

“À malin, malin, et demi”

Perhaps the weather spawns the first event. Nine degrees. A damp, irritating wind. No chinks in the granite sky. The sort of bleakness that invades the soul of the most dedicated optimist. Which Garmt de Vries is not. Dark clothing, dark hair, dark thoughts. A perpetual five-o'clock shadow. A commanding unibrow over steel-blue eyes. He rolls his chair into the aisle and gazes out the window near his mean cubicle in Universiteit Utrecht. His new position in the Department of Subatomic Physics at least affords him the cubicle, a space marginally better than a library carrel. And now he is Dr. de Vries, at last free of his interminable dissertation in neutrino astrophysics.

Raindrops splat the rippled panes of the ancient window and Garmt sighs. At twenty-eight he is desperately bored. Gamma-ray bursts no longer excite him. Marriage to the love of his life has ended the thrill of the chase. And the ongoing renovation to his apartment has frazzled his patience. He looks at the wall calendar in a nearby cubicle—28 March 2006. Le Maestro dead now for a century and a year. As always, whenever Garmt thinks of Jules Verne, a secret passion surfaces. If only he could hear his master's voice. He imagines what Verne sounded like. In his mind he interviews the great writer, whose voice was surely sonorous and content. Impatient at silly questions. Detailed and scholarly when challenged—as Garmt would surely do.

A phone rings in two short bursts. He wheels back into the cubicle and glances at the LCD on his desk set. Not a familiar number and not from within the university, thank God. He is in a mood too foul to deal with a fellow professor or an eager student trying to impress him. The phone rings again.

“Yes?”

A woman speaks hesitantly in the high-pitched quaver of a crone. “Dr. de Vries?” He is

still startled to be addressed by his title.

“This is he.”

“I am Mrs. Rina Appel of Amersfoort. A friend directed me to you. I have items you may find of interest.”

Stifling a yawn, Garnt asks, “Such as?”

“You did not get my email?”

My god, he thinks, the antediluvians have email. “Perhaps it was discarded as spam.”

She chuckles. “Yes, that happens.”

He hears the lisp of ill-fitting dentures and is irritated at this interruption of his valuable time. “What items?” He fears he’ll have to keep bringing her back to the subject.

“You are a scholar of Jules Verne.” A statement, not a question.

Garnt feels a tingle. From her voice she could be very old, could have been born before the master died. “I am.”

“My aunt passed away last year.”

“You have my condolences.” He tries to sound sincere.

“It was a great shock. She was the last of my mother’s family.”

He stifles his impatience. “You mentioned Verne.”

“Oh,” she twitters. “Yes.” A pause.

“And?”

“I found a wooden crate...you must read my messages. And blue books.”

The Dutch blue covers flash through his mind. He strives not to give away his interest. “I did not get your email.”

“But you could check your spam file.”

Sharp old woman.

“Tell me a bit more about these blue books.”

“After you check your spam, please call.” A click.

He can't believe she has hung up on him. He is tempted to delete his spam, but curiosity, which has felled greater men than he, drives his hand to his mouse. A click. A double-click. The file opens. Yes, there are her messages, dated two days ago. Return address rappel@freeler.nl. Thank goodness his file maintenance is poor. The details in the first message are scant and compelling. An inheritance from the aunt. A grandfather, Ger Appel, who was a reporter. Wax cylinders in a leather case...a recorded interview labeled “Jules Verne 1903.”

Certainly it's possible. Gamma-ray bursts were once unheard of. But it is not thinkable, not imaginable. He can't let his mind believe what he reads. Rationality takes over. A scam. He is the subject of an elaborate hoax. He double-clicks again. In her next email she tells of a series of Verne's works in Dutch. And ‘In een kist naar 't Hemelsche Rijk (pronounced Rike)’ signed by Verne. Garnt says aloud, “*Bombarnac*, 1902.”

The tingle becomes a shudder of excitement. Contact information? Yes, a phone number with the code for Amersfoort. He reminds himself to be guarded against the possibility of a dishonest scheme, but is eager to call her back. For a moment he considers the possibility of an instant rise to fame among Vernians and beyond.

