian through her window, and found her sobbing into her lace handkerchief. ‘Oh, it is such a beautiful, romantic story,’ she stammered. ‘I know his Krista will rush to his side.’

I left them to it and made for the gate as I had in mind to see if Captain Jansons was around. I was rather looking forward to hearing the details of his somewhat contrived purchase!

Instead I met Nando returning from town, looking flushed and excited. ‘I met many old friends,’ he said. ‘And I hope you don’t mind I have some family in town and they insist I must stay with them.’

‘Of course,’ I replied. ‘That’s great. It will be nice for you on your return to stay with your own family. But you will give your address to Obid or Miss Hovnanian in the office so we can get in touch as soon as the road is due to be opened.

‘But I want to go there and work on the road myself.’

‘Very well then, see Rollo and organize it with him. I’m sure he won’t refuse extra hands, and I am very sure that your hands will be especially enthusiastic and energetic!’

It had been quite a dayful Mr Harvey, and frankly it was more than my poor mind could cope with! I went round to the back of the Palace to the semi-secluded garden the ex-President had made for himself and his wife during their earlier, more amorous days. I sat for some time, resting my over-full mind! Then I went home. Captain Jansons’ story could wait.

As I came in my father called from his study. ‘Message for you Son.’ He was hard at work and I wondered what he was up to. As if in answer to my unspoken question, ‘I’m preparing a Duty Roster for the Guard,’ he explained briefly, looking up at me over his half-glasses. ‘They’ve decided they need to earn their keep.’

I wondered if Augusta’s outburst that morning had made up their minds! My father handed me a piece of paper. ‘It’s from young Rowland Tulu at the Garage. Very short message.’ I looked at the slip of paper. ‘She’s coming!’ was all it said. I thanked my father. For a moment he looked at me rather slyly and I could almost guess what he was thinking: ‘Our Jay’s a dark horse. Got himself a nice little filly has he?! Picked up in Paris perhaps?’

Then my mother called out ‘in here dear,’ from the kitchen. That meant she had something to say that Father wasn’t to hear. ‘It’s getting near the end of the month...’ she began, almost whispering. ‘Father’s friends have been asking about their remuneration.’

Of course, the Old Soldiers’ pensions. And they’d want it in the hard stuff too, none of our packets of instant printing. ‘Any idea?’ I queried. Mother, anticipating me as she so often did, handed me a folded note. Scanning it quickly I saw a line of figures. I put it in my pocket for the morrow.

Retiring to my room, I took out the letter from the Attic Club regarding the forthcoming visit from Amalgamated Textiles. The letter was quite detailed, giving me prices and conditions to haggle for, and briefing me on the company itself and the representative I was to meet.

There was also a postscript to the effect that the Company might possibly sound me out regarding a possible International Corporate HQ – which of course was shorthand for registering their company in a low-tax regime. The advice on that topic was to offer the lowest market rate, to be established by mutual consent. If successful it would involve the construction of a small building, for there would be no employees to speak of, just a brass plate, yet the building itself of striking modern design would look impressive in the company’s reports to shareholders, and impressive too for our own citizens.

I was called down by Mother – ‘Quickly, quickly, the television’s working!’

It turned out that our maid had told my parents the news that our gallant (now enthusiastic!) telephone technician had himself trekked up with Tulu to the satellite dish and between the two of them repaired it. As a result that very evening was to see the first genuine Newscast in several years, now returned just as it used to be. It was 7 p.m., the set was turned on, and a smartly dressed announcer introduced himself, then continued ‘We begin our Newscast with international news, brought to you by the BBC Overseas Service.’

It was wonderful to feel reconnected with the outside world once more – I think my parents felt it even more than I did, for I had at least spent time abroad fairly recently. The announcer then returned briefly with ‘And now for local news.’

We all sat spellbound, our eyes glued to the screen, as we watched the Morning Star rounding the headland and entering what was now her Home Port. The announcer was telling the story as voice-over, his voice competing with some triumphal background music punctuated by the odd surface clicks from the gramophone record. Then oh, I felt my face colouring bright red Mr Harvey! Yes, my parents and I, our maid who was hovering in the doorway, and indeed our whole nation were regaled with my performance from the deck of the Morning Star, clearly filmed from a window above the Port Café. It was embarrassing indeed, but my commonsense told me that as President I would probably be doing more of this sort of thing so I’d better get used to it.

The ordeal over and the Newscast concluded, my mother clasped my hand. ‘You were wonderful darling!’ she said, further embarrassing me in front of the maid! As she got up to lay out supper, my father turned to me and nodded very

emphatically. ‘Well done Son,’ he said, with considerable feeling. Then, lowering his voice, ‘I imagine the late President bequeathed some funds...’

‘Yes.’

‘I had an idea there might be some money available. You see, his last project before he died was... believe this... he wanted to buy a couple of second-hand frigates, from Canada I think. And there was even talk of a nuclear sub. Apparently the sub was based in Odessa on the Black Sea and was being offered for cash by its Commanding Officer who hadn’t been paid for two years. Quite extraordinary.’

Father paused, shaking his head in disbelief. Then ‘Still, I’m glad to see you’ve found a better use for the money, Son!’

‘There’s more’, I added hesitantly, not wishing to give too much away at that stage, even to my own father. ‘And we will find a good use for all of it. But I hope that very soon the full accounts will be published. You may be surprised. I think everyone will be’.

And with that un-apologetically enigmatic remark I excused myself and retired to get ready for dinner.

Chapter Fifteen: Our First Report

Arriving at my office just before 8 a.m. as was my custom, I was met by a highly, and quite uncharacteristically excited Obid. ‘Everyone has seen the television Sir. The whole town is down at the Port. They are all volunteering to clean the Morning Star. There are so many people on board scrubbing and polishing they can hardly move for the crush.’

I later heard that some dark blue paint had been found in the Fire Station where, you will recall Mr Harvey, the old Palace Guard were accustomed to secreting their booty. Tulu meanwhile had got the engines running smoothly, and by the time her hull had been painted in dark blue down to the waterline with white superstructure and trimming, she was, in Captain Jansons’ words, the smartest ship afloat. A small exaggeration perhaps, but we were all very proud of her, for she was ours, and she was to serve us well – even to this day.

Rollo’s tools and equipment had been wheeled out from the Fire Station and, quite delighted, my Responsible for Roads and Transport called into my office briefly before setting off into the hills, aided by a mechanic from the garage who would drive the machine, and – surprise surprise! – several Palace Guard members suitably rigged out in khaki denims (‘fatigues’ in American I believe, Mr Harvey) who would help with the work. Nando, too, had joined the work party. Their first job would be to open up the road and free the bus, then to break through into the Valley of Solomon. Finally, a small perk for the boss – clearing the track up to the Villa Yolanda. Meanwhile, Tulu with a couple of heavily-built assistants was making all speed possible in his somewhat broken-down breakdown truck, heading towards his other bus parked by the roadside, armed with a replacement front axle. It was barely 8 a.m., and things were moving, Mr Harvey!

Miss Hovnanian informed me briskly that I had an 8.15 appointment. My mind circled rapidly. I had no wish to appear uninformed. Fortunately a sound came to my rescue, the unmistakable, rich sing-song voice of Augusta reverberating in the hallway. ‘Your President is just the loveliest man Mr Obid. You must take very good care of him.’

‘I endeavor to do so,’ was Obid’s typical butler-like response.

‘Angele my dear’ (to Miss Hovnanian), ‘you are looking wonderful, and your hair, so pretty. You must always look your best for him – he is still unattached you know...’

‘So,’ I said as she came through the door into my office, ‘you’re already starting in business with a marriage agency!’

This amused Obid who was standing behind her, and relieved Miss Hovnanian’s embarrassment – her face was quite flushed! Sitting herself down in front of my desk Augusta was quite unashamed. ‘I have many ideas,’ she said. ‘And if the President wishes me to find someone suitable...’

‘The President does not wish it for the moment, thank you Augusta,’ I replied, ‘I will let you know, if and when...’

Obid and Miss Hovnanian, both highly amused, closed the door behind them, leaving me with Augusta. Our conversation proved very rewarding. Augusta handed me a list of projects, all of which her ladies could undertake

quickly and with minimal investment, though one or two required purchases from Durban. She especially mentioned that many of her ladies had sewing machines and 'can make anything you can imagine'. I hinted that there could perhaps be a garment factory in the near future which would give employment to the ladies with sewing machine experience. I asked her to keep that piece of information confidential and she promised to do so. Naturally within an hour of her departure the town was rife with rumours!

I told Augusta about the Cabinet and invited her to the meeting that afternoon so that she could report on some projects her ladies had in mind. I did not tell her that the Cabinet Meeting, or part anyway, was to be televised; I had a strong feeling that it might unleash an outburst of uncontrolled excitement. The Cabinet prospect excited her quite enough, and she rushed away muttering 'Lordy Me, I have to get masself ready and this dress it just won't do!!'

I knew there was something I had to do, and fishing in my back hip pocket I brought out the piece of paper my mother had given me detailing the remunerations for the Old Retainers Brigade. I pressed for Obid – this could be a delicate matter.

When he came in I mentioned that my father's colleagues appeared to be in line for remuneration. 'That is so Sir, yes.'

'Any idea how much?'

'No Sir. I was not privy to such information. Your predecessor dealt with that personally. Though as Mister B was not involved, I would imagine that the Safe would have provided...'

I showed Obid the piece of paper. He looked somewhat aghast – the amounts were fairly generous to say the least. What did they do with it all, I wondered. Suddenly I felt embarrassed, even guilty, that the non-existent services of my father and his friends should be so highly rewarded.

But I was then to encounter another facet of Obid's character, one of extreme maturity and wisdom. 'They are the Elders of our nation Sir,' he offered, with complete assurance. 'It would not be seemly for their honoraria to be in any way diminished.' I could not have put it more perceptively myself.

'Then we had better summon Mr Gupta and raid the safe again,' I suggested.

'It will be done Sir,' was the customary response. And as usual, it was. After the 'due processes' had been accomplished a set of sealed envelopes, one for each recipient, would be delivered by Obid 'in the usual manner'. So that was that. Not one of my pleasanter duties, even though it concerned my father, for whom as you may have gathered Mr Harvey, I had complete respect.

I just couldn't help thinking that the money could have purchased a new water pump for one of the villages, or perhaps some school materials. I wondered if Obid had read my thoughts, for he said quietly and consolingly 'Our new President is doing much good for our country, for which to date he receives no remuneration.' It did make me feel a little better!

I reminded Obid that there would be a Cabinet Meeting at 2 p.m. Of course he never needed reminding about anything, but I put to him that it might be an idea to televise the proceedings. There would be some new Members, and progress reports, all of which should be public knowledge. Our Newspaper Editor should also be present of course.

Finally my mind returned to the earlier disturbance, and the vision of the Guardsmen watching videos. 'Does the Guard have a library of videos then Obid?' I asked.

'They do Sir,' was the reply.

'These should be with the television studio, so that everyone can share our modest feast.'

'Indeed they should, Sir.'

'Which would require an order from the President?'

'Precisely Sir.'

'I order it. There. Another duty easily done.'

'But much appreciated, nonetheless.'

‘Come to think of it, I imagine the Old Soldiers all have private video collections in their homes. I know we have. I think I will dictate a letter to Miss Hovnanian, to be handed to them with their envelopes, to the effect that now the television is working on a more commercial footing, they might consider donating their videos to the TV Studio’

‘An excellent idea Sir.’

‘Then it will be done,’ I replied, buzzing for Miss Hovnanian, and catching Obid’s eye as I stole his favourite line!

I telephoned the City Manager – yes, dialing the number! – and asked him to come over at his convenience. He was round in five minutes – I don’t think his days were all that full!

I had two items on my mind I needed to discuss with him. First was the matter of locating the new garment factory – assuming it could be negotiated successfully. We would need a concrete base for the building, easy access from town for the ladies, and most importantly, there was the matter of how to get the goods, which we would presumably pack into containers, out to the freighters – there was no way they could get into our small harbour, and it would be a pity to tie up the Morning Star to do the job of a lighter.

We discussed location, ultimately not a problem. Then we decided to summon Captain Jansons to see if he had any suggestions about loading and unloading containers. He was not at home when I dialed his number – of course, he would be on the Morning Star, his new toy! A messenger was sent, and the Captain was with us in a matter of minutes. We told him the situation, and the Captain came up with a real surprise.

As a result of earlier offers from a foreign power to construct a runway in the sea over our coral – I mentioned that before Mr Harvey – one or two odd legacies had been left behind: namely three Jeeps – which The General, now Palace Guard Commander, had somehow managed to acquire, two generators (lacking spare parts of course!), and an LARC60 – a 63foot, 60-ton-capacity amphibious craft. Being at home on land as on the water, this would be able to drive to the factory loaded with an empty container, then drive back with its container full, into the water, its container hauled up by the freighter and replaced with an empty. So! Not all news is bad news! We had gone as far as we could with that project, which would now have to wait for the Amalgamated Textiles representative’s visit.

That settled, the CM left, but Captain Jansons hung back, closing the door after the CM had gone. ‘There is another matter...’ he began.

