

The Gentle Assassin

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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By noon, when Dr Jamieson arrived in London, all entrances into the city had been sealed since six o'clock that morning. The Coronation Day crowds had waited in their places along the procession route for almost twenty-four hours, and Green Park was deserted as Dr Jamieson slowly made his way up the sloping grass towards the Underground station below the Ritz. Abandoned haversacks and sleeping bags lay about among the litter under the trees, and twice Dr Jamieson stumbled slightly. By the time he reached the station entrance he was perspiring freely, and sat down on a bench, resting his heavy gun-metal suitcase on the grass.

Directly in front of him was one of the high wooden stands. He could see the backs of the top row of spectators, women in bright summer dresses, men in shirtsleeves, newspapers shielding their heads from the hot sunlight, parties of children singing and waving their Union Jacks. All the way down Piccadilly the

office blocks were crammed with people leaning out of windows, and the street was a mass of colour and noise. Now and then bands played in the distance, or an officer in charge of the troops lining the route bellowed an order and re-formed his men.

Dr Jamieson listened with interest to all these sounds, savouring the sun-filled excitement. In his middle sixties, he was a small neat figure with greying hair and alert sensitive eyes. His forehead was broad, with a marked slope, which made his somewhat professorial manner appear more youthful. This was helped by the rakish cut of his grey silk suit, its ultra-narrow lapels fastened by a single embroidered button, heavy braided seams on the sleeves and trousers. As someone emerged from the first-aid marquee at the far end of the stand and walked towards him Dr Jamieson sensed the discrepancy between their attire—the man was wearing a baggy blue suit with huge flapping lapels—and frowned to himself in annoyance. Glancing at his watch, he picked up the suitcase and hurried into the Underground station.

The Coronation procession was expected to leave Westminster Abbey at three o'clock, and the streets through which the cortege would pass had been closed to traffic by the police. As he emerged from the station exit on the north side of Piccadilly, Dr Jamieson looked around carefully at the tall office blocks and hotels, here and there repeating a name to himself as he identified a once-familiar landmark. Edging along behind the crowds packed on to the pavement, the metal suitcase bumping painfully against his knees, he reached the entrance to Bond Street, there deliberated carefully and began to walk to the taxi rank fifty yards away. The people pressing down towards Piccadilly glanced at him curiously, and he was relieved when he climbed into the taxi.

„Hotel Westland,“ he told the driver, refusing help with the suitcase.

The man cocked one ear. „Hotel where?“

„Westland,“ Dr Jamieson repeated, trying to match the modulations of his voice to the driver's. Everyone around him seemed to speak in the same guttural tones. „It's in Oxford Street, one hundred and fifty yards east of Marble Arch. I think you'll find there's a temporary entrance in Grosvenor Place.“

The driver nodded, eyeing his elderly passenger warily. As they moved off he leaned back. „Come to see the Coronation?“

„No,“ Dr Jamieson said matter-of-factly. „I'm here on business. Just for the day.“

„I thought maybe you came to watch the procession. You get a wonderful view from the Westland.“

„So I believe. Of course, I'll watch if I get a chance.“

They swung into Grosvenor Square and Dr Jamieson steered the suitcase back onto the seat, examining the intricate metal clasps to make sure the lid held securely. He peered up at the buildings around him, trying not to let his heart become excited as the memories rolled back. Everything, however, differed completely from his recollections, the overlay of the intervening years distorting the original images without his realizing it. The perspectives of the street, the muddle of unrelated buildings and tangle of overhead wires, the signs that sprouted in profuse variety at the slightest opportunity, all seemed entirely new.

The whole city was incredibly antiquated and confused, and he found it hard to believe that he had once lived there.

Were his other memories equally false?

He sat forward with surprise, pointing through the open window at the graceful beehive curtain-wall of the American Embassy, answering his question.

The driver noticed his interest, flicked away his cigarette. „Funny style of place,“ he commented. „Can't understand the Yanks putting up a dump like that.“

„Do you think so?“ Dr Jamieson asked. „Not many people would agree with you.“

The driver laughed. „You're wrong there, mister. I never heard a good word for it yet.“ He shrugged, deciding not to offend his passenger. „Still, maybe it's just ahead of its time.“

Dr Jamieson smiled thinly at this. „That's about it,“ he said, more to himself than to the driver. „Let's say about thirty-five years ahead. They'll think very highly of it then.“

His voice had involuntarily become more nasal, and the driver asked: „You from abroad, sir? New Zealand, maybe?“