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A lovely young woman hangs up the receiver. Her sleek black hair is drawn into a knot at the nape of her neck. Her skin is pale except for a blush of excitement across her cheeks. “He is hooked,” she says to the old woman across the room. “How was I?”

Rina Appel rocks in a chair as old as she. “Ah, Mahault, no wonder you make your living

as an actress. I couldn't have played myself half so well."

The young woman laughs. "Oh, that was such fun. Thank you for letting me try my voices."

Rina looks at her granddaughter with blind devotion. "Such a gift you have." She gazes at the stack of books and cylinders on the table by the window. "Perhaps, dear Mahault, in my last years I will have wealth and the comfort it affords."

"I am sure of it, Grandmama. Dr. de Vries sniffs something of great value."

"Well, my dear, I don't know what I'd do without you. We've tumbled onto a prize, and just think of the luck, having a granddaughter at Filmmuseum Amsterdam."

"Only until I get my big break." Mahault assumes the dramatic stance that is a joke between the two women. "A principle at Theatre Carre."

Rina's phone rings and Mahault reaches for it. "Hello?" her voice imitates her grandmother once again.

"Mrs. Appel?"

Mahault laughs and replies in her own voice, "No, Izaak. I was pretending to be Grandmama."

"You fooled me."

"What have you found?" She holds her hand over the phone and says, "My friend from the museum."

The old woman nods.

Izaak responds, "Nothing much, I'm afraid."

"Well, that's what we expected. When can you come to Grandmama's?"

"This afternoon."

Mahault hangs up the phone. “Izaak is coming over to assess the cylinders.”

Rina nods. “And he found nothing at the museum that would help us?”

“No. But he’s an expert in early recordings. He’ll know if these are genuine.”

“Ah, good. And Dr. de Vries can authenticate the books.”

* * *

After a series of hurried telephone calls, Garmt de Vries cancels a class for the first time in his brief career as a teacher. The young professor arrives in Amersfoort mid-afternoon for an appointment with Rina Appel at her home in a row of old wall houses.

He pushes a button that looks like a doorbell, and then, in case it doesn’t work, knocks insistently on the heavy wooden door. A young woman answers, introducing herself as Mahault, the granddaughter of Rina Appel. “Please come in Dr. de Vries. Grandmama is in her parlor.” She leads him to a sitting room dominated by antiques and an elaborately carved ceiling. In a small brocade and mahogany rocker sits an old woman.

“Dr. de Vries, may I present my grandmother, Mrs. Rina Appel?”

Garmt takes the proffered hand, tiny, age-spotted, frail, but his gaze is drawn to a table behind her, near a window. The blue books he recognizes instantly. A wooden crate—smaller than he’d imagined—a newspaper yellowed by age, *Amersfoortsche Courant*. What captures him most are five cylinders that look as if they’re made of milk chocolate, in size like the can of liquid protein he’d had for lunch.

Mrs. Appel says, “You have spotted my treasure.”

“May I look closer?”

She nods. “That is why you are here.”

He goes to the table, examines each item, reads the 1903 interview with Verne—three

brief columns of brittle newsprint—touches nothing. He turns and asks, restraining his fervor, “Where do we begin?”

Mrs. Appel points to an antique phonograph on a table in a corner of the room. “Also my grandfather’s. We could try to play one of the cylinders, if you’d like.”

“What if we damage it?”

“Life is risk, Dr. de Vries.”

Mahault picks up one of the cylinders and loads it onto the phonograph as if she’d done so every day of her life. She says, “I figured out how to make it work. Are you ready?”