‘Good or bad? Because if it’s bad, forget it till next week!’

‘Actually, it’s not just good, in fact it’s quite splendid!’

‘Well fire away then!’

The Captain was quite beaming with pleasure as I motioned him to sit down again.

‘Did I ever mention the President’s Yacht?’

‘Yes I believe so. Also I recall seeing it when I was quite young.’

‘Then you will probably agree with me that it was, is quite splendid.’

‘From what I remember, yes, absolutely yes.’

‘Well, it’s still there, hauled up on its own slipway, in its own boatshed, and in tiptop condition – that has been one of my pleasures over the years, looking after this magnificent vessel.’

‘Where is this boatshed then?’

‘It’s in the next cove as you go north. That was the best physical location. There used to be a road to it but it became overgrown and frankly, the fewer people who knew about it the better, as I didn’t really want a family of kids living in it!’

‘Quite so.’

We paused for reflection, then I asked ‘So what are you proposing for her, if anything?’ I smiled as a very pleasant thought came to mind ‘Perhaps she could become the Presidential Yacht once again, and transport me around the playgrounds of the rich and famous at enormous expense – for which of course my loyal citizens would gladly pay.’

Captain Jansons looked at me in horror, but only for a moment, as he caught the obviously mischievous glint in my eye.

‘Now seriously Captain, have you any ideas?’

‘Well first of all Sir, I am happy that you did not at once say we should sell her. Frankly and honestly, it would break my heart – though of course I appreciate that many other considerations are more important’

‘So if the serious displeasure of one of my Cabinet Members is not on, what do you suggest?’

The Captain summoned his thoughts. ‘I am getting old Sir,’ he began, ‘and looking forward to my retirement. Just now I have the Morning Star which I will captain for perhaps several months to ensure that everything is running smoothly. But then I would like to hand over the captaincy to a senior crew member – I have at least three possible candidates on whom I would confidently rely. Then...’ His voice tailed away. I prompted – ‘Then?’

‘Well Sir, I have two friends, seamen like myself. Both of them are in command of luxury vessels which are chartered to wealthy people for their vacations. Both operate in the Mediterranean, rich waters for such clients! These vessels are similar to ours in size and accommodation, but there the comparison ends. Both are modern, like others plying the charter trade. Ours is a magnificent, not antique, but almost so, with the most handsome woodwork and fittings. You recall her outer appearance...’

‘Yes, quite clearly.’

‘Well she is every bit as magnificent inside.’

‘So. You keep her under wraps until when?’

‘We are moving into winter now. We could advertise for next season. My colleagues have many names of potential clients. It would bring in some valuable revenue.’

‘Fine. Sounds good to me.’ And the Captain left with a new spring in his step!

It was coming up lunch-break time, but there was something I wanted to do first. I called for Obid. I had never actually toured the Palace, so I asked him to take me around. I was especially interested in the Presidential Suite, also I had a vague memory that guest suites had been mentioned on the top floor as well. In fact these had been installed in the 1930s with a remodelling of the top floor to provide six guest suites, bed-sitting room and private bathroom, for visiting diplomatic staff.

My devious mind was at work here, Mr Harvey.

It had occurred to me that we might lure one or two retired businesspeople to come and stay with us for a while, with their spouses, why not. Surely they would be tempted by ‘self-contained accommodation in the Presidential Palace’. We could lure them into our community activities and perhaps either make business contacts or get advice, or both.

I put this to Obid who seemed quite pleased with the idea. ‘I will take good care of your guests Sir,’ he assured me, ‘that is my function as Major Domo.’ Thinking of a possible visit from the Textiles gentleman I warned him that we might be receiving a guest as soon as the following Monday. ‘I am always ready Sir,’ was Obid’s confident – and entirely predictable! – reply.

And so, after a brief but informative tour of the Palace... to lunch.

I returned at one-thirty to the Stateroom thinking I would be there before everyone else. In fact I was the last to arrive. At five minutes before two I invited people to take their places. ‘I am starting five minutes early because what I have to say is off the record. I am hoping that today we can at least introduce ourselves to our customers – and by that I mean every single person, man woman and child in this country – and in addition, for those who have something to report, tell people what we have achieved so far. Now you may have noticed that we have the editor of the Island Chronicle with us. We also have the cameraman from our own tv station, and I think I need to warn you in advance that we have to cooperate a little with this worthy gentleman. What I mean is, we may have to give him time to move around a little between shots. For example, he will be pointing at me when I am speaking. Then he may have to re-position himself for the next speaker. So please wait for his signal before speaking. Of course he can do some editing afterwards to make a smooth assemblage of interviews, but if you start speaking before he’s facing you, he will miss what you have to say.’

There were nods of assent from all the members except for Augusta who had until then remained somewhat quiet and chastened. ‘Lordy, you mean I’m going to be on television? But Sir, I’ve never been any good at acting and I don’t know

my lines.’ I told Augusta with a smile that she was a natural actress, which amused her colleagues around the table, but provided her with no reassurance.

‘As for your lines, Augusta, you will speak naturally and follow the lead of others. Basically you will say – ‘I am Augusta. The President has asked me to coordinate business projects for our ladies. If you have any ideas please come to see me. We hope to get some projects started very quickly.’

I was a little dismayed to see that Augusta had taken some paper and a pencil from her large bag and was scribbling furiously. Well, perhaps when the others had spoken, she would be more relaxed.

And so the meeting began, and as President it was I who set the ball rolling. Pointing to myself and waiting for the cameraman’s signal, I began.

‘My friends, this is the end of my first full week as your new President. I have assembled a Cabinet which will form the basis of my government. The Cabinet Members are gathered around this table in the Stateroom of the Palace in order to introduce themselves to you and make their reports of progress so far. Each Cabinet Member here present has a Responsibility for a particular area of government. Please get to know these people, whom we call our Responsibles, so that you can approach them if you have problems. We are all, including myself, here to serve you and our nation. Please remember that. Feel free to tell us if we are doing well, and more importantly, tell us if we are failing in our duties.’

I then sat back as each Member introduced him- or herself. For some it was an introduction only. Others had something to report. Captain Jansons formally reported that the Morning Star was now ‘ours’ and that cleaning and painting work was progressing with much volunteer help. Mr Warungu for Education confirmed that international agencies had been contacted and that it was government policy to do everything possible to improve educational facilities. After the meeting he informed me privately and with great enthusiasm that the villagers had got the message that education was once again on the government’s agenda, and they had begun cleaning up their school buildings. Also many teachers were returning to their old jobs.

Signalling the cameraman, I mentioned that one very important Member was not able to attend this Meeting. ‘Mr Rowland Tulu is our Responsible for Roads and Transport, and he is right now as we speak, somewhere in the hills opening up blocked roads. He and his team have promised to work right through the weekend, every hour of daylight, until the job is done. I do not think I am speaking out of turn when I say that with good luck and hard work, by the middle of next week they should even have opened the road to the Valley of Solomon.’

A round of well-deserved applause greeted that announcement. I hoped Rollo would see it, perhaps on one of the village television sets, as he had said he might stay overnight in the village until the work was done.

A somewhat nervous young Kareem introduced himself as being the government’s representative for Village Affairs, while Obid, who had been sitting quietly throughout, had ‘great pleasure in announcing that the cinema would shortly be reopening with both machines working and some new films from London’.

Augusta’s turn was next, and as the camera turned to face her she rummaged in her bag and produced a comb and a mirror ‘Augusta,’ I prompted, ‘there is no need for that. You are looking just wonderful as you are.’ Augusta looked pleased, then dubious. Turning to her notes she held up the piece of paper and began to read slowly. I let her finish, then complimented her on her excellent speech – at which everyone else looked a little dubious! Then, making a discreet signal to the cameraman to keep rolling, I said ‘Now Augusta, just for fun, imagine that our cameraman here is a group of your ladies, and you want to tell them about your new job and how they need to bring their projects to you’.

Without further ado Augusta launched forth. ‘Hello Ladies. You all know me, I’m Augusta, the Homestyle Cakes Lady. Well I want to tell you that any day now everybody will be tasting our delicious cakes again. And that’s not all, oh no. I know you ladies have many talents and many ideas. And I want you to tell me about them. Our wonderful new President has promised to help us. And he has promised that the people will have money to buy our cakes and all the other wonderful things we can all make.’

Whether or not she had anything further to say I wouldn’t like to guess. Knowing Augusta, she could quite well have gone on all afternoon. But at that point she was interrupted by a round of applause – which couldn’t have provided a better end to the meeting!

The meeting broke up, at least the formal session. But I was pleased to see that Members spent much time renewing acquaintances and discussing their work.

As I left for home I must admit well.. yes, I was pleased! Also I confess that, despite my previous embarrassment at my first tv performance aboard the Morning Star, this time I was quite looking forward to the Seven o'clock News! It turned out pretty well, too, the tv staff had done a wonderful editing job and the whole 'show' ran smoothly and seamlessly.

My mother's reaction was thoughtful rather than emotional and she nodded her assent very fervently as my father said, with great feeling, 'You've done more in a week than many a man in your position would achieve in a year. Well done, Son. I think my old pals will agree, we've backed a winner here!'

That meant a lot to me, Mr Harvey, and I frankly admit that I was quite overcome. I excused myself with the pretext of taking a breath of fresh air, over which I took longer than usual.

Sixteen: Encounter with the Garment Trade

With the conclusion of what seemed to be generally accepted as a pretty good week, I resolved to have a nice, quiet, restful weekend. If that did not, in fact, come to pass I had only myself to blame. There's always a more relaxed feeling about Saturday – Sunday too but a little different – and I began by enjoying the feeling that according to the 'tradition' I had already established, I would not be expected at the Palace over the weekend.

As I scanned a few of our own rather meager collection of magazines, my fertile mind imagined some old warplane skimming low overhead as it dropped daily supplies of the world's great newspapers for our main-street newsstands in every known language – Arabic, Hindi, Russian, Die Zeit, La Stampa, Le Soir, Financial Times... But that would be a long way off, if ever!

I went upstairs to my room, there to peruse yet again the notes I had received to prepare me for the Textiles Gentleman. But I soon realized that I already knew it all by heart!

On a sudden impulse I changed into some old clothes which were still fairly presentable, and with a brief explanation to my mother, scooted off into the hills in my Beetle. I just had to know how the road clearing work was progressing. Anyway I thought, the chaps would probably welcome a little presidential encouragement!

Arriving at the worksite where the subsidence had been I was surprised to find quite a crowd of willing workers, all beavering away enthusiastically. Some were Palace Guard members recognizable by their khaki denims, others had presumably come from the village at the end of the road.

Rollo saw me and came over to greet me looking very pleased indeed. 'I was planning to hammer-in the iron reinforcing strips I had brought to shore up the outer edge. But we decided it would be better to widen the road on the inside so we have been shifting earth from there, also cutting into some rock that was there.'

'Are you finding that you have all the necessary gear?'

'Oh yes, absolutely. Everything is working very well and we have all we need. And so many helpers!'

'Well don't let me hold up the work,' I said, and catching the infectious enthusiasm, grabbed a shovel and joined in. I have always believed Mr Harvey, that ideally, mental and physical work or exercise should be in balance.

When it became time for a lunch break everyone sat on the ground in a circle and pooled what they had brought. I to my shame had brought nothing, but was welcomed into the circle and gestured to help myself.

After lunch the work continued. The sound of a not-very-healthy vehicle making heavy weather of the climb up the road signaled the arrival of our valiant tv cameraman, come to record the works for the evening news. He started filming the work and talking briefly with Rollo who described their strategy. When he discovered me however, he looked quite horrified.

'Mr President?' he enquired incredulously, the absence of the little red light on his camera indicating that he had stopped filming.

Signaling him to start filming again I stopped work and leant on my shovel for a breather, mopping my brow in the afternoon heat. Addressing the camera directly I delivered one of my little homilies Mr Harvey: 'Neither your

government nor your President will become a parasite, taking the nation's money, living in luxury and giving nothing in return. We are here to serve you, and right now we need to get our country to work. If that means opening up a road, then that is what we do, myself included.'

That too should go down well on the Seven o'clock News. You see Mr Harvey, I was becoming quite what I believe is known today as 'media-savvy'!

I stayed with the team until it got dark and the party broke up. Rollo, who had come up on the back of a motorcycle with a third worker perched on the fuel tank, returned back to town more comfortably in my Beetle.

As for the rest of the weekend Mr Harvey, I felt it my duty to attend Church Parade on Sunday – we are a fairly religious community you know – but I can tell you that I walked to church and back in great discomfort as well as spending a very uncomfortable hour wishing away the Church Service. Yes, you probably guessed. I was incredibly stiff after my day's hard labour, and happily spent the afternoon in quiet repose!

Arriving at the Palace just before eight on Monday morning I was met by Obid who handed me a message from Rollo. 'He was here very early Sir, about 6.30, before first light. He gave me this message.' I knew that Obid would be fully conversant with the contents, but I read it aloud so that we would both know that we both knew... if that makes any sense, Mr Harvey.