„No,“ Dr Jamieson said, noticing that the traffic was moving down the left-hand side of the road. „Not exactly. I haven't been to London for some time, though. But I seem to have picked a good day to come back.“

„You have that, sir. A great day for the young Prince. Or King I should say, rather. King James III, sounds a bit peculiar. But good luck to him, and the new Jack-a-what's-a-name Age.“

„The New Jacobean Age,“ Dr Jamieson corrected, laughter softening his face for the first time that day. „Oh yes, that was it.“ Fervently, his hands straying to the metal suitcase, he added sotto voce „As you say, good luck to it.“

Stepping out at the hotel, he went in through the temporary entrance, pushed among the throng of people in the small rear foyer, the noise from Oxford Street dinning in his ears. After a five-minute wait, he reached the desk, the suitcase pulling wearily at his arm.

„Dr Roger Jamieson,“ he told the clerk. „I have a room reserved on the first floor.“ He leaned against the counter as the clerk hunted through the register, listening to the hubbub in the foyer. Most of the people were stout middle-aged women in floral dresses, conversing excitedly on their way to the TV lounge, where the Abbey ceremony would be on at two o'clock. Dr Jamieson ignored them, examining the others in the foyer, telegraph messenger bays, off-duty waiters, members of the catering staff organizing the parties held in the rooms above. Each of their faces he scrutinized carefully, as if expecting to see someone he knew.

The clerk peered shortsightedly at the ledger. „Was the reservation in your name, sir?“

„Certainly. Room 17, the corner room on the first floor.“

The clerk shook his head doubtfully. „There must have been some mistake, sir, we have no record of any reservation. You aren't with one of the parties upstairs?“

Controlling his impatience, Dr Jamieson rested the suitcase on the floor, securing it against the desk with his foot. „I assure you, I made the reservation myself. Explicitly for Room 17. It was some time ago but the manager told me it was completely in order and would not be cancelled whatever happened.“

Leafing through the entries, the clerk ran carefully through the entries marked off that day. Suddenly he pointed to a faded entry at the top of the first page.

„Here we are, sir. I apologize, but the booking had been brought forward from the previous register. *Dr Roger Jamieson, Room 17.*“ Putting his finger on the date with surprise, he smiled at Dr Jamieson. „A lucky choice of day, Doctor, your booking was made over two years ago.“

Finally locking the door of his room, Dr Jamieson sat down thankfully on one of the beds, his hands still resting on the metal case. For a few minutes he slowly recovered his breath, kneading the numbed muscles in his right forearm. Then he pulled himself to his feet and began a careful inspection of the room.

One of the larger rooms in the hotel, the two corner windows gave it a unique view over the crowded street below. Venetian blinds screened the windows from the hot sunlight and the hundreds of people in the balconies of the department store opposite. Dr Jamieson first peered into the built-in cupboards, then tested the bathroom window onto the interior well. Satisfied that they were secure, he moved an armchair over to the side window which faced the procession's direction of approach. His view was uninterrupted for several hundred yards, each one of the soldiers and policemen lining the route plainly visible.

A large piece of red bunting, part of a massive floral tribute, ran diagonally across the window, hiding him from the people in the building adjacent, and he could see down clearly into the pavement, where a crowd ten or twelve deep was pressed against the wooden palisades. Lowering the blind so that the bottom vane was only six inches from the ledge, Dr Jamieson sat forward and quietly scanned them.

None seemed to hold his interest, and he glanced fretfully at his watch. It was just before two o'clock, and the young king would have left Buckingham Palace on his way to the Abbey. Many members of the crowd were carrying portable radios, and the din outside slackened off as the commentary from the Abbey began.

Dr Jamieson went over to the bed and pulled out his key-chain. Both locks on the case were combination devices. He switched the key left and right a set number of times, pressed home and lifted the lid.

Lying inside the case, on the lower half of the divided velvet mould, were the dismantled members of a powerful sporting rifle, and a magazine of six shells. The metal butt had been shortened by six inches and canted so that when raised to the shoulder in the firing position the breach and barrel pointed downwards at an angle of 45°, both the sights in line with the eye.

Unclipping the sections, Dr Jamieson expertly assembled the weapon, screwing in the butt and adjusting it to the most comfortable angle. Fitting on the magazine, he snapped back the bolt, then pressed it forward and drove the top shell into the breach.

His back to the window, he stared down at the loaded weapon lying on the bedspread in the dim light, listening to the roistering from the parties farther along the corridor, the uninterrupted roar from the street outside. He seemed suddenly very tired, for once the firmness and resolution in his face faded and he looked like an old weary man, friendless in a hotel room in a strange city where everyone but himself was celebrating. He sat down on the bed beside the rifle, wiping the gun-grease off his hands with his handkerchief, his thoughts apparently far away.