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Ludoslaw Olscewicz finishes his email to Krzysztof Czubaszek, President of the Jules Verne Society of Poland, then turns back to the latest stack of protest letters from the enraged citizenry of his hometown of Ustka. A tempest in a teapot, he deems it, but the town council insists the matter must be pursued. And as mayor, that duty falls on him. Again he studies the town seal, which has been in dispute for several years. Pollution has diminished the fishing industry to the point that tourism is the main source of revenue for the tiny Polish town on the Baltic Sea. And the inhabitants want to change the town seal in hopes of attracting more tourists. The object of their concern is the mermaid that has occupied the seal for centuries. Her breasts are too small, her hips too large; she is not the model of feminine pulchritude the town fathers feel should represent Ustka. He picks up the latest proposal for a fitting Piscean heroine, a buxom fish woman who bears a surprising resemblance to the film star Aleksandra Nieśpielak. He crumples the paper and throws it across the room.

For diversion he checks the Jules Verne forum but finds nothing of particular interest. Ludoslaw has been a faithful member of the forum for many years while pursuing his interest in

genealogy, with particular reference to a persistent rumor from the nineteenth century that Jules Verne was, in fact, a Polish Jew with the surname of Olscievicz. To Vernians this is preposterous, given that Verne was promoted, during his lifetime, as an eminent French author of fine Catholic stock. But Ludoslaw will find the genealogic connection to the famous writer if such a link exists.

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The sounds coming from the cylinders are recognizable as the voices of two men, intermingled with heavy static; one of them might have said Verne. Garmt's moderate French is good enough to discern that a man is asking questions of another man, presumably Verne, who reports that he is in poor health and is sad at not being known as a writer of literary merit. Garmt feels a sudden grief when, after just two minutes, the recording ends.

"So," Mahault asks him. "What do you think?"

Feeling put on the spot as an expert, Garmt clears his throat repeatedly while his mind whirls. "It's possible that it is Verne. But we need better equipment, must listen to the remaining cylinders, must—" he is idly fingering the crank of the phonograph and jerks his hand back when he feels something sharp.

"Be careful," Mahault says. "Apparently the handle cracked at some point and was mended, but not well."

Garmt looks closely at the repair, which involves a slender metal rod attached to the crank with woven wire. Broken strands await the unwary. On the pitted gray metal of the handle is an isolated spot of rust, crusty in appearance. It occurs to Garmt that the spot is not rust, but blood, perhaps from the master himself. He averts his eyes, not wanting to show too much interest in the phonograph, and returns to the other table to examine the blue covers, the

newspaper. Garnt opens the copy of *Bombarnac* and seeing what truly does look to be Verne's autograph, tries to think how he might get the spot of rust or blood from the machine and into a secure container of some sort for examination. What if he has stumbled onto Verne's DNA?

A doorbell chimes and Mahault scurries from the room, "That will be Izaak."

Garnt returns to the table in the corner, placing his body between Rina Appel and the machine. He removes from his pocket a clean handkerchief and, with the nail of his left thumb, scratches at the brown crust on the handle of the old phonograph. As he scrapes flakes onto the cloth he notices a brass label near the mount for the fluted megaphone. Pretending interest in it, he speaks aloud, "Thomas A. Edison, National Phonograph Co., New York."

Mrs. Appel says, "Yes, and if you look more closely, you'll see a date, 1901."

"You're right." Garnt folds his handkerchief with care and slips it back in his pocket, satisfied that he has captured the flecks of rusty brown from the handle, and reminding himself not to reach in his pocket absentmindedly before he can transfer the contents to—to whom? Who can determine whether what he's found is really blood, and can do a DNA search?

Mahault returns with a man she identifies as Izaak Keuchenius, director of the recordings division of Filmmuseum Amsterdam. Short, fat, with the ruddy cheeks of an imbiber, Keuchenius is a jolly man with a hearty handshake who seems to be enjoying his middle years. "Well, well," he says as Mahault takes him to the table by the window. "What have we here?" He spends a moment examining things, picks up one of the cylinders with his thumb and small finger, touching only the opposite rims, and looks closely at it. "I think it was only used once. Can't be sure, of course. Appears to be not so bad."

Garnt says, "We listened to one, and it was horrible. Static, scratchy, barely audible."

"I'm sure that's so. Without the right equipment..." Izaak puts down the cylinder and

turns abruptly. “This is a godsend. And no matter what the cylinders contain, they must be protected. I’ll make arrangements to put them into a vault at my bank. It is our duty to guard them with care.”