The message brought good news indeed: 'Am away to the hills! We have completed our first job including a final rolling of the road surface. The bus has been cleaned by the village and it is looking beautiful inside, everything shining as new. My father is going there later this morning to bring back the bus. One of the Guardsmen will take him. Today we start work on the Valley of Solomon. This will be much more difficult I think. I must have missed Nando as it is still early, but please tell him that he can come up with us tomorrow if he wants to. Perhaps there will be a way through by foot. But for the whole road to open it might take three days. We will work until it is finished.'

I pressed for Miss Hovnanian – I had told Nando to give her his address – then sent for a messenger to take the note to him. I also sent messages to the tv cameraman and the Island Chronicle. Opening up the Valley of Solomon, with its rich harvests of fruit and vegetables, tea and coffee, would be a major achievement for us, quite apart from bringing our long-lost fellow countrymen back into the fold once more.

As soon as the messengers came back I sent them off once again to the City Manager, also to Kareem, Augusta and Mr Gupta, asking them, if they were available or could be found, to come to my office as soon as convenient. Yes, I was hatching a plot, Mr Harvey!

In the meantime I went down to Mister B. I was pleased to see that he had managed to make his 'den' a little more homely, with some added furniture, pictures and photos brought from his home. 'Mister B!'

'Good Morning Sir!'

'Mister B, you once asked me if I would print money to make people rich.'

'I well remember Sir.'

'Well now is the time. I would like fifty packets delivered to my office on Friday morning please.'

'I will do it Sir.'

'Excellent. Oh, and make sure Obid pays you something before Saturday.'

'I am not part of his household Sir. I think perhaps it is you...'

'Very well. Remind me to pay you when you bring the packets to me.'

'Thank you Sir. I will look forward to it.'

The messenger advised me that Kareem, my Responsible for Village Affairs, was 'in the hills'. But the CM, Mr Gupta and Augusta arrived together within ten minutes of my messages. I told them I wanted to have a very special Market Day on the following Saturday. Everyone must be told. There would be a prize for everyone who had a shop or a stall with merchandize for sale. Augusta was to tell her ladies to start making or producing whatever ideas they had with whatever resources they had available. The Market should have an air of the ceremonial to it. I would present prizes, and the band would play. If we had any flags to put out, let's do it.

Augusta rushed off immediately to organize her ladies, and I asked Mr Gupta to liaise with Mister B about the forthcoming print order which would have to be entered into the accounts.

Alone now with the CM I tackled him on the matter of street cleaning. There was not the garbage rotting away on street corners that one sees in many developing countries, our people were simply too poor to throw much away. In fact they were expert in recycling and re-using almost anything. However there was no provision for street cleaning and I wanted to get something going. I asked the CM 'Any ideas?'

'Well, short of paying permanent cleaners, which I presume you don't have funds for at the moment, I suppose we could organize a general volunteer cleanup. I think most of the traders in the main street would be happy to come out with a brush, and as for the neighbourhood side streets, the people are out every day sweeping. They would certainly welcome an organized effort.'

'So what could we lay on in the way of support, do you think?'

'Well really, I'd say the main thing would be a truck to put the rubbish in. Tulu could probably help there.'

'What about street washing? Any thoughts? That would really clean things up.'

'Right. Good thinking. Yes, I've got it. We can use the Fire Engine to spray the streets after the rubbish has been shifted and the streets have been swept.'

'Excellent. I will announce it on tv on Tuesday and we'll do it on Wednesday.' 'Right, I'll get onto it.' 'Good. And don't forget the Saturday Market.'

I wrote a note for Kareem. 'There will be a big market in town next Saturday. Tell everybody in the villages to come down and bring whatever they've got to sell. There will be prizes for people with stalls.'

Then I sent for the tv cameraman. We taped the announcement about the Great Cleanup and the forthcoming Market Day in my office.

I suggested he might like to be a bit creative, go out into the town and tape some of the scruffier corners, with a voiceover extolling the virtues of a clean urban scene ready for Saturday. I was pleased to see that he jumped on the idea with enthusiasm. I suppose that he was still enjoying the novelty of a free and independent television service. After some discussion we agreed to put the announcement out both on that evening, Monday, and also on Tuesday, so everybody would be sure of getting the message and be ready for the Wednesday cleanup.

I spent what was left of the morning on the verandah, and took an early lunch break. I had a strong feeling 'something might happen' in the afternoon, that 'something' probably being the arrival of Mr Textiles. I revised for the millionth time the notes I had been sent from London until I had everything clear in my mind. In fact it was at 2 p.m. sharp that I heard the Harbour Master's shrill whistle which on a Monday at that time could only mean the plane was coming in, and early too for a change. I put on the Official Sash and went down to meet it. The pilot climbed down into the waiting dinghy, then turned to assist his passenger. Dressed in a light linen suit and carrying a black brief case... well there was only one person it could be.

I hauled him up onto the jetty and we introduced ourselves. He seemed like a decent enough chap. A few pleasantries about his journey and the weather took us to the Palace, where I handed him over to Obid so he could be shown to his Suite and freshen up. Obid had somehow managed to guess or foresee what would be required of him, for he appeared at the front entrance dressed in formal grey striped trousers, black jacket and white shirt with bow tie. Quite the English butler!

'This is Mr Hansen, Obid, from Amalgamated Textiles,' I said as we arrived. 'I am Obid, the Major Domo. If you will allow me Sir, I will show you to your accommodations.' I invited our guest to come down to my office whenever he was ready. Then I advised Miss Hovnanian that I was not to be disturbed.

Though I confess to have been, well, a little nervous at the prospect of negotiating with some hard-bitten international businessman, and on behalf of my nation no less, we soon got down to it. I began of course with the usual enquiry about his journey.

'Well, I must admit I started getting a bit nervous fairly early on when I noticed the pilot taking frequent swigs from a whisky bottle. Y'know, I really think youguys need to do something about that. I can't see my boss doing that drunken seaplane act.'

And if you ever want to bring any tourists in...’

‘Point taken,’ I replied, though truthfully I hadn’t quite got around to that yet!

Hansen announced that he had told the pilot to wait as he was flying on to Limassol. I expressed regret that he would not be spending a few days with us and extended the invitation to a suite in the Palace whenever he was passing. That broke the ice quite nicely, and we proceeded to business. ‘We’re looking at 4 cents an hour,’ was his opener as he spread his file out on the desk in front of him. I knew the figures, and that ours was the lowest in the trade. ‘5.7’ I replied, matter-of-factly. For a moment our eyes met. I could read his thoughts: ‘Good. This guy knows his onions. That should speed things up.’ So we got down to business.

‘Do you have premises?’

‘No.’

‘Can you lay-on a level concrete base to our specs with services?’

‘Concrete base, yes. Water, sewage treatment, yes. Reliable power source, dubious.’

‘Right. Generator. Now. Female labour either with sewing skills or ready and able to learn?’ ‘Yes, most with skills.’

‘Excellent. OK. Out-shipment. I see your harbour is quite small. Do you have another that can take a medium sized freighter?’

‘No. But we do have an LARC60.’

That stopped him in his tracks. ‘What on earth is that?’

‘Well believe it or not it’s a 63-foot, 60-ton-capacity amphibious craft. We can drive it up a slipway and overland to the factory, load it up, then down into the water and over to the freighter..’

‘Good Gracious! Well I’m blown! Really?’

‘Yes. And don’t ask how we got it!’

We both shared a smile and enjoyed a break in what had been a fast-moving negotiation. I had a few details to put to him but these were accepted without argument. He put some plans on my desk – ‘this is what we’ll need in the way of a base.’ Then he put a contract in front of me. ‘This is our standard contract for you to peruse at leisure. I will prepare a final draft as soon as I get back to the office, filling in the details, and adding the few extra matters we discussed. There will be no nasty surprises I assure you. We’re a big company, yes, and we like to negotiate a good deal. That’s what we’re in business for. But we deal honestly with our partners and we stick to our word, written or spoken.’

‘So I have been advised,’ I replied, ‘That’s why we invited you.’

I’m sure he wanted to probe a little into that somewhat enigmatic statement, but he did have one last point: a concern that some of the finished products might find their way out through the back door. ‘Nothing personal, no reflection on your personnel. But it does happen...’

My attic friends had prepared me for this situation and I was able to respond positively. Taking the bull by the horns, as it were, and anticipating such eventualities, I proposed, and he readily agreed a deal to the effect that we ourselves, our nationals, would be able to buy any of the company’s products at what is known as the factory-gate price, that is, the full production cost including admin, overheads and capital write-off. The factory gate price for a T-shirt is, I believe, 9.9 cents. That is the price our wholesalers pay. They are three in number, licensed on the understanding that they will sell on the island only and not export beyond our shores. They in turn distribute to retailers in town and in the villages. We are very happy with that arrangement!

Our business concluded, I think, to mutual satisfaction, I let the fellow go on his way. As I saw him to the front door, I felt that all I wanted just then was to give my newly tried negotiating skills a well-earned rest! Obid magically appeared to conduct our visitor to the Port, and that – well – that was that. The matter of the Corporate HQ did not appear to be on Hansen’s agenda and I did not bring it up. ‘So far so good’ was good enough.

Now let me tell you more about how our relationship with the textile trade continued. As we expanded, with the same, and later with a couple of other companies, we did two things. First we selected friendly partners. Second, we tried to ensure that we were making, right here, a full range of men's and women's clothing.

Man cannot live by T-shirts alone, so to speak.

Our ladies grew in expertise and confidence, and using my good offices, they got permission to use the factory during non-working hours to produce their own garments using their own materials. They had always managed despite previous difficulties, to obtain rolls of highly colourful cloth from somewhere. Actually I suspected that their fishermen husbands and friends would slide into small mainland harbours on dark nights to get the cloth and would return to our island with considerably less fish than they had actually caught. They began making men's shirts from their colourful materials which immediately caught on. They gave them the brand name of 'Sunday Best'. The ladies had a strict rule: sales through the shops only. This pleased the shopkeepers, and it also ensured that husbands did not persuade their wives to give them free shirts!

Oh yes Mr Harvey, as the English say, there are no flies on our ladies! Anyway, that caused a very interesting development: only the men with jobs could afford a Sunday Best shirt, so the shirt became a status symbol for men with jobs, a source of shame for those without, and of course a strong incentive to get or create work as fast as possible.

And there's more. One day, Mister Textiles, the Big Boss from Head Office did a world tour of all his facilities, and when he got to us, he found a pile of Sunday Shirts in a corner of the factory. He immediately took two of his size and wore them throughout his short stay – and probably thereafter too I would suspect. Before he left he offered the ladies a good price for their shirts and guaranteed to take all they could produce.

So you see the net result was that many of our people got jobs with what was, and is for us a respectable wage, bearing always in mind that our cost of living is way below anything the so-called developed world could ever dream of. In addition, our people got access to a full range of clothing at factory prices; and we earned valuable foreign exchange which allowed us to buy essential capital equipment from abroad. Not a bad deal all round, I'd say.

Chapter Seventeen: Welcome to your Government

As I arrived at the Palace just before eight on Tuesday morning, something seemed to be, well, out of place. No sign of Obid, no sign indeed of any activity whatsoever. I buzzed for Miss Hovnanian to see if she had any appointments for me, any messages phone calls anything! But there was nothing on my agenda whatsoever.

I remember quite clearly sitting back in the luxurious presidential five-point swivel-and-tilt chair, enjoying its comfortable reclining position to the full for the first time since I had taken office. I pushed the chair back a little on its smooth casters and put my feet up on the desk, though I hasten to add that I hurriedly recoiled from this somewhat decadent posture. I swiveled to face the window and for a while enjoyed the view out to the garden, briefly recalling my first day in that office with its barred and shuttered windows.

Moments passed, and still nothing. No noise, no visitors, absolutely nothing. Peace, quiet, silence.

I reviewed the situation to date. The Morning Star was ours and currently undergoing complete refurbishment. Roads were being cleared to the hill villages. Kareem was checking the villages to assess their immediate needs. Letters had gone out to international educational charities assuring them of the new government's honesty and its unswerving dedication to the education of its youth. A big cleanup for the town was scheduled for the morrow with preparations underway by the City Manager. Plans for a textiles factory had been laid, with every possibility of their coming to fruition. And we had the prospect of an ideal Responsible for Land Use and Agriculture in the form of Krista, Rollo's betrothed. Not bad so far.

And still the Palace was silent as a churchyard. 'Palace'? That brought back an idea from a few days ago and I buzzed for Miss Hovnanian, asking her to send the carpenter to me and the person who produces public signs.

When these two worthies arrived I asked them to produce a nice, elegant sign for each of the gateposts at the entrance to the Palace grounds, the signs to read: Government House. Welcome.

Alone again, my mind turned to administrative matters. First, I had always intended that the Presidency should have a limited life. You know, Mr Harvey, your United States President is simply an Executive, whose job is to execute the will of Congress. Or such at least is his Job Description in the Constitution. But look at him now. He is a Great Leader, as close to a Dictator as he dares to go. And Britain's Prime Minister is certainly far more than simply *primus inter pares*, the first among Cabinet equals, as his Office is described in textbooks on the English Constitutional system. And in developing countries, the title of 'President' is an invitation to self-inflation and demagoguery.