When he rose he moved stiffly and looked uncertainly around the room, as if wondering why he was there.

Then he pulled himself together. Quickly he dismantled the rifle, clipped the sections into their hasps and lowered the lid, then placed the case in the bottom drawer of the bureau, adding the key to his chain ring. Locking the door behind him, he made his way out of the hotel, a determined spring in his step.

Two hundred yards down Grosvenor Place, he turned into Hallam Street, a small thoroughfare interspersed with minor art galleries and restaurants. Sunlight played on the striped awnings and the deserted street might have been miles from the crowds along the Coronation route. Dr Jamieson felt his confidence return. Every dozen yards or so he stopped under the awnings and surveyed the empty pavements, listening to the distant TV commentaries from the flats above the shops.

Halfway down the street was a small caf with three tables outside. Sitting with his back to the window, Dr Jamieson took out a pair of sunglasses and relaxed in the shade, ordering an iced orange juice from the waitress. He sipped it quietly, his face masked by the dark lenses with their heavy frames. Periodically, prolonged cheers drifted across the roof-tops from Oxford Street, marking the progress of the Abbey ceremony, but otherwise the street was quiet.

Shortly after three o'clock, when the deep droning of an organ on the TV sets announced that the Coronation service had ended, Dr Jamieson heard the sounds of feet approaching on his left. Leaning back under the awning, he saw a young man and girl in a white dress walking hand in hand. As they drew nearer Dr Jamieson removed his glasses to inspect the couple more closely, then quickly replaced them and rested one elbow on the table, masking his face with his hand.

The couple were too immersed in each other to notice Dr Jamieson watching them, although to anyone else his intense nervous excitement would have been obvious. The man was about twenty-eight, dressed in the baggy impressed clothes Dr Jamieson had found everyone wearing in London, an old tie casually hand-knotted around a soft collar. Two fountain pens protruded from his breast pocket, a concert programme from another, and he had the pleasantly informal appearance of a young university lecturer. His handsome introspective face was topped by a sharply sloping forehead, thinning brown hair brushed back with his fingers. He gazed into the girl's face with patent affection, listening to her light chatter with occasional amused interjections.

Dr Jamieson was also looking at the girl. At first he had stared fixedly at the young man, watching his movements and facial expressions with the oblique wariness of a man seeing himself in a mirror, but his attention soon turned to the girl. A feeling of enormous relief surged through him, and he had to restrain himself from leaping out of his seat. He had been frightened of his memories, but the girl was more, not less beautiful than he had remembered.

Barely nineteen or twenty, she strolled along with her head thrown back, long straw-coloured hair drifting lightly across her softly tanned shoulders. Her mouth was full and alive, her wild eyes watching the young man mischievously.

As they passed the caf she was in full flight about something, and the young man cut in: „Hold on, June, I need a rest. Let's sit down and have a drink, the procession won't reach Marble Arch for half an hour.“

„Poor old chap, am I wearing you out?“ They sat at the table next to Dr Jamieson, the girl’s bare arm only a few inches away, the fresh scent of her body adding itself to his other recollections. Already a whirlwind of memories reeled in his mind, her neat mobile hands, the way she held her chin and spread her flared white skirt across her thighs. „Still, I don’t really care if I miss the procession. This is my day, not his.“

The young man grinned, pretending to get up. „Really? They’ve all been misinformed. Just wait here, I’ll get the procession diverted.“ He held her hand across the table, peered critically at the small diamond on her finger. „Pretty feeble effort. Who bought that for you?“

The girl kissed it fondly. „It’s as big as the Ritz.“ She gave a playful growl. „H’m, what a man, I’ll have to marry him one of these days. Roger, isn’t it wonderful about the Prize? Three hundred pounds! You’re really rich. A pity the Royal Society don’t let you spend it on anything, like the Nobel Prizes. Wait till you get one of those.“

The young man smiled modestly. „Easy darling, don’t build your hopes on that.“

„But of course you will. I’m absolutely sure. After all, you’ve more or less discovered time travel.“

The young man drummed on the table. „June, for heaven’s sake, get this straight, I have not discovered time travel.“ He lowered his voice, conscious of Dr Jamieson sitting at the next table, the only other person in the deserted street. „People will think I’m insane if you go around saying that.²

The girl screwed up her pert nose. „You have, though, let’s face it. I know you don’t like the phrase, but once you take away the algebra that’s what it boils down to, doesn’t it?“

