

Passenger to Frankfurt 1970

(Plot spoilers ahead)

The story does get off to a cracking start, with our hero, Sir Stafford Nye, an English Diplomat on his way back from a mission in Malaya. Stafford's aeroplane was delayed at Frankfurt airport. Feeling bored in the departure lounge, a beautiful young woman who tells him her life was in danger accosted him. She could get through Passport Control in London if she could have his passport and Corsican bandit's cloak. Sir Stafford agreed, since she reminded him of his dead sister.

Within the first few days of getting safely back to London Sir Stafford's flat gets 'gone over' by someone looking for something. There are also two attempts on his life. The beautiful girl, Countess Renata Zerkowski, responded to Sir Stafford's advertisement to meet up. Renata introduced him to her contacts in the Secret Service who want them *both* to go 'under cover' to find out who is driving worldwide student unrest, to ferment revolution and gain ultimate power. It is at this point of the book, the plot gets bogged down in explanations and ideology.

Christie was writing from her experiences of the late 1960s: widespread student revolts on campus from California to the Sorbonne. There were Grosvenor Square protests outside the US Embassy against the Vietnam War, and the nuclear disarmament movement marches. Christie had lived through two world wars, was very disappointed that humans had learned nothing.

Renata says to Sir Stafford:

'You've represented this poor, miserable country. Things are in a mess. Student unrest is just one flower on the tree. They – whoever they are- work through youth. Youth chanting slogans..so easy to start a revolution. That's natural to youth. All youth has always rebelled. ..But you're blind, too..They can't see where things are taking them..And who it is behind them, urging them on....Hitler and the Hitler Youth..a long careful preparation..it was a fifth column being planted in different countries all ready for the supermen.... It's so frightening..History repeating itself. The young hero, the golden superman, that all must follow..The young Siegfried.'

Renata: there is 'Violence for the love of violence'. A 'growing organization of youth everywhere against their mode of government; against their parental customs, against very often the religions..There is an insidious cult of permissiveness..The cult of drugs has been deliberately advanced'.

The top financier, Robinson also lectures Sir Stafford in a similar vein: 'Look back through history. You'll find it coming again and again, repeating itself like a periodic table, repeating a pattern. A desire for rebellion. A feeling for rebellion, the means of rebellion, the form the rebellion takes.'

Renata tells Sir Stafford 'I'm your guide. Like Virgil with Dante, I'll take you down to hell'. The world is 'full of beliefs without kindness at present.'

'Don't you remember in 1919 everyone going about with a rapt face saying Communism was the answer to everything. That Marxist doctrine would produce a new heaven brought down to a new earth.' But 'when you have the same human beings running things, they'll run them the same way. You've only got to look at history.' Christie seems to have forgotten her young heroes were not born then, and has slipped into remembering her own youth during the First World War.

'Science was once going to be the answer to everything. Freudian beliefs and unrepressed sex would be the next answer to human misery. There'd be no more

people with mental troubles. If anyone had said that mental homes would be even fuller as a result of shutting out repressions nobody would have believed him.'

In the Grand Duchy of Liechtenstolz they met a fascist aristocrat, Charlotte von Waldsauen, and her protégée, who is supposed to be Hitler's son. One is expecting Sir Stafford to have to show his pseudo-fascist credentials, but nothing happens, except witnessing the Hitler Youth bands.

World leaders were concerned. The reader listens in to meetings with the British Prime Minister's aid asking: 'What's gone wrong with the world? - without getting any answers.

Somewhat surprisingly bad language creeps into this novel: Admiral Blunt says 'Don't you start arseing around with the Russkies again' to the Prime Minister. Professor Eckstein, a brilliant scientist, offers chemical and germ warfare to the British war cabinet: 'we could kill half the population of England given about three days'. The PM doesn't feel this would be a good solution.

The French are equally in a pickle with a terrifying Marshal of France suggesting bombing the protestors: 'Such nuclear deterrents as can be used in unfrequented spots can be put into action in such a modified form that though they may bring terror to the mob, we ourselves shall know that there is no real danger in them.' Fortunately others at the council speak against this action:

"Nuclear weapons? Quel blague! ..What would become of the soil of France, of the air of France?"

The world was bent on self-destruction. Given the youth revolution was from within, the fifth column, conventional politicians were at a loss about how to quell it. This chimes with modern day terrorists in the twenty first century.