No. I had already decided, many moons ago in a certain London Attic, that we would emulate the Swiss. The Swiss Federal Council, which in our terms could be the equivalent of our own Cabinet, has seven members. Each year, a different member becomes Federal President. The post confers no special powers or privileges, and the President-of-the-moment continues to administer his or her own department. This was what I was after. At the next Cabinet Meeting I would amaze my colleagues by de-moting myself. What politician in his right mind would ever do that, Mr Harvey?! I would become Cabinet President, holding the title for one year.

I then turned my attention to the all-important matter of our Constitution, not so much writing it, since I had many notes from the Attic Club, but more importantly, the question of who would form the first Constitutional Executive?

I buzzed for Obid, who as usual gave the impression that he had anticipated my buzz and was waiting outside the door.

'Good Morning, Sir.'

'Good Morning Obid. I need to consult you in your capacity as Advisor to the President.'

'I am at your service, Sir.'

'Please have a seat. You may remember that in your capacity as Presidential Advisor you have accepted that it is proper for you to sit.'

'Indeed so Sir,' Obid replied, duly sitting. We quickly caught one another's eye, both amused at this little dance of protocol.

Pausing for a moment to gather my thoughts, I began with a little homily – one of my favourites in fact, as you probably know by now Mr Harvey. 'I have assembled a Cabinet of Members Responsible for the various areas and functions of government. Their job is to provide the laws and regulations necessary to ensure justice, peace, good organization and prosperity in our country.'

'That would be a most satisfactory outcome, Sir.'

'Yes, no doubt. And I have every hope that we will achieve it. But I have another very pressing concern. Governments are by nature monopolies. They have no competition. They can set whatever taxes they want, and they can waste money without let or hindrance. We want good government to do a good job, efficiently and productively. And to make sure we get it, we need good people in government indeed, but equally importantly if not more so, good people keeping an eye on government. We will soon have a Constitution which sets out rules and procedures for government. What I need now are people who will watch government with an eagle eye and be ready to pick up any bad laws, any tendency to waste, any arrogant behaviour. They would form the Constitutional Executive.'

Obid had seized my intentions very quickly.

'Indeed Sir, it has always been my experience that government employees quickly become lazy, arrogant, and intent on building up their own positions. If that tendency could somehow be checked, I am sure that the people would rejoice, and the quality of government be greatly enhanced.'

'So do you have any thoughts as to who might be good as government watch-dogs?'

'I would suggest at once Sir, any or all of the sixty-two prisoners whom you released upon taking Office. They were all imprisoned for criticizing the regime, the President, and his lackeys who oppressed the people. They would all be friends of good government, but quick to criticize bad government or bad government officials.'

'Excellent. That is just what we need. Do we know who these people are?'

'They can all be found, yes Sir.'

'Then I would like to meet them. As a group in one meeting if possible.'

‘Early next week could be possible Sir.’

‘Good. Then please arrange it, and advise Miss Angele’. Obid nodded assent, while adding that perhaps these unfortunates, still probably recovering from their long ordeal, might prove super-critical...

I was quick to reassure him. ‘The major, Number One problem with all governments today is profligacy. Bad government one can tolerate if it is cheap. But government which is bad *and* expensive? No. Let us enjoy the benefits of critics who will remind government to watch the pennies and to respect its customers. That said, however, you are right to a certain extent in that a knowledge of law must also be required. And this in fact brings me to a second question for my Advisor. Do we have, have we ever had a Law Court and a Judge?’

‘Oh yes indeed Sir. The British were very fond of that sort of thing. The Rule of Law. And a public Law Court. It would indeed have been a good legacy. Unfortunately your predecessor found it tiresome and dismissed it. Indeed, one of the ex-prisoners was a judge who rather publicly refused to bow to the President’s wishes. I hope you will be able to meet him Sir, though I fear that, being of mature years, his health suffered from the conditions of his imprisonment. He did have two juniors; they received some legal training at a law cramming institution in Chancery Lane. However their funding was cut off when the President discovered it – I recall he was most indignant at such a waste of his money.’

‘So what happened to the two students?’

‘They took odd jobs in London and saved for their passage home Sir. They also may be brought for your meeting next week.’ I had one more question for my Advisor. ‘I am also looking for someone, perhaps retired, with good business sense, but not aggressive. Does anyone come to mind who might fit that description?’ Obid paused for thought, a little longer than usual, so I explained that I needed someone, or preferably a small group, to form a Business Development Agency.

As Obid appeared to have no immediate response, I took the opportunity to expand a little on my business philosophy, drawing first on a rather nice quote I had heard in the Attic. ‘Bob Hope, a comedian you may be familiar with...’

‘Oh yes, Sir. I saw every one of his films.’

‘Well Bob Hope once said that Banks are institutions which lend money to people who can prove they don’t need it.’

‘Very perceptive, Sir.’

‘Basically, if you want to borrow money for a business venture, you have to provide collateral, you have to show that you have that amount of money in assets, your house for example, which of course is pretty useless to people who have no money but good business ideas.’

‘Quite so Sir.’

‘Well fortunately there are alternatives. Micro-credit makes small loans to poor people on a group basis, the idea being that the group supports any member who gets into difficulties. A similar idea in a more developed environment was employed in a North-Western Spanish Basque town called Mondragon. There, people who borrow money are backed by business support services which can help with design, production, personnel, accounts and any other problems. The project itself becomes the collateral, not the borrower’s house or property. These are the sort of ideas I am looking at. And what I need to make this a reality is a group of people with business experience who can help and assist young businesses to succeed and pay back their investments.’

Obid had caught my drift, and I could almost see his mind scanning a list of every likely candidate in town!

‘I would have to give this matter deep thought Sir,’ he said. ‘I can see that one needs people with good business sense, but people who are ready to help others, not people who are only intent on building their own business. Philanthropy does not always go hand-in-hand with good business sense.’

‘Very perceptive,’ I replied, returning Obid’s frequent compliment to myself!

‘I think, Sir, that it could be important for the person or persons to be retired from active business, so there will be no clash of interests. And this brings at once to mind a Mr P K Roy who was very active in trading during the colonial era and still, I believe, writes regularly for a South African business journal on various aspects of business startup.’

‘Good. Perhaps he could be wheeled in at some mutually convenient time.’

‘That can easily be arranged, Sir. He frequently joins me for a game of trick-track at the corner chaikhana,’ Obid here using the old Arab-Hindu word for a tea-house.

‘Excellent. The sooner the better. We should also get the fruit juice bottling plant running again, especially if the Valley of Solomon is opened and we can get their fruit and pomegranates.’

‘I believe that spare parts are needed for the bottling equipment, Sir, also a new juice extraction machine since the old one is quite beyond repair – even by Tulu!’

‘Right. Then please get hold of the people concerned so we can get onto it as soon as possible.’

And with Obid’s usual ‘It will be done, Sir,’ I had nothing more on my agenda or my mind, and I felt we had done quite a fair morning’s work.

The afternoon, quite amazingly, passed without incident and with no outside demands on my time. I enjoyed sitting out on the verandah working on my country’s Constitution. No Mr Harvey, I was not about to make myself Emperor For Life! On the contrary, strict discipline of government and all its constituents was my aim, to be achieved with my Constitutional Executive which I planned to populate with a gaggle of dissidents and a sprinkling of judicial wisdom, and later perhaps, widening the catchment. For it was my dream, which I later fulfilled, to bring the weight of internationalism to my Constitutional Executive by inviting the participation of retired justices and respected personalities from other Commonwealth nations, people who could look at us from outside, and who could not be influenced by personal involvement.

You see Mr Harvey, and here I come, quite unapologetically, to another brief homily, there are three essentials of good governance. Start with honesty of intent. Without that, if those in charge are brazenly out for themselves, we are doomed from the start.

Second comes competence. A community, a region, a nation, these are complex machines which need to be understood and expertly handled. Governance must be cost-effective and on the ball. Resources-apportionment must be just, allowing for all needs yet respectful of nature itself and mindful of the future. And economic management needs to provide infrastructural services, especially credit, without which no market can function. In addition, economic management needs to recognize both the aspirations and the temptations of private business, and to encourage its aspirations whilst, in the words of the Common Prayer, delivering it from temptation.

And third, we need guarantees of quality and honesty built-in to the system so that it will never become corrupted. That is the function of a Constitution, and of those responsible for its observation, enforcement, and perpetuation.

Actually I must confess that we had gone over constitutional matters so often and so thoroughly in the Attic Club that my leisurely afternoon musings were more recollections than original thinking. But I enjoy politics, especially slapping-down arrogance in government! And to contribute to a pleasant afternoon, Obid brought me a refreshing pot of tea at three o’clock, and by five I was home.

The only remaining excitement of the day was the Seven o’clock News, featuring a reminder of the Big Cleanup scheduled for the morrow, Wednesday, to begin at 9 a.m. I expressed the hope to my parents that people would come out and make a good effort. My father, looking up over his half-glasses from the book he was reading, told me I could certainly count on volunteers from the Palace Guard. ‘Volunteers?’ I asked in some disbelief.

‘Yes, volunteers,’ Father replied firmly. I will inspect them at 0745 tomorrow morning as usual, then adopt a routine well known to Sergeants Major throughout the British Army. I call for volunteers, then order ‘Squad! One pace forward March!’ And hey presto, the whole squad volunteers.’ My father, quite serious, returned to his book, while my mother, who had clearly missed the military sarcasm, observed ‘I am sure we can count on the Palace Guard to do their public duty.’

And so came Wednesday morning, when I dressed in respectable working clothes and mountain boots. I enjoy cleaning, and was not going to be left out of the fun. Avoiding the Office lest I get caught up in some administrative matter, I presented myself at the corner outside the Palace... I correct myself! outside the gates of Government House, where volunteers had been instructed to assemble. The City Manager was in charge, and there was quite a crowd. Looking up the main street I could see that shopkeepers were already out sweeping the area in front of their shops.

The drill was, first to sweep, then to clean up rubbish and dump it into the truck which Tulu had laid on, then finally would come the street washing. For the pavement (‘sidewalk in American, Mr Harvey!’) the CM had produced a small portable pump and length of hose. Then for the wide roadway, the fire engine would spray sea water from its holding

tank, starting at the top of the town and following the natural downhill slope towards the harbour, where sandbags had been laid to direct the water along a channel to the sea. It was all very well planned and thought-out.

Our Newspaper Editor was there taking a few photos and statements, also of course our faithful TV cameraman. I was quite pleased to note that on this occasion I was included in several shots without any particular ceremony – just one of the chaps, which is what I was, and what any politician ought to be.

The whole process lasted a good three hours, and I think that all involved earned a good lunch! Certainly I have never seen our small town looking so sparkingly clean! In congratulating a tired but clearly delighted City Manager, I expressed the hope that we could keep it up, and I reiterated this to our cameraman for inclusion in the evening's Newscast!

Unaccustomed to hard labour, I planned to take it easy in the afternoon, perhaps a little more Constitution work on the verandah. But hardly had I settled myself down to work than the noise of a motorbike arriving at speed disturbed the quiet of the afternoon – remember Mr Harvey that our town was burdened with little vehicular traffic. The rider, presumably a Palace Guard member as he was on one of the Guards' BMWs, was clearly very excited as he drove straight up the drive through the grounds – an absolute no-no in Government House etiquette.

'Sir, Sir, Mr President Sir!' the rider shouted, seeing me on the verandah. Obid had also come out to see what all the noise was about.

'Mr Rowland is asking for you urgently Sir. They will very soon have a road open to the Valley of Solomon and he would like you, Sir, also the newspaper and the television to come quickly.'

This really was exciting news! Rollo had not expected to have a drivable road through until Thursday or even later. Things must have proved easier than anticipated. It does sometimes work out that way, Mr Harvey!

My mind did a hurried inventory of anyone who might be involved. Young Nando, my friend from the park in Madrid, would already be up there, perhaps even home in his valley, if a walk-through had been opened up earlier on. That left, well really, just myself, the Newspaper Editor and the Cameraman. I told the motorbike rider to take the Editor up with him, while I would gather up the Cameraman and equipment and drive up in my Beetle. I made sure I had the Official Sash in my pocket in case there was a small ceremony – opening up the Valley of Solomon after goodness knows how long should certainly merit some kind of a celebration!

Arriving at the work site I found everyone waiting impatiently. Rollo, flushed with excitement, told me that one last push of his excavating machine and we'd be through. Would I like to put on the Official Sash and drive the machine for that last dramatic push-through?

I was tempted, not for personal prestige, but to lend an appropriate air of occasion. I had to think fast – everyone was impatient to make the last move! I went for what turned out to be a rather fun compromise.

The final push went through with the TV camera rolling. Then with Rollo at the controls, and myself beside him sporting the Official Sash, the great wide shovel on the front of the machine was lowered almost to ground level and most of the workcrew stood on it, the rest hanging onto the machine anywhere they could a grip. The TV Cameraman ran ahead and filmed this great human heap as it moved slowly forward.