The young man gazed reflectively at the table top, his face, as it grew serious, assuming massive intellectual strength. „In so far as mathematical concepts have their analogies in the physical universe, yes—but that’s an enormous caveat. And even then it’s not time travel in the usual sense, though I realize the popular press won’t agree when my paper in Nature comes out. Anyway, I’m not particularly interested in the time aspect. If I had thirty years to spare it might be worth pursuing, but I’ve got more important things to do.“

He smiled at the girl, but she leaned forward thoughtfully, taking his hands. „Roger, I’m not so sure you’re right. You say it hasn’t any applications in everyday life, but scientists always think that. It’s really fantastic, to be able to go backward in time. I mean—“

„Why? We’re able to go forward in time now, and no one’s throwing their hats in the air. The universe itself is just a time machine that from our end of the show seems to be running one way. Or mostly one way. I happened to have noticed that particles in a cyclotron sometimes move in the opposite direction, that’s all, arrive at the end of their infinitesimal trips before they’ve started. That doesn’t mean that next week we’ll all be able to go back and murder our own grandfathers.“

„What would happen if you did? Seriously?“

The young man laughed. „I don’t know. Frankly, I don’t like to think about it. Maybe that’s the real reason why I want to keep the work on a theoretical basis. If you extend the problem to its logical conclusion my observations at Harwell must be faulty, because events in the universe obviously take place independently of

time, which is just the perspective we put on them. Years from now the problem will probably be known as the Jamieson Paradox, and aspiring mathematicians will be bumping off their grandparents wholesale in the hope of disproving it. We'll have to make sure that all our grandchildren are admirals or archbishops."

As he spoke Dr Jamieson was watching the girl, every fibre in his body strained to prevent himself from touching her on the arm and speaking to her. The pattern of freckles on her slim forearm, the creases in her dress below her shoulder blades, her minute toenails with their chipped varnish, was each an absolute revelation of his own existence.

He took off his sunglasses and for a moment he and the young man stared straight at each other. The latter seemed embarrassed, realizing the remarkable physiognomical similarity between them, the identical bone structure of their faces, and angled sweep of their foreheads. Fleeting, Dr Jamieson smiled at him, a feeling of deep, almost paternal affection for the young man coming over him. His naive earnestness and honesty, his relaxed, gawky charm, were suddenly more important than his intellectual qualities, and Dr Jamieson knew that he felt no jealousy towards him.

He put on his glasses and looked away down the street, his resolve to carry through the next stages of his plan strengthened.

The noise from the streets beyond rose sharply, and the couple leapt to their feet.

"Come on, it's three-thirty!" the young man cried. "They must be almost here."

As they ran off the girl paused to straighten her sandal, looking back at the old man in dark glasses who had sat behind her. Dr Jamieson leaned forward, waiting for her to speak, one hand outstretched, but the girl merely looked away and he sank into his chair.

When they reached the first intersection he stood up and hurried back to his hotel.

Locking the door of his room, Dr Jamieson quickly pulled the case from the bureau, assembled the rifle and sat down with it in front of the window. The Coronation procession was already passing, the advance files of marching soldiers and guardsmen, in their ceremonial uniforms, each led by a brass band drumming out martial airs. The crowd roared and cheered, tossing confetti and streamers into the hot sunlight.

Dr Jamieson ignored them and peered below the blind onto the pavement. Carefully he searched the throng, soon picked out the girl in the white dress tip-toeing at the back. She smiled at the people around her and wormed her way towards the front, pulling the young man by the hand. For a few minutes Dr Jamieson followed the girl's every movement, then as the first landaus of the diplomatic corps appeared he began to search the remainder of the crowd, scrutinizing each face carefully, line upon line. From his pocket he withdrew a small plastic envelope; he held it away from his face and broke the seal. There was a hiss of greenish gas and he drew out a large newspaper cutting, yellowed with age, folded to reveal a man's portrait.

Dr Jamieson propped it against the window ledge. The cutting showed a dark-jowled man of about thirty with a thin weasel-like face, obviously a criminal photographed by the police. Under it was the caption: *Anton Remmers*.

Dr Jamieson sat forward intently. The diplomatic corps passed in their carriages, followed by members of the government riding in open cars, waving their silk hats at the crowd. Then came more Horse Guards, and there was a tremendous roar farther down the street as the spectators near Oxford Circus saw the royal coach approaching.

Anxiously, Dr Jamieson looked at his watch. It was three forty-five, and the royal coach was due to pass the hotel in only seven minutes. Around him a tumult of noise made it difficult to concentrate, and the TV sets in the near-by rooms seemed to be at full volume.