The feelings of impending doom are, as always, lightened by Christie's humour. In particular, the character of Sir Stafford Nye's Great Aunt, Lady Matilda Cleckheaton, the daughter of the 8th Duke, with a wonderful network of friends and acquaintances across the world. Lord Altamount, a top old man still advising M16, describes her as an 'indomitable Victorian' 'that sheer vitality of hers that outlives her bodily strength'. One is tempted to feel this is the closest Christie gets to an authorial self-portrait. Christie admitted in interviews that Ariadne Oliver was her alter ego as far as being a writer was concerned, and Mrs. Oliver is most interesting about the problems writers face. Lady Matilda is given a lot of space in this novel to air her views on almost everything, which again is unusual, given she really takes no part in the action. Lady Matilda's philosophy on life is: 'Its much better to be interesting than handsome'. She could almost be Miss Marple when she says: 'there aren't so many patterns in life, you know. One recognizes patterns as they come up. It's like a book on knitting. About sixty-five different fancy stitches. Well, you know a particular stitch when you see it.'

She gives forthright opinions about new things:

'those terrible computers that get all one's figures wrong'. And

'our own grocer – such a nice man, so thoughtful and such good taste in what we all likes – turned suddenly into a supermarket, six times the size, all rebuilt, baskets and wire trays to carry round and try to fill up with things you don't want..'

Lady Matilda exists in a couple of rooms, in the "large Georgian manor house in the country she inherited". It is a portrait of impoverished nobility in the 1960s, with most of the house remaining "under dust sheets". Stafford remembered the house as a boy 40 yrs previously [in the 1930s]: 'it had been pleasant there then. There had been money and a sufficient staff to run it.' Yet the estate still owns a Raeburn, two Lawrences, a Gainsborough, a Lely, two rather dubious Vandykes, and a couple of

Turners.’ Although some pictures ‘had had to be sold to provide the family with money.’

Lady Matilda reflects on being in her 80s, as is, of course, Christie herself: ‘Well, I’m old. Rheumatism or arthritis or a nasty bit of asthma, or a sore throat or an ankle you’ve turned. Always something. When you’re my age. You can’t get about. You can’t meddle with people much, you can’t do any gardening. All you can do is sit in your chair and have ideas.’

Matilda has no time for Politicians: ‘Politicians don’t have time to look at the world they’re living in. They see the country..as one vast electoral platform...politicians have a feeling that they have a kind of divine right to tell lies in a good cause. ..Mr Baldwin made his famous remark – “If I had told the truth, I should have lost the election”.

‘Those awful, awful Labour people. When I was a girl there wasn’t such a thing as a Labour Party. Then there’s the Liberals..but they’re terribly wet. Then there are the Tories, or Conservatives as they call themselves again now..too many earnest women. Makes them lack gaiety.’

‘We were good at running an empire. We weren’t good at keeping an empire running.’

‘I have no academic distinctions. I’m not in the least intellectual. But Robert has always said that I’ve got a great deal of common sense, of intelligence.’ Her childhood friend, Prof Robert Shoreham, a world famous physicist, has had a left sided stroke.

‘If a man’s frantic with brains he doesn’t really want a woman who’s also frantic with brains to talk to. It would be exhausting. He’d much prefer a lovely nit-wit who can make him laugh.’

Rather oddly for ‘a top physicist’ Prof Shoreham seems to be a neuroscientist, one wonders if it is a misprint for physician or physiologist, or carelessness at the editing stage. Shoreham has confided in Lady Matilda about his Project Benvo {short for benevolence}, because she gave him the original idea by asking: ‘Why can’t you invent something that will make people pleasant’. So he does. With this chemical Shoreham discovers ‘You can change a man’s character... – he becomes benevolent. He exudes kindness. He has a horror of causing pain or inflicting violence. {It} can be released over a big area..It is permanent. ‘a deterrent to be used in war, in mass risings, riotings, revolutions, anarchy..{It produces} a great wish for others to be happy.’ However, Prof Shoreham, just before his stroke stated that he’d destroyed all his work because he was ‘afraid. Afraid of what science has done in its time of triumph...heart transplants that have brought disillusion...nuclear fission; new weapons that have slain. The tragedies of radioactivity; the pollutions that new industrial discoveries have brought about’.

In the classic thriller ending the arch evil genius behind World domination tries to kill Prof Shoreham before he can start making gallons of the magic elixir to make the world a happy place, and quell the student revolts. Given that it is a well run, world wide organisation bent on destruction and domination, it does seem very improbably odd the mastermind turns up alone, incognito, to try an assassinate Professor Shoreham.

However, 007 films always end in a fisticuffs scene too, with James Bond managing to knock out the would-be dictator, so saving the world, again, in the nick of time.

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