The villagers had already been prepared, and had gathered to line the road up to the village centre. The machine moved slowly up the road, everyone cheering wildly, reaching up their hands to the workers. I saw Nando in the crowd and gave him a special wave! Though clearly not of comparable historical significance Mr Harvey, watching it all replayed on the News that evening one couldn't help recalling scenes from World War Two, of Allied troops riding through the streets on their tanks as they liberated previously occupied towns and villages.

I had to make a speech of course, and took advantage to congratulate Mr Rowland Tulu and his team for their persistence and determination in doing such a fine job. I told my audience that this was just the beginning. The village would have a regular bus service, the road would be properly maintained, and they would have a market for all their wonderful fruit and vegetables, as well as tea and coffee once again. I also made reference to the juicing and bottling plant in town, assuring them that repairs were already in hand. Finally I invited everyone to come down to the Big Market the following Saturday, with prizes for everyone with a stall and goods to sell.

After that – of course! – we all repaired to the village Meeting House for refreshments and chat and well, to savour the moment and the great event! I felt so comfortable with these people, the atmosphere was so very warm and friendly. I was also quietly pleased with myself, for though I would never openly admit it, the fact was that this would not have

happened without ‘my revolution’. Constitutions are all very well, indeed essential of course, but physical achievements, things which make a real practical difference in people’s daily lives, that’s just something different.

When we emerged from the Meeting House we found that the villagers had decorated the Machine with flowers, and were taking turns to pose on it for the television. That was to prove very popular viewing in the evening, especially in other villages whose people had always feared in the back of their minds, that the same fate of total permanent isolation might happen to them.

When the ceremony was finally over and everyone had fully expressed their pleasure and excitement, Rollo sent the Machine away with a driver ready for the next day – the day on which Rollo would be rewarded by opening up the road to ‘his’ new Villa. Rollo himself gratefully accepted my invitation and we drove back to town in my Beetle. Recalling the last time we had driven down from the hills together in the Beetle with a goat in the back seat, we had a good laugh as Rollo observed that the car ‘smells much cleaner today!’

The Seven o’clock News that evening proved a great delight. The studio staff had put together a full thirty minutes of effort, strain and sweat, jokes among the workers, the first breakthrough... Nando’s personal reunion with his family and friends, village preparations for the full opening of the road, yes – the President soon-to-be-renamed Cabinet Chairman tearing up the road in his yellow Beetle, then the full breakthrough with the Machine fully loaded with its human cargo hanging on like decorations on a Christmas tree, everyone cheering, and finally, the triumphant progress up the road to the Meeting House to be greeted by the Headman beaming with pleasure. My little speech rounded off the entertainment on a positive note for the future. All in all a splendid half hour’s entertainment!

I retired that night well satisfied.

Chapter Eighteen: The Man from ICEF

The following day, Thursday, began with every prospect of being quiet for me, giving me another opportunity to work on my Constitution sitting comfortably on the verandah. Things had been achieved, other things were in motion, and there was nothing of immediate importance to distract me. Later in the morning Obid brought coffee, and the garden provided a relaxing backdrop for the eye. I reflected how well everything seemed to be going thus far. Then my eye caught sight of a small boy struggling to push a wheelchair up the gravel driveway. The occupant appeared to be an elderly gentleman wrapped up in several blankets. The wheelchair made heavy weather of the gravel surface so I put my work aside and went over to help push, for which the small boy was very grateful.

Obid appeared and quickly came to assist, indicating that pushing the chair was his, rather than my prerogative. Always one for the protocol! The gentleman was helped out of his wheelchair, and with Obid and myself one on each side, he climbed the few steps to the verandah. The boy rushed ahead with the blankets, put a couple on and around the nearest basket chair, keeping one for the old gentleman’s knees once he was settled. The gentleman waived a hand in the boy’s direction. ‘A splendid fellow. He looks after an old man. Most grateful.’ Obid made the introductions.

‘This is His Honour Judge Wynn-Williams. Judge, may I present our new President.’ With that Obid bowed and left us, taking the small boy under his arm with the invitation ‘How would you like to see inside the Presidential Palace?’ As the boy nodded enthusiastically Obid continued ‘Then we’ll start with the kitchen. Cook has just made some fresh jam cakes.’

The old gentleman turned to me. ‘So You’re the new President. Are you being a good President?’ Slightly taken aback I answered that I felt I was being good, so far.

‘Ah, well there you have it young man. Many a President begins with the best of intentions. But they never last. In a couple of years you’ll be throwing the likes of me in prison – except that I won’t be around that long. But there will be others to oppose you, and no doubt they will suffer the same fate.’

Raising slightly, I turned my chair so that I could confront the Judge head-on, face to face. ‘I am not so foolish, Judge, as to assume that I am somehow and miraculously different from other men. I have created a Cabinet of Members responsible for different areas of government. They are called Responsibles so that people will feel free to call them to account. I have abolished the title of President. I am now Cabinet Chairman, for one year, after which another Cabinet

member will assume the role. Our laws will be guided by one Supreme law: *Do No Harm. The purpose of government is to prevent men from injuring one another.*

‘I see you are familiar with Thomas Jefferson,’ the Judge interjected.

‘Indeed Sir.’

The Judge continued. ‘Others have expressed the same sentiments, including Lord Denning whom I am proud to have known. I well recall a phrase from one of his books: *What matters is that each man should be free to develop his own personality to the full; the only restrictions upon this freedom should be those which are necessary to enable everyone else to do the same.* That is a good Principle, and should provide a clear overall guide for your legislators.’

‘And for the people also, Judge. A clear guiding principle will make it easier for them to criticize if government fails or exceeds its duty.’

‘But you will also need a Constitution, and a strong Court to uphold it... and even then it can be usurped.’

I was not to be put off by the Judge’s... let us say slightly pessimistic approach.

‘I am working on a Constitution at this moment Judge, and I would consider it an honour if you would collaborate. I will also be forming a Constitutional Executive to uphold it, and I would like to invite you...’

‘Not again young fellow. I stuck my neck out once and damn’ near got my head chopped off. That sort of thing’s for the next generation. And I hope they don’t end up where I did. But I will look over your draft Constitution if you like.’

At this point Obid appeared with more coffee, and serving the Judge, excused himself profusely saying that an important matter required my attention in my office, but that it would only take a moment. Excusing myself to the Judge I left him enjoying his coffee and followed Obid. As soon as we were inside the door Obid spoke in a low confidential whisper.

‘I hope you will forgive this intrusion Sir. I wanted you to know that I managed to find the Judge yesterday evening, and it was I who arranged for him to be brought this morning. I must tell you Sir, that he is living in the poorest condition, alone in one rather dark and chilly room, and I am sure that he is eating very little. It is not a matter of surprise to me that his present condition is so wretched.’

‘That’s terrible.’

‘Indeed so Sir. I was wondering... of course it is not for me to say but if you intend to rally the Judge to your aid he would need better living conditions and some proper care.’

‘Absolutely. So what would you suggest?’

‘As Major Domo Sir, I would consider it an honour if he were to occupy one of the Guest Suites in the Palace. I would take proper care of him, and our chef André will ensure that he is properly fed. I knew him in his more active days, Sir, and hold him in the deepest respect.’

‘An excellent idea Obid.’

‘Thank you Sir. It would be yourself, of course, who would put the matter to him.’

‘Yes, I will do that. Thank you Obid.’

Returning to the Judge and apologizing for my temporary absence, I was highly gratified to note that his mood had changed. Perhaps it was the reviving effect of the coffee, perhaps I might even have convinced him of my sincerity, who knows. Anyway, he was looking distinctly less moribund and rather more positive. Perhaps the garden too was having a soothing effect on one who spent his time alone in a rather depressing room. ‘I would certainly be interested to hear your thoughts on Constitutional matters, both the content of the document, and the way you hope to uphold it,’ he offered.

‘I am very pleased to hear that, Sir, and I really could do with some professional help.’

‘Then you may certainly call upon me whenever you are ready.’

‘Well actually, Sir, I am ready right now. And I was wondering... pushing you back and forth is a little inconvenient... we have some Guest Suites here in the Palace which are free and if you were to accept an invitation to spend a little time here it would greatly facilitate our joint labours. I happen to know that our Major Domo, Obid, holds you in the highest

regard, as do many in town I am sure, and he would consider it an honour to welcome you. We also have an excellent Palace Chef, André, who is presently bored with little to do, as I myself am living at home for the time being.'

The Judge remained silent, and I turned to face the garden. I suspected that he would be only too pleased to accept, but pride and simple good manners dictated that if he were to accept, it should not be too hasty.

'The garden is so relaxing,' I said quietly. 'I have been sitting out here as I work on the Constitution and I find the atmosphere most conducive to thought. One can discuss the finer points of law in peace and quiet...'

'Well, if you are convinced that I can be of help, and I must admit that for an old man who moves slowly, the convenience of being on the spot so to speak... just while there is work to be done...'

'Then that is settled. I greatly appreciate your help.'

I glanced towards the door onto the terrace, and was not surprised to see Obid's head peering round the corner. 'Obid,' I called, 'could you spare a moment?' I reiterated my invitation to the Judge and asked if it would be in order with the Major Domo, a question which of course received an immediate and enthusiastic affirmative.

'If I might make a suggestion Sirs...'

'Yes Obid?'

'The Judge appears to be most comfortably placed, and it would be quite tiresome for him to have to be pushed back and forth in order to collect his personal belongings. With the Judge's permission, I myself with an assistant can go to the Judge's residence and bring all such belongings as may be necessary for his personal comfort...'

'An excellent idea, Obid. What do you say Judge?'

'Well, perhaps it might be more...'

'Excellent. Then it will be done, will it not Obid?'

'Quite so Sir.'

Obid disappeared, and a few moments later André came out to announce that the Judge's lunch was being prepared and would shortly be served in his Suite. As I left for my own lunch break, the Judge, now positively beaming with anticipation, was being helped up by André, while giving him a descriptive foretaste of his luncheon menu.

Returning to the Office after lunch I half expected to find the Judge ready to work on the Constitution. But this was not one of my young energetic Cabinet Members. Miss Angele told me that the Judge was resting. The Doctor had been summoned, and pronounced him 'very weak, under-nourished, and with a mild chest complaint', all of which would no doubt improve with rest, proper care in a decent home environment, and a mild antibiotic for his chest. Fine. Let him take his time and regain his strength.

Would this be a quiet, peaceful afternoon of garden contemplation, I wondered? Actually that was not what fate had in mind. At just after two-thirty I heard loud whistling from the Port direction, and a young boy came running up the drive. 'Where's the President?' he asked me breathlessly.

'I am.'

'Well Sir, the Harbour Master sent me. The plane has come, and there are two passengers, a man and a lady. He wishes you to come at once Sir.' The young lad began to run back, stopping and turning to me, rather expecting me to join him at a light gallop I suspect. I called that I was coming and waived him on. I followed him at a brisk pace, having quickly made sure that I had the Official Sash in my pocket – which I put on as I walked.

I arrived at the quayside as the two passengers approached in the dinghy. One was indeed a young lady, the other a somewhat strict-looking gentleman perspiring in a dark suit and wearing rimless spectacles. 'Allow me to go first,' he said to the young lady as they reached the quay, 'then I will be able to render assistance from above.' He climbed up the short ladder, then reached down to assist the young lady.

Both had baggage, hers more substantial than his, which was brought up by the pilot. 'Getting busy round here!' he said to me as we shook hands. I had known him since childhood. With that he left for the Port Café with his customary alacrity leaving me with my two guests.

The man spoke first, dryly and precisely. 'Theodore Hopkins,' he said, proffering a visiting card. 'I am from Eye-sef' at least that's how it sounded. I looked at his card. ICEF – International Christian Education Fund.

'Yes of course,' I said hastily, as if he was expected, though I needn't have bothered.

'We like to pounce unexpectedly,' he said. 'One never knows what one will find.' Then turning to the young lady, 'This is Miss Krista Vollenbach. She is from Germany I believe.'

'I am Joshua Macumbie,' I replied, then adding 'President' as they really did have to know! 'Please, follow me.'

Obid and the young boy who had been the Judge's 'pusher' appeared to help with the luggage and we headed up to Government House, the Harbour Master leading and ushering us forward with a beaming smile, until we had left 'his territory'. I made some small talk asking about their journey while my mind raced around trying to think how I could give proper attention to both simultaneously!

As we reached the Palace, I introduced Obid to my two guests, hoping that he would see my dilemma which of course he did at once. 'Mr Rowland is in the hills Sir,' he whispered. 'But I can send the boy at once for Mr Warungu, so that he may consult with the educational Gentleman.'

I agreed and Obid sent the boy off with a whispered command. Then turning to the two guests: 'Please, Sir, Madam, allow me to escort you to your accommodations so that you can refresh yourselves and perhaps relax after your journey.' Mercifully they both agreed, giving me a little more breathing space.

I returned to the verandah. Having settled his guests, Obid came out to me.

'What do you propose Sir?' I had had a few moments to work out logistics.

'I hope Mr Warungu can be found!'

'Oh yes Sir, that is no problem. The unfortunate gentleman sprained his wrist and with his arm in a sling is not very active at present. I know that he is in town as I saw him this morning. I am sure he will be quick as the boy will tell him who has come.'