Garmt feels he should protest, but can think of no better plan.

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When he returns to the University, Garmt writes an immediate post to the Jules Verne forum, giving a complete accounting of the cylinders, the crate, the newspaper. He restrains himself as he writes, not wanting to make too much of the discovery, but feeling bound by honor to share this great find with his colleagues in all things Vernian. After he clicks the send button, he calls a friend who was formerly on his track in neutrino astrophysics, but who dropped out after one semester to pursue a doctorate in molecular biology and genetics.

He goes to her office, where she examines the contents of the handkerchief. “Of course I don’t know for sure, but I believe it is dried blood.”

“How can we find out?” Garmt has hardly slept or eaten since the first phone call from Rina Appel the day before. His eyes burn and his mouth tastes foul.

“A simple test. Of course I’ll need a smidgen of the sample, but from that alone we can make some determinations.”

Within an hour his friend ascertains that the flakes are indeed blood. How old and whose remains unanswered, but Garmt almost cannot contain himself. His mind speeds ahead to the problem of linking the blood to Verne; has anyone else thought of trying to find a biological sample, such as a hair? While he’s immersed in such thoughts, he gets a call from Izaak Keuchenius. “Can you come to the museum tomorrow evening? Mrs. Appel and her granddaughter will join us and we’ll listen to the cylinders.”

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After lunch with the town council, Ludoslaw again checks the forum. He is astonished by a post from The Netherlands...a recording of an interview with Verne made in 1903, preserved on wax cylinders. The great man's voice! Perhaps with a trace of a Polish accent. Ludoslaw thinks of the forum members—those rascally upstart Yanks who think their scholarship entitles them to a piece of the master. And that transplanted European, Margot, who makes himself known at every gathering. Olivier Dumas, the effete frog who lives for puffery, with his decades-long chokehold on the Société; and of course Count Piero Gondolo della Riva, the too-cool Italian whose modest claim to fame is in his research—ha!—showing that Michel Verne completed the work of his father upon the latter's death. Only an idiot would deny that. It still rankles Ludoslaw that it is della Riva's collection that attracts thousands of visitors to the Verne museum in Amiens. Money! If he had a fraction of the count's millions, he, too, could become a world-renowned Verne scholar. But that is of little importance, compared with his hope of proving himself a direct descendent of the legendary writer.

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Izaak takes his entourage to a small windowless room deep inside Filmmuseum Amsterdam and invites them to sit while he makes a show of the software he used to lift voices from the cylinders. The result—whole phrases, even sentences—raises the hair on Garmt's arms. With enhancement, enough of the interview is extracted to determine which man is Verne. His voice is soft, high-pitched, his manner hesitant and indirect when responding to questions. Garmt is a bit disappointed at Verne's lack of assertion.

There is a moment of stunned silence after the last recording is played, then Izaak asks Garmt, "Well, professor? What is your opinion?"

Garmt, emotionally charged but ever the scholar, responds with cautious sanguinity, “I believe that this is the voice of Jules Verne.”

Mrs. Appel asks, “How can we know for sure?”

Izaak indicates a cylinder. “As you heard, your grandfather voice-labeled all five cylinders by stating ‘Jules Verne, 27 March 1903.’ And although they were quite expensive, especially given a reporter’s salary, Ger Appel never reused them. Respect for Verne, I would imagine. I have no doubt of the authenticity.”

Mahault laughs and touches her grandmother’s arm. “The cylinders are genuine! You’ll be a wealthy woman!”

“So it seems,” says Izaak, a glint of avarice in his sparkling eyes.

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When Garmt goes to his office on Friday morning, he finds responses to his original post from Vernians everywhere. They caution him to secure the fragile cylinders against scoundrels who’d only think of profit, and to keep this news within the forum for the present. Amidst the eager babble emerges calm counsel from a man at The Library of Congress in America. Garmt recalls Brian Taves as a fellow with large glasses and a hesitant smile, soft of speech and cautiously wise. Taves advises proceeding with a generous spirit while adhering to archival standards. Garmt is acutely touched by Taves’ closing words, “Surely nothing can bring together the Verne associations of the world more than finally hearing the master speak.” Moved by such sagacity, Garmt posts an update, reassuring the forum of his prudence.