Suddenly he clenched the window ledge.

„Remmers!“ Directly below, in the entrance to a cigarette kiosk, was a sallow-faced man in a wide-brimmed green hat. He stared at the procession impassively, hands deep in the pockets of a cheap raincoat. Fumbling, Dr Jamieson raised the rifle, resting the barrel on the ledge, watching the man. He made no attempt to press forward into the crowd, and waited by the kiosk, only a few feet from a small arcade that ran back into a side street.

Dr Jamieson began to search the crowd again, the effort draining his face. A gigantic bellow from the crowd deafened him as the gold-plated royal coach hove into view behind a bobbing escort of household cavalry. He tried to see if Remmers looked around at an accomplice, but the man was motionless, hands deep in his pockets.

„Damn you!“ Dr Jamieson snarled. „Where’s the other one?“ Frantically he pushed away the blind, every ounce of his shrewdness and experience expended as he carried out a dozen split-second character analyses of the people below.

„There were two of them!“ he shouted hoarsely to himself. „There were two!“

Fifty yards away, the young king sat back in the golden coach, his robes a blaze of colour in the sunlight. Distracted, Dr Jamieson watched him, then realized abruptly that Remmers had moved. The man was now stepping swiftly around the edge of the crowd, darting about on his lean legs like a distraught tiger. As the crowd surged forward, he pulled a blue thermos flask from his raincoat pocket, with a quick motion unscrewed the cap. The royal coach drew abreast and Remmers transferred the thermos to his right hand, a metal plunger clearly visible in the mouth of the flask.

„Remmers had the bomb!“ Dr Jamieson gasped, completely disconcerted. Remmers stepped back, extended his right hand low to the ground behind him like a grenadier and then began to throw the bomb forward with a carefully timed swing.

The rifle had been pointed at the man automatically and Dr Jamieson trained the sights on his chest and fired, just before the bomb left his hand. The discharge jolted Dr Jamieson off his feet, the impact tearing at his shoulder, the rifle jangling up into the venetian blind. Remmers slammed back crookedly into the cigarette kiosk, legs lolling, his face like a skull’s. The bomb had been knocked out of his hand and was spinning straight up into the air as if tossed by a juggler. It landed on the pavement a few yards away, kicked underfoot as the crowd surged sideways after the royal coach.

Then it exploded.

There was a blinding pulse of expanding air, followed by a tremendous eruption of smoke and hurtling particles. The window facing the street dropped in a single piece and shattered on the floor at Dr Jamieson's feet, driving him back in a blast of glass and torn plastic. He fell across the chair, recovered himself as the shouts outside turned to screams, then dragged himself over to the window and stared out through the stinging air. The crowd was fanning out across the road, people running in all directions, horses rearing under their helmetless riders. Below the window twenty or thirty people lay or sat on the pavement. The royal coach, one wheel missing but otherwise intact, was being dragged away by its team of horses, guardsmen and troops encircling it. Police were swarming down the road towards the hotel, and Dr Jamieson saw someone point up to him and shout.

He looked down at the edge of the pavement, where a girl in a white dress was stretched on her back, her legs twisted strangely. The young man kneeling beside her, his jacket split down the centre of his back, had covered her face with his handkerchief, and a dark stain spread slowly across the tissue.

Voices rose in the corridor outside. He turned away from the window, the rifle still in his hand. On the floor at his feet, unfurled by the blast of the explosion, was the faded newspaper cutting. Numbly, his mouth slack, Dr Jamieson picked it up.

ASSASSINS ATTEMPT TO MURDER KING JAMES

Bomb Kills 27 in Oxford Street Two men shot dead by police... A sentence had been ringed: ...one was Anton Remmers, a professional killer believed to have been hired by the second assassin, an older man whose bullet-ridden body the police are unable to identify...

Fists pounded on the door. A voice shouted, then kicked at the handle. Dr Jamieson dropped the cutting, and looked down at the young man kneeling over the girl, holding her dead hands.

As the door ripped back off its hinges he knew who the second unknown assassin was, the man he had returned to kill after thirty-five years. So his attempt to alter past events had been fruitless, by coming back he had merely implicated himself in the original crime, doomed since he first analysed the cyclotron freaks to return and help to kill his young bride. If he had not shot Remmers the assassin would have lobbed the bomb into the centre of the road, and June would have lived. His whole stratagem selflessly devised for the young man's benefit, a free gift to his own younger self, had defeated itself, destroying the very person it had been intended to save.

Hoping to see her again for the last time, and warn the young man to forget her, he ran forward into the roaring police guns.