'Good. We can probably leave them to become acquainted on the verandah, perhaps with some encouraging refreshment...'

'Certainly Sir.'

'The problem I see ahead is that Mr – what's his name – Theodore Hopkins will expect to see some of our schools, and we have no suitable car to my knowledge. And in case you're going to suggest the ex-President's black bullet-proof limousine with dark curtained windows I have resolved not to let it be seen until we've painted it bright orange with purple spots!'

'You jest no doubt Sir, but I see your point and entirely agree. The vehicle in question has most unpleasant associations.' 'Precisely. But what else do we have?'

'There are other vehicles in the garage Sir. The President had quite a taste for motor cars. One particular vehicle of an open and slightly sportive nature comes to mind...'

'Can it be laid on, with driver?'

'It would need cleaning Sir, but yes, it can be done given perhaps half an hour or so.'

'Good. Then perhaps you can set that in motion. It might be a good idea to have Tulu in attendance, just in case any mechanical adjustments have to be made. Ah, here comes Mr Warungu now. Thank heavens for that.'

Mr Warungu was briefed, and we worked out a simple strategy. I would speak to Mr Hopkins first and impress him with my impeccable honesty and sincerity. You see, Mr Harvey, how modest I am?! Then I would hand him over to Mr Warungu so they could get to know one another. Light refreshments would be brought, after which they would both go in the car to see some of the village schools, all of which, Mr Warungu assured me proudly, had been made more than presentable by their respective villagers.

'And Miss Krista, Sir?' Obid enquired.

‘Yes. Well I don’t know if you are aware, but she is Rowland’s bride-to-be...’

‘I was aware, yes Sir.’

‘Oh?’

‘Mr Rowland had a long telephone conversation with Miss Krista about her visit, Sir, and I happened to be socializing with my colleague in the telephone exchange at the time...’ Obid’s voice tailed away.

‘And you overhear telephone conversations?’

‘With respect Sir, it was considered wise during your predecessor’s time.’

‘Yes but nonetheless...’

‘Of course it was quite improper Sir. But the volume control on the monitor speaker became stuck, Sir, and the engineer did not feel able to un-stick it as...’

‘...as he was working without enthusiasm at the time.’

‘Precisely so, Sir.’

Suddenly a thought came to my mind – and not an entirely happy one.

‘I believe I mentioned to Mr Rowland that he and Miss Krista might stay in the President’s Suite, the Garage accommodation...’ ‘being quite unsuited to a lady of refined taste Sir?’

‘Precisely.’

‘That would be quite in order Sir, if it is your wish.’

‘I suppose you also overheard that proposal?’ ‘Yes Sir’.

‘Then I owe you an apology Obid,’ I said, ‘I should not have made the invitation without first consulting my Major Domo.’

‘That is quite alright Sir,’ Obid replied reassuringly, ‘indeed an apology from myself would also be in order, for the problem with the volume control.’ Nice!

In the event however, Krista was to sleep with my tutor’s family – he had recently returned from his turn abroad – because Krista had promised her parents she would not sleep under the same roof with Rollo until they were married, and we all respected their sense of correctness and discipline.

Anyway, to return to the story, our game-plan worked quite smoothly as regards the ICEF gentleman and Mr Warungu, after I had made my personal and official intentions quite clear as to the absolute sanctity of any funds which might be donated towards education. I then grabbed Krista, who had come down meanwhile fully refreshed and was enjoying the garden, and seating her in my Beetle without any explanation rushed off into the mountains. The side road leading to the villa had already been partly cleared, and we could hear the sound of machinery ahead. Hooting loudly as the work gang came into view, I waved to Rollo, parked the car and left the two lovebirds to a long and fond embrace, quite oblivious of the crew who stopped work and stood staring and smiling, sharing the pleasure and warmth of their boss’s reunion.

I called to one of the Palace Guardsmen – there were several volunteers working there – and asked him to give me a lift home on the back of his BMW motorcycle. As I left I called to Rollo ‘Take the Beetle’ and returned home on the BMW clinging tightly to the driver, my eyes shut, muttering silent prayers. But safely back at the Palace – I must start calling it Government House! – I was glad I had left the Beetle for Rollo and Krista. They would surely want to spend time at ‘their’ villa when the road work was finished, and they could return both together in the same vehicle and in relative style. They would also be spared the near-death experience of riding on a BMW motorcycle behind a Palace Guardsman!

The Seven o’clock News could hardly match the excitement of the previous day, but the TV crew had done their best, having spent the afternoon filming village celebrations in the Valley of Solomon. After the News, Mother said she’d like to watch a video.

‘Anything special in mind?’ Father asked.

'Something with Cary Grant,' was Mother's not unpredictable reply. Father got up to go his study where the videos were kept on one of his bookshelves. He called back to me 'Will you come and give me a hand to find something, Jay?' That was quite unusual, and I hoped Father's sight was not failing. As we entered the study he indicated several large cardboard boxes on the floor. 'We all got the note with our last envelopes' he began. I remembered, now with some embarrassment, the note I had put in with their monthly stipends suggesting they might like to surrender their video collections to the TV studio.

'Oh dear,' I said, 'I hope it was not presumptuous of me...'

'I don't think so. Not to me anyway. It makes sense for us all to share them. I jollied the chaps along a bit – felt I ought to support the President, being in the family and all that – and they duly coughed up. I suspect a few favourites have been held back. I too thought it wise to keep one or two of your Mother's regulars. But there's still well over a hundred in those boxes.' Good old Dad, I thought to myself, as we returned with one of Mother's all-time favourites: *To Catch a Thief*. I have to admit that I enjoyed it too. The spectacular south-of-France scenery brought back pleasant memories of my playboy days! Father, as usual, dozed quietly through most of it.

Before we all retired for the night I asked Father if he had known Judge Wynn-Williams. 'Absolutely!' was father's enthusiastic reply. 'Yes I knew him. We all held him in the greatest respect. I would go so far as to say that he died a martyr.' That surprised me.

'But he's alive and I won't say well, but right now he's a guest at the Palace. He was living alone in miserable surroundings, not eating properly. Now he is being well cared for.'

'By Jove!' Father exclaimed with unconcealed enthusiasm. 'He used to be one of our Card Club you know. He must come to dinner tomorrow night.' And obviously quite delighted, he went into the kitchen to tell Mother. Returning after a few moments he said 'You will try to get him on your team, won't you Son?' 'I already have,' was my reply.

Arriving at my office next morning, I had an early visit from Kareem, my Responsible for Village Affairs. He reported that having checked the two villages in the Valley of Solomon, the main, first village and another smaller one higher into the mountains where the coffee and tea are grown, he had now completed his rounds of all the hill villages and was preparing a report on their various potentialities and needs for the Cabinet Meeting in the afternoon.

I gave him some leaflets to study which I had brought from the Attic Club, leaflets from all sorts of people and organizations specializing in what is generically called 'alterative technology', simple, cheap and easy-to-make devices which can make a significant difference at a low level. Open fires, for example, need a lot of fuel, while a simple stone oven can do the same amount of cooking with a lot less fuel. I also had leaflets on generating methane gas from sewage. That sort of thing.

I have always believed, Mr Harvey, that poverty in itself is not a problem, providing it is being dealt with at its own level. The so-called trickle-down effect, wherein the rich get richer and throw a few crumbs to the poor, does not excite me. If people, however poor, feel that they have the means, the opportunities to improve their lives in an honest and reasonably organized environment, if they can see a better life next month, next year, and a better life for their children, then they are satisfied. That was, and is our objective.

I had planned to devote myself to our educational gentleman – he could, after all, be a source of money, and at that particular stage in our national development, any assistance was to be seized upon and gratefully accepted. At that moment however, Mr Warungu arrived 'to take charge of my gentleman' as he put it, and the two of them went off to do whatever business my Responsible for Education had in mind.

I did have another thought. Sending first for Obid, I enquired as to the health of our temporarily resident Judge, and was told that he was still resting. I told Obid that the Judge had been a member of Father's Friday dinner-and-cards group and had been, or would be invited that evening. Obid was clearly delighted, though he warned that perhaps dinner would be excitement enough, and that an early night would be more appropriate than a lengthy round of bridge – or whatever it was they played. I asked Obid to convey the invitation as soon as the Judge was 'up and about', then I telephoned my Mother to remind her that the Judge would be coming to dinner.

On the spur of the moment I also 'invited' our educational guest, to which Mother happily agreed. She did after all have André the Palace Chef as her secret weapon! I felt that if Mr Theodore Hopkins were to dine with a group of responsible, law-abiding, honest citizens it would help put his mind at rest. As a precaution however, I mentioned this to Father at lunch time, hinting that we needed to impress the fellow. Father, highly amused, assured me that they would all do their best to give every impression of total sanity!

The rest of that Friday went forward smoothly.

The main afternoon event was the Friday Cabinet Meeting of course. I began by explaining my decision regarding the Swiss-style Executive, specifically that I would become Cabinet President for a year after which another member would take over the Presidency, a role which, I further explained, would be clearly delineated by the Constitution which I was in process of completing.

My colleagues then made their statements one-by-one, this time waiting for the Cameraman to focus on the speaker. Even Augusta appeared more relaxed; she was wearing a pair of spectacles which gave her a very serious expression. At the end of the meeting I reminded everyone present and our TV audience that the Big Market would take place next day, Saturday, and that everyone should be sure not to miss it. Once again the TV crew and editor made an excellent job, and the Seven o'clock News brought people up to date.

Chapter Nineteen: A Fortnight's Finale

I awoke early on Saturday morning, feeling as excited as I used to feel when I was young and waking up at 4 a.m. on Christmas Morning, for today was Market Day. To everyone who came it would surely be something of a special occasion. There would be flags and decorations, and the market would be quite substantial since roads had been opened up, villagers enticed to come down from the hills, and it had been hinted that everyone would get some kind of a prize.

It was 5 a.m. by the time I had showered and dressed. Instead of my usual constitutional in the Palace Grounds, I walked around town. It was still relatively quiet, but already the CM had laid on street cleaning – brushing up on the big cleanup of the previous Wednesday. Flags were being put up, and the corner tea shop was just opening. I could feel an air of festivity coming on – and I'm sure it wasn't just me!

I went back to the Palace and sat in the gardens for a while before returning home for breakfast. When I went out again at 7.30 the Main Street was alive with activity. The buses were already coming in from the villages, even our two big buses, now back in operation, were full, crammed with people inside, the roofs with packages, baskets and livestock.

I wandered about, watching fascinated as people set up stalls, greeting one another, exchanging gossip. Then I repaired to the peace of the Palace Grounds. I had the gardens to myself – everyone was in town! I sat for almost an hour, just enjoying life!

At 10 a.m. according to plan, the Band and Palace Guard paraded along the Main Street, myself following with Mister B, Mr Gupta, and several minor functionaries from the Palace carrying sealed boxes containing small packages of our money, 25 notes to a package. Reaching the Market Square at the end of the Main Street, I stepped up onto a small platform and with a very short speech formally declared the Market open. The Guard marched back, but the Band stayed to play for a while.

The time had come for me to embark on my somewhat unorthodox exercise. Much to everyone's surprise and delight, I toured the whole market area followed by my small entourage, talking briefly with each trader, congratulating them on their presence and their produce, then handing each stall-holder a packet of 25 notes as trading seed-money.

Have you ever played the game of Monopoly, Mr Harvey? The game of becoming wealthy through buying and selling property? To begin with, everyone gets a property to start, and – this is vital – an opening sum of money. Why? Quite simply, because without the basic 'float' of money, no trading of property or anything else could take place. No money, no trade.

And the proof of the pudding, the net result of my little exercise was that trading which had been somewhat slack immediately picked up. I suppose people were enjoying having a little flutter with their free money. But to me, as I observed the activity, they were enjoying a facility which allowed them to trade their goods and services with each other as opposed to being restricted merely to barter.

I should add, by the way, that each package was signed for by the recipient, and Mr Gupta would enter an account for the entire proceedings.

Having mingled and watched for a while I returned satisfied, taking refuge once again in the Palace Gardens – make that Government House Gardens will I never learn! – where I would sit for some considerable time, engrossed in economics, reviewing everything I had learned during sessions in the Attic Club.

I had dreams, great ambitions. I really felt that with the newly established Market currently in progress, plenty of produce from the villages now the roads were opened, and active trading now that people had a basic ‘float’ of money to oil the works, we had the beginnings of an economy. The following week would see the formation of a Business Development Agency, starting with projects requiring minimal investment, then moving on to longer-term investments.

Our main, in fact our sole objective in our economic policy was, and remains, universal prosperity. We become prosperous by learning to create better products and services tomorrow, for less cost than we did yesterday.

But that’s only the half of it, for it is absolutely useless having half the people working productively while the other half sit around in idleness. So our objective is: everybody working, everybody working productively. And we begin right after basic education, guiding our students into their chosen path then giving them every encouragement. The government finances universal education: we consider it a vital investment in our future prosperity.

Full employment is important to a country’s prosperity. It is also important socially. I think I can safely say without fear of contradiction or exaggeration, that we are at peace in our society not only because we teach peace, mutual respect and tolerance, but also because everyone in our country is part of society. We have no outcasts as other countries do.