He wheels from the cubicle to stare out the window, pondering the amazing find. The next few steps will determine the fate of the cylinders. What happens to the blue books is almost of no consequence. They’re valuable, certainly, but nothing like the recordings.

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Ludoslaw packs his case in a great hurry, eager to get to Amersfoort, hoping to arrive before any parasitical Vernians who will surely try to buy whatever the young Dutchman has uncovered. What if Dumas and other members of the Société arrive before he does...most live closer, but few have his resources. As mayor he is entitled to the services of a small jet owned by the Polish government and available to officials when duty calls. He will deal with the “duty” part of that later, having already booked the plane for a trip to Amsterdam this afternoon. Then a taxi to Amersfoort—less than forty kilometers—he’ll be at the old woman’s house before dark.

* * *

Garmt’s phone rings as he is composing yet another post.

Rina Appel is so upset he can barely understand her, but the import of her message is clear: “The cylinders have disappeared.”

“But how?” Garmt stammers. “The bank vault...”

“I believe my granddaughter fell for the schemes of a scoundrel. The man, Izaak, he never took the cylinders to the bank. Apparently he plans to sell them for a great deal of money. The police believe he has left the country. Oh, my poor Mahault. Her reputation is ruined. She’ll never—”

“Sell them? To whom?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know.”

Garmt is physically ill, and close upon hideous nausea is horror at what he has done. Why did he send out those precipitous posts? He’ll be a laughing stock. He glances at his calendar as Mrs. Appel continues to wail. Has it really been only three days since he first spoke to her? Soon it will be April, and he’ll...an idea comes to him slowly. A way out. He apologizes to Mrs.

Appel and hangs up.

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When Ludoslaw alights from the taxi in Amersfoort, the first thing he sees is a silver Lamborghini in a no-parking zone outside Rina Appel's home. Piero Gondolo della Riva! It must be. And the man coming down the sidewalk from center city is unmistakably Olivier Dumas, sunlight glinting off his bald pate. The next man Ludoslaw expects to see is Eric Weissenberg, driving straight from Geneva in his lumbering Cadillac. And if Art Edwards gets wind of this—thank God for the Atlantic Ocean. Ludoslaw ducks behind one of the trees lining the sidewalk, thinking it is better to watch than to be watched. In a moment the door to Rina Appel's wall house slams opens. A man emerges. Close-cropped dark hair, a yacht-weathered face set in an attitude of determined intent—della Riva! Dumas almost runs him down. The two men explode in a mixture of French and Italian, from which Ludoslaw gathers that whatever they seek is no longer in Mrs. Appel's possession.

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On Saturday, 1 April 2006, the Paris edition of *Le Monde* headlines a story in its arts section, "Société Jules Verne Acquires Signed Dutch Series." In Rome, *La Repubblica* features an interview with Piero Gondolo della Riva, under the banner: "Count Denies Purchase of Verne Cylinders." *Polska Agencja Prasowa*, a news service out of Warsaw, makes an astonishing announcement: "DNA Links Polish Mayor to Jules Verne." And Garnt de Vries posts a message to the forum, dismissing the story of the treasure as an April Fool's joke.

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On the evening of Friday, 27 March 1903, a man in the clothing of the poorest of the Dutch, his hands red and ruined from years as a janitor for *Amersfoortsche Courant*, saw on Ger

Appel's desk a strange box with a curious horn extending from it. The tired old man believed the machine had something to do with music, and could not resist the urge to crank the handle. In so doing, he pricked his finger, shouted, "Stront!" and went back to cleaning the cluttered offices. He carted away his mop, his broom, and his pail of filthy water, extinguishing the few lights allowed for his work, and leaving behind him on the crank of the phonograph a drop of blood.

Anna Jean Mayhew

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