And finally, a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work. For that ensures, not only social justice, but also social stability, and the peace of an industrial society without the disruptions of strikes and lockouts.

These are economic and social necessities, and as such, the responsibility of government. And I have harsh words indeed, Mr Harvey, for governments which ruin lives through their own incompetence in failing to ensure that these necessities are met.

Of course, many try to conceal the unemployment rate in their own country by sheltering behind Economics and its Great Gurus who swear that a certain amount of unemployment is inevitable, even essential, if inflation is to be kept under control.

But that is a myth, Mr Harvey.

Let me tell you of an amusing incident that happened to me quite recently actually.

There was a Bankers’ Conference in Biarritz. Not a major affair. Probably nothing more than senior bankers taking a pleasant week off at their customers’ expense. Our government received an invitation. It seems they have a few paid places for poor countries like ours – scholarships you might call them – so that we can sit at the feet of great masters, gathering a few crumbs of wisdom. No one was particularly keen to go, but it was a pity to waste a free trip! I was out of government by then and was offered the ticket. So off I went.

I recall a gathering at one of the receptions where bankers chat informally and drink free cocktails. I was standing close to a small group of delegates and one asked me where I was from, not recognizing me as part of the select International Bankers’ Circle of course. When I told them, I could sense at once that air of pity which the wealthy feel for their lesser brethren. They had been talking about inflation, and one of them – I excused his rudeness as he had clearly availed himself excessively of the free liquor – asked me ‘So what was your inflation rate this week?’

The others did look rather embarrassed, but I was not put off. ‘Inflation is illegal in our country,’ I replied.

They were not sure whether to laugh or pity me. One Banker muttered quietly ‘*So etwas sollten wir in der Schweiz tun*’ in a strong Zurich accent, ‘We should do that in Switzerland’. The gentlemen were silent. Then one of their younger members decided to pop the obvious question. ‘How can you make it illegal? You control inflation through the money supply, but only indirectly. How can you make it illegal? It just happens.’

‘No Sir,’ I replied, ‘it doesn’t just happen. People make it happen. Individual people. Inflation is an increase in the price of a product or service without a corresponding increase in its quality or quantity, and that is illegal.’

‘How do you enforce it?’

‘We inspect business accounts each year, just as you do. But instead of looking at their profits so that government can take a cut, we check that the company is passing on any productivity increases to its customers in the form of lower prices. That, in our view, is part of government’s job.’

Then another one spoke. He too was young. English. Quite a serious chap. He asked ‘But what about wages? How do you control wage pressure?’

It was a genuine question seriously put to me. But I think the gentleman’s colleagues were rather pleased. I suppose they thought they’d caught me out. Anyway, I explained how we view and handle things. ‘Certainly, inflation can also be caused by an increase in remuneration – at any level – without a corresponding increase in the quantity or quality of work performed. That too is illegal.’

‘And how on earth do you enforce that?’

‘We use a system which defines and measures the basic elements of a job, training, experience, responsibility, concentration and so on. It is very accurate and precise, and indeed, well-known and used extensively in your country... in the larger business enterprises. That in turn defines the remuneration.’

Another pause. Then the young Englishman continued. ‘I must say, that sounds remarkably sophisticated for such a...’

‘Small and insignificant country?’ I said, offering him a suggested completion. The poor man was quite embarrassed. But seeing me smiling – I was not in the slightest bit troubled – he said ‘Well, I wouldn’t put it quite like that but, yes. Anyway, the main thing is, does it work?’

‘In response to your first point, regarding its sophistication, I’m afraid we can claim no credit for it. The evaluation system was set up for us, and is regularly monitored, by a leading British company specializing in *Job Evaluation*, a science which has been successfully put to use within major companies and government agencies for half a century plus. In fact there are several competing systems actively in use around the world. All we have done is to apply one single system uniformly throughout the country. And in answer to your other question, yes it works.’

‘No disputes?’

‘Not really. It’s fair, no 6-figure bonuses and all that. Our JobEval is universal in its application. And people are satisfied that it works. Occasional discussions tend to focus on issues of principle. People understand they can’t ask for more without giving more.’

I really thought I had them there, Mr Harvey. For a moment at least! Anyway, it would give them something to think about. I let them reflect for a few moments then came in for the final blow, the *coup de grace*, as my friend the French Ambassador would put it.

‘We consider it vital to eliminate inflation, both wage and price, for two very important reasons.’

‘First, when a nation’s money is subject to inflation, it fails to fulfill one of its core functions – to serve as a store of value. Money which continuously loses its value cannot be an effective store of value, any more than a bucket with a hole in it can provide an effective store of water. And because your money is useless as a savings medium, people turn to the nearest practical alternative: property. Which rather explains why buying a house in your country now requires a lifetime’s mortgage. Our money actually increases in value, as productivity-increases lower production costs, and therefore the selling prices, of our products and services.’

I paused only for a moment before continuing. ‘The second reason is that with stable money and no danger of inflation, we can expand our economy to full capacity and full employment. In other economies, as I understand it, when expansion gets close to full employment, inflation takes hold and it is necessary to halt expansion by causing a degree of recession and unemployment. We have no unemployment. Indeed it is our view, supported by proven experience in Japan during the late 1980s I believe, that a slight shortage of labour helps to maximize productivity by avoiding over-manning.’

Sensing their barely concealed amazement I covered my own embarrassment by excusing myself and moving away to a far corner of the room. I did not meet any of them again.

Anyway to summarize, I believe that unemployment for any length of time and with a clear prospect of its continuing represents a failure of governance. And that brings us back to our Business Development Agency which helps people formalize their plans, checks their financial requirements and projections, then sees them through startup. Many plans and ideas, from the most simple to the most complex have subsequently come to fruition in that way. And yes, we do have full employment! So my dreams on that Market Saturday were not pie-in-the-sky! Indeed, I truly felt, as I sat in the Gardens, that this simple market event marked an excellent finale to my first fortnight, my first two full weeks in office.

The news that evening did full justice to the event. The half-hour broadcast began with scenes of preparation, cleaning, sweeping, putting up flags. Then buses arriving, people unloading themselves and their packages, setting up stalls, scene of my goodself distributing investment money (strictly not to be seen in Swiss banking circles!), and general trading activity. There were individual stories of people coming down from previously blocked villages... all in all, a really jolly scene! The President was caught just for a few seconds negotiating a large *falafel* sandwich on the go. That really pleased me, despite the slight inelegance involved in the exercise. It meant that I was now accepted as what I truly wanted to be, just one of the chaps.

Next day, Sunday, I again looked back on the great Market event with some pride as the beginnings of a real and viable economy. After Church I dressed for hiking and announced that I would not be back for lunch. This time I really was going to take that long walk in the hills which I had so often promised myself.

But as I left our house, guess who appeared from the Tutor's house a few doors away... it was Rollo and Krista. You may remember Mr Harvey, that as a result of Krista's promise to her parents that she and Rollo would not sleep under the same roof until they were married, Krista was staying with my Tutor and his wife. 'Hey Jay!' Rollo called out. 'We're going up to the Villa to start work. We're really excited about it and want to get it livable as soon as we can.'

So I ask you, Mr Harvey, what could I do? 'That's good timing,' I said. 'I'll come up with you.' So we all piled into Tulu's truck, squeezed up together on the front bench seat, the back of the truck already loaded with various garden tools, some large ornamental pots for the terrace and a basket with food and wine for lunch. And it was while we were lurching on the terrace that, after a little hesitation and a nudge from Krista, Rollo announced that he and Krista planned to get married 'as soon as we can'.

According to custom, the banns of marriage would be read in church on three consecutive Sundays, so that 'if any here present know cause or just impediment why these two should not be joined in Holy Matrimony, then speak now, or forever hold thy peace'. In the event there were no objections, but on the first reading there was a distinct murmur of approval from the congregation!

On the way home there were further revelations. Krista had phoned her parents asking their permission and inviting them to the wedding, to both of which they had replied with enthusiasm. I assured Krista, her parents would be honoured guests at Government House. Rather more to my surprise, on being asked for, and having given his fatherly consent, Tulu had expressed disgust at the condition of his garage, and set about a major cleaning operation there and then. Wonders never cease.

On Monday morning Mother came out with one of her (only occasional!) surprise remarks. I had mentioned that I had very little on my agenda, to which she responded "Well, why not take a day off, go to a quiet beach somewhere, take that hike in the hills you're always promising yourself... the one that never happens?" 'I second that' Father replied with enthusiasm bordering on an order!

So off I went, pausing only to tell Obid 'if anybody wants me, I'm not there.' I was quite confident now, that I had a team who could be fully relied on, and Obid, as usual, showed every sign of having fully seized my drift.

But I didn't head off to a secluded beach, tempting as it was. I had a Plan, Mr Harvey!

I always knew that the ex-president had been something of a car, or rather ostentatious limousine collector. So I checked with Tulu, who, looking appropriately conspiratorial, led me through a small door at the back of his workshop into a large garage, well lit from a skylight and immaculately clean, to reveal a collection of vintage motorcars which quite took my breath away! I was taken on a brief tour, and was proudly assured that every vehicle was in tip-top condition and ready to roll, as indeed the ex-President had required. I was particularly fascinated by two models.

The first was a Soviet-era black GAZ "Chaika M-13" saloon, complete with curtains! "Chaika" means "seagull" in Russian; this car was substantially inspired by the American Packard, with a big-displacement V8 engine, and central camshaft. I knew that the "Chaika-13" was often used by the KGB, and this tied-in with Tulu's story of its origin on the Island. Apparently there was a time when Russia had considered that the Island Government was getting too friendly with the USA, and believing (very perceptively!) that all dictator-presidents of small countries like large motor cars, they offered a choice of several models. The KGB association appealed to a president who at that time in his career was just as interested in developing a secret police as he was in large motor cars.

The other was a 1936 Hispano Suiza J-12 convertible which, as I again learned from Tulu, the president had purchased at enormous expense to his tiny nation through the offices of the French Ambassador.

And for what I had in mind, the Hispano was the obvious choice. This J12, also known as the T68, was one of the truly elite vehicles produced by the prestigious Hispano Suiza Company. The chassis alone cost upwards of \$10,000, a small

fortune in those days and more than most complete vehicles. The engines were similar to those found in fighter planes and powerful enough to carry these large and stately vehicles at a respectable speed up any incline. The present 6.5-liter version had a one-piece aluminum cylinder block and an overhead camshaft. It had proved its potential on numerous mountain roads, climbing the steeper gradients slowly but with ease and confidence.

The bodies were outfitted by some of the greatest coach-builders of the era, and this was no exception. The seats were in scarlet leather, with thick shag-pile carpeting. There was of course a pull-down bar with cut-glass decanters, and a speaking tube through which one could instruct the driver to 'slow down while cocktails are being poured'. A matching brass-bound trunk was lodged in its place on a rack at the rear, detachable so the servants could bring it up to the hotel, or wherever, as was the custom.

Perhaps you have guessed my scheme Mr Harvey. If not, you jolly should have done!

During the marriage ceremony, Tulu's new apprentice, having been thoroughly prepared and washed, brought the Suiza, now fully opened up, polished and sparkling, to the front of the church, where it was waiting as the couple came out – to huge crowds of course – the church itself having completely overflowed. When confetti had been thrown and numerous photos taken, Tulu appeared, he had of course been in church, front row, and dismissing his young lad with a quick gesture, held open the rear door for the couple, bowing as he did so.

But I had kept the final honour for myself. Quite frankly, I felt I deserved it! For it was I who would drive them slowly up into the hills to their new home. After passing through two villages lined with cheering crowds, we reached the Villa. On arrival, Rollo and I took the trunk into the house. It contained full provisions for the three days privacy and seclusion local custom required.

Getting them 'settled in' took just over twenty minutes, much as I had expected, and on cue Tulu appeared with my Beetle in which we both returned to town, leaving the Suiza for the Happy Couple's later return.

I can safely say that jolly good day was had by all!

Chapter Twenty: An Honest Government

Reviewing the flurry of activity over the past couple of weeks, things had definitely Been Done. We had established a Cabinet of enthusiastic and qualified members, my own position was clarified, a Constitution in progress, roads, transport, development plans... and the beginnings of a market economy with the prospect of expansion through the Business Development Agency was now moving ahead. Its function is modeled on a well-tried example from Mondragon in Basque Spain. Basically, new business projects are vetted for viability, with collateral for the bank loan being secured by the project itself. Experienced businessmen help the new business get started and supervise it until it is established. Since these advisors are mostly retired they do not charge for their services. And of course our banks do not charge interest as such, just a small admin and insurance fee.

So with a little initial encouragement, plus suitable publicity for new ideas and their perpetrators, things began to move along quite merrily. With us, Mr Harvey, it's a community effort to make us collectively as productive, and therefore as prosperous as possible. The Business Development Agency does just that: develop business.

And that rather leads on to our money... a story in itself.

We continued for some time with a cranky old money system based on Mister B's bits of paper. I believe I have already made it clear that an economy requires real products and services before one can worry about facilities for trading them. But eventually we had to get around to it, once the economy was doing well and employment was picking up. Also Mister B's printing press was becoming unreliable, and there was no way we could have printed more than one colour as the registration would not have been sufficiently precise. It was a good machine, but simply worn out. So we would have to buy a new printing press, get expensive plates made in Britain, buy stocks of special paper, and on top of that, we would need to buy coins since we couldn't mint them ourselves. All together a horrendous expense.

So we made a quantum leap. First of all, our telephone system was pretty much on the rocks, slow and cranky, and costly to bring up to date. Fortunately human ingenuity intervened and with the help of an overseas Telecom company miracles happened, and almost overnight – or at least that's how it seemed – everyone had a mobile cell-phone. Of course that was happening all over the world. People were simply leap-frogging right over expensive and unreliable fixed-line static phone systems in Africa and many other areas.

The next development was the use of mobile phones for banking. This crept into our society and began to take hold before we noticed. As soon as we did notice it, we saw a golden opportunity to jump the whole expensive cash-and-notes thing and go for electronic banking exclusively. And that's how we came to be an almost cash-less society, as you have of course already observed whilst here.

On the subject of finance, we were concerned, as I am sure many good citizens around the world are also concerned, about 'over-burdensome taxes', which in a cashless society cannot be... circum-navigated. We tackled that problem early and head-on by furnishing our Constitutional Executive with a special Finance department, the duty of which is to scrutinize every penny of government expenditure to ensure that it gives value for money. And of course our government servants are all paid according to our standard scale, no huge bloated salaries for them. And so-called 'expenses' are tightly controlled to the point of virtual non-existence.

My point here is that we try to satisfy government critics like you, and myself, that anything you pay to government is carefully and productively spent, not frittered away on ladies' underwear. I mention that particularly because it was once confessed to me by a diplomat in Vienna – not one of ours as we have done away with such non-productive officials – that a purchase he made in my presence was for his mistress, and that money was no object since his taxpayers would foot the bill. It was spoken with an air of jest and pride which I found quite distasteful. But I confess I tactfully said nothing since I was about to be taken to lunch by that worthy gentleman, a lunch which I strongly suspected would also be financed by the generosity of his taxpayers. Such is the world.

Another concern could be... well bank accounts seem more solid than a nebulous figure on a cell phone screen. And we fully understood that. But let me first point out that these days all bank transactions are pretty much paperless, so we do rely on backups and fail-safe mechanisms. In response to any concerns as related to our specific situation, the Telecom company which operates our central bank clearing system in which all accounts are duplicated, maintains three real-time updating mirror accounts in three different time zones and continents. So failure would be pretty much unthinkable. Our 'partners' are highly competent, and charge us virtually nothing. I believe they regard our enterprise as a useful ongoing experiment. We are still, strangely enough, somewhat in the forefront you see.

However, the bottom line, Mr Harvey, is that running a monetary or credit system this way is a fraction of the cost of financing notes and coin, and certainly everyone has taken to it. It is just so convenient. We do also have debit cards which we give to foreigners and our visitors. You of course have one yourself which you have been using whilst here. But no cash! One of the benefits of coming in late, as it were, is that one can skip all the slow and painful development process and plunge straight into the latest technology.

Another example of that process lies in our transport policy. We decided – I decided – at a very early stage that we would have no cars, no private vehicles on our island, save only for goods transport and service to remote dwellings.

Here again we were starting with a clean slate in that the ex-president's collection, my Beetle and the BMW motorcycles were the only vehicles apart from trucks and buses. So we had to decide. Do we go for a quiet, pedestrianized town where people can stroll and relax and breathe? Do we go for narrow country roads requiring minimum upkeep because they are used only by public vehicles? Or do we let rip and end up with pollution and traffic chaos and a great dual carriageway ringing our island and ruining the coast? I realize I have loaded the question a little, but not unrealistically I think.

However I hasten to add that with no private cars as an alternative, the efficiency and convenience of public services becomes paramount. Our bus services are under constant review. People tell the administration what they want in the way of timetables or possible new services. The buses are modern and comfortable – all built here on imported chassis! And Tulu makes trailers too, so that people no longer have to put goods and animals on the roofs. Our trucks and buses are regularly checked, and the drivers are licensed after passing a rigorous test. Speed limits are clearly signposted on the roads and Tulu puts large speedometers in the middle of the dashboard where the passengers can see them. They can do their own enforcing you see! They watch the drivers like hawks!

Another point I should mention about public transport reliance is that any new housing and commercial developments must be designed with public transportation in mind, clustered together in close-knit communities. Of course all our communities are surrounded by parkland for public use, so there is no shortage of fresh air and opportunities for exercise. That is what makes public transport work effectively. The usual great suburban spreads of homes in gardens with wide service roads makes public transport inherently difficult to provide economically.

Now I think I know what you are thinking, or if not, what you will inevitably think sooner or later! How was this decision reached? Was it the result of a so-called democratic process? Is our country indeed a Democracy?

Well I would humbly – no daringly suggest that we are the most democratic country in the world, and I take *democracy* in its etymological sense of *people power*. Each of our villages will debate upcoming legislation, pre-published in

advance, so parliamentary debates are well prepared. Everyone, literally everyone, has the opportunity to air his or her views, and actually have them taken into real consideration. And if that's not real democracy, tell me what is!

Government was established right from the start, and remains today, a retail operation. The people are the customers of government, and expect to be able to interact with government on a continuous basis. Our entire legislative process is open to question at all times. Our people are encouraged to make good use of it. And believe me Mr Harvey they do!

So that is our government. We have one single law which is unchangeable, a law which is simple, a law which everyone can understand. For the individual: live your own life as you wish, but do not harm anyone else. And the corollary for government: no law is justified unless to protect one freedom from aggression by another. That is our Basic Law, upon which all other laws are based, and from which all other laws are derivations, so to speak. It is simple enough for all to understand, surely. But we teach it, too.

We begin at the beginning. Right from kindergarten. We have, in modern parlance, zero tolerance for any kind of aggression or bullying. Our teachers are trained to watch for it, and to establish firmly in our children's minds that such conduct is not acceptable. As they grow older we teach the same thing but in a more mature fashion. We point out that your family life, your standing in your neighbourhood, your ability to work productively and amicably with colleagues will all be improved if you simply learn to be nice to people. It is in fact one of the most important skills one can learn and practice – though regrettably it is neither taught nor even formally recognized in most nations' educational establishments. That is one reason why there is so much violence in the world.

We have very little violence in our country. Indeed an act of violence is a very rare occurrence I am pleased to say. I believe this is because we educate against it. We teach mutual respect. We legislate it in people's dealings with one another, in trade and the use of natural resources, and if necessary, we enforce it.

We also teach that if governments and government employees do become corrupt it is not just the system we should blame. People too have a responsibility. If you have wealth, for example, you obviously safeguard it. So also, we teach that honest, responsible government and the benefits which come from it must likewise be safeguarded by public knowledge and vigilance.

But we – I! – theorize too much! Let us turn to practicalities. For a start, if you cast your mind back, you may recall that you arrived on our island by a plane which landed on hard ground, not on the water. And thereby hangs another tale.

I'm afraid that Jesse, the Old Goose as we called her, eventually had an appointment with her maker. At around the time the Goose met her end, her pilot, Jim Daley, had had about enough himself. He's really a splendid fellow you know, heart's in the right place and all that. He decided he'd like to retire here, and he married a very nice local girl. Obviously he shared our concern as to how we could replace the air connection. He went off one day to take the Goose to her final resting place, and came back with a DC-3 which he managed to land on a flat area in the hills. The village school building was located there, and the kids played football on the flat ground. He stopped just short of the brand-new schoolhouse. Good thing too, as the school was in session at the time!

The teacher was furious, but the kids were delighted! They immediately jumped on board, ignoring the teacher's instructions to 'get back to your desks AT ONCE'. The kids were the first people to board what would become our national airline. Jim had sold his house in Australia and bought the plane out of his own money. Of course we paid him back over a period. So we had a plane, and we made a well-drained flat grass runway, but we needed some kind of a terminal building. And that's a bit of a story in itself.

The schoolhouse by the runway was old but we had patched it up well. Then a lady came from some educational charity and said we needed a new schoolhouse. So she sent one. All modern metal and plastic, prefabricated in sections. We had pages of instructions in the form of diagrams, with descriptions in seventeen languages. The only trouble was that when it was up, the schoolteacher didn't like it and nor did the children. They all said it was 'hard and unsympathetic'. It was not our style you see. But we left it until the educational lady had come and officially opened it. Then the villagers rebuilt the old schoolhouse closer to the village. And the new modern schoolhouse by the runway became a very appropriate building to receive our incoming tourists.

Jim built himself a nice little house by the runway and now he's our air traffic controller. He brought a friend along to pilot the plane, an old army buddy. So that was that. The DC-3's a great plane you know. Jim's favourite comment is that 'the only replacement for a DC-3 is another DC-3.' Its ability to take off and land on grass made it ideal for us. We still haven't needed to pave the runway yet!

Of course, one cannot underestimate the value of tourism, in limited quantities. It brings the world to our doorstep, and people take our exports away, so saving us the shipping costs. We make all sorts of small things, art, carving, jewelry, our ladies dip pieces of tropical fruit in chocolate – I indulge myself with a large box every Christmas!

And I'm happy to say that... well, I'm very happy with the way things are, the way they have developed.

I recall going on a little foreign jaunt, and in Vienna I repaired as usual to my favourite Café, or at least that was my intention. It has been there for four hundred years. Lived through the Turkish siege in 1685. Now it is closed. Why? Because rents have become so high, coffee and cakes just can't compete with the Guccis and Ralph Laurens. Permit me a simple economic homily Mr Harvey. Prosperity is created through productivity, producing more and better tomorrow at less cost than today. That is progress. Rent increases, unless they are accompanied by building improvements, are economically and socially regressive, since the customers are now required to pay more today for the same service they received more cheaply yesterday.

In our economic policies we try to eliminate those non-productive, or non-consumable costs. Increases in house and office and business prices and rentals can only be justified when improvements are made. Our aim in government and in the private sector is that the customer should get value for money, preferably a little bit better value each year for the same money as productivity gives us more goods for less work. That is why our *true* cost of living remains the lowest in the world, because we guard against charges which provide no consumable value.

My objective was to establish a self-sustaining, self-disciplined government structure, and a self-sustaining nation – fully and productively employed, prosperous, informed socially, politically, technologically, internationally. And I think that has been achieved. Our people are educated, healthy, productive. And plugged into the world. We have established many Wi-Fi hotspots here in town and in every village, also our shops and government offices are connected – essential of course since our finances are internet-dependent. For our internet connection project we also got help from a Japanese computer manufacturer – they gave us a large consignment of outdated equipment, subsequently updated regularly.

And if we as a nation need a few luxuries, or to keep our infrastructure up to date... remember all that money we found in the Presidential Safe? Well having bought all the immediate essentials from abroad, we put the rest into a portfolio of Government Bonds. They are producing 3½% which we use to buy presents for ourselves – all publicly debated I might add. So while other countries have huge deficits, we have a surplus, invested and producing income.

I sometimes reflect that the taxpayers of those countries whose bonds we have purchased are financing the 'presents' we buy from the income. Of course to a much greater extent, your fellow taxpayers in the US are effectively buying lots of goodies for China with the interest payments they make to China for holding so much American debt. It's a funny old world, Mr Harvey.

So, there you have it. I am happy and proud when I look back on what we have all achieved, and I believe we have the necessary mechanisms and systems in place to ensure that things continue to roll along nicely.

And now, inevitably... I have a confession to make. When you first approached me with this project of yours and we agreed for you to take down some of my recollections, I was sure that there was a journal somewhere. So I spent quite a while going all through my papers of the last twenty years. Quite a mountain of it!

Finding what I was looking for was not a problem. I have a wonderfully simple and effective filing system. I just have one box, and I put everything in it, each document on top of the last. So hey presto, everything is automatically filed in chronological order. I knew that anything relating to the revolution would be way back and I could find it easily. The problem was that curiosity forced me to go back page by page through my recent history, articles and papers I had written, conferences I had been invited to, plans for my country which had worked and some that hadn't... Jolly good fun actually!

Anyway, I eventually reached the revolutionary years and there, sure enough, was the Journal I had begun on the very first day of the 'régime-change'. I had set myself the task of sitting down every night, whatever the hour, tired or not, and spending fifteen minutes noting down the events of the day. And that, my dear Mr Harvey, was why I was able to give you so much information, a blow-by-blow account of each day, each minute of those first crucial days – the first two weeks which we have just completed, in fact.

And there's more, for I have to tell you that I kept it up for precisely two weeks then... well it rather fell by the wayside. And before you become angry with me, ask yourself, how many people begin a diary on the First of January and have abandoned it by the Second?

You know Mr Harvey, when I sit here, in the Government House Gardens enjoying the scents and colours of the flowers everything comes back to me. I feel a young man once more, a whole country, albeit a small one, in front of me, waiting to be shaped and crafted into my vision of a civilized society.

'You have surely achieved that, Sir, and I say that with the greatest sincerity.'

Sir Joshua gave no response.

And there we left it.

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mm@arton.co