

The Container

1 The Transfer

‘The seat belt sign has been switched off ... but it is advisable to keep the seat belts fastened during flight ...’

The announcement was hardly over before the passenger in seat 59A sprang up and rushed to the front of the plane. The stewardess was startled by this burst of activity ... but soon ceased worrying. The passenger entered the toilet.

‘Took him for a hijacker, did you, Sheela?’ smiled Jamshed twirling a moustache that would have done justice to Air India’s Maharajah.

‘Well, one never can tell these days, can one?’ observed Sheela pointing to 60A. ‘Look over there. That one is up to no good.’

Without turning his head Jamshed managed to look.

‘You are nervous these days, Sheela. Won’t be surprised if you start doubting our captain’s intentions next! ... 60A has had one too many, that’s all.’

60A was a burly European. When all the announcements were over he too rose and made his way to the toilet. Unbuttoned shirt and denims ... his hefty, masculine body seemed to burst out of his clothes. But at that moment all of it was shaking and tottering.

By now *Emperor Vikramaditya* was well set on its flight path at 30,000 feet. That the flight was steady could be seen from the unruffled levels of drink in the glasses resting on the passengers’ tables. But 60A was nevertheless finding his progress towards the toilet difficult.

He finally reached his destination and began struggling with the door handle. Jamshed tapped him gently.

‘Sir, this toilet is occupied. There are more toilets on the lower deck in case you wish ...’

‘*Danke! Nein!* ... Thank you ... Will wait here.’

Looking down at the narrow, winding staircase to the lower deck, Jamshed could appreciate 60A’s point of view. He was on the point of offering his steward’s seat to the passenger when the toilet door opened. 59A emerged

and, casting a look of disapproval at 60A, made his way back to the seat. 60A rushed in.

‘Come, time to serve the snacks’, Jamshed activated Sheela.

When 60A came out, both Jamshed and Sheela were preoccupied with arranging trays for Executive Class passengers: they did not notice the bulging pockets of the emerging passenger. And, of course, thanks to the fuss created by 60A, they had failed to notice another detail. The brown travel pouch that 59A had taken into the toilet was no longer with him when he came out.

The London-bound jumbo reached Delhi on time. The passenger who had boarded the plane at Bombay and occupied 59A deplaned, but by now the occupant of 60A was snoring in contented fashion. He knew that many a collector would happily part with a fortune to acquire that brown travel pouch now resting safe in his briefcase.

2 The Find

The sudden and unexpected ringing of the telephone shook Arul.

Who could be calling at this unearthly hour? It was 6 a.m. For the last hour and a half Arul had been busy debugging his computer programme. Despite several attempts, the monitor of his terminal kept telling him that his instructions could not be carried out. Painstakingly, he had examined the logic of his subroutines, the numerical codes for solving his equations, the data points ... all seemed correct. Yet this idiotic computer refused to accept his programme.

Yes. Idiotic! That is what a computer is, despite its advanced technology. Arul had always said so to the computer buffs in the Institute. No doubt the computer did millions of operations per second and stored billions of information bits for instant retrieval; and granted also that, but for its help, many of today’s outstanding problems (including his own) would remain unsolved. But still, the computer was basically an idiot that did only what it was told to do. A fast and efficient, but unthinking assistant. That, in the last analysis, was what a computer was designed to be Otherwise, it would not have stopped at some trivial error of programming. It should have pointed out where the error was ... the obstinate moron. But who on earth was ringing at this hour? The Institute’s telephone exchange did not start functioning before 8 a.m. and to avoid the bother of outside disturbances Arul preferred to work in the early hours of the morning. Whoever was ringing must be in the Institute, and using the internal line. Arul picked up the receiver. He was right.

‘Dr Arul?’ a crisp voice called.

‘Yes, speaking.’

'Duty officer Shirke speaking, Sir! Trunk call for you from Bangalore ... would you come down please?'

'Coming, Shirke! Hold on.' Arul rushed out.

Arul was uneasy in his mind as the lift descended to the ground floor. His father, now in his seventy-third year, was in frail health, but he insisted on living alone in his sprawling house in Malleswaram, surrounded by his rose garden. The old man would never give it up for a box-like flat on the tenth floor of a Bombay skyscraper.

Shirke, in his khaki uniform, was standing near the reception, holding the receiver of a green phone. This is where all outside calls to the Institute were directed after office hours. The other phone, blue in colour, was for internal communication only, which Shirke had used to call Arul.

'Hallo! Hallo! This is Arul ... Dr Arul speaking.' He could hear the operator's voice clearly as she said, 'PP call to you sir! Hallo Bangalore ... go ahead please.'

'Speak up please,' Arul shouted impatiently as he heard some indistinct tones at the other end.

'Raghavan, here, Dr Arul.' The line was now clear ... and Arul was relieved to hear those words too. Raghavan! Then the call was official and had nothing to do with his father. For Raghavan was the manager of his project at Gauribidnur, where he was planning some highly sensitive experiments to test the law of gravity. In the past, too, Raghavan had telephoned from Bangalore to report on the progress of the project—but never so early in the morning. Why? He was given the answer straightaway.

'I phoned because a totally unforeseen development has taken place. We have just discovered ...'

Raghavan kept on talking and Arul listened incredulously. Even the stoic Shirke could sense his rising excitement.

'Is Mr Jagdale in?'

'May I know who is calling sir?'

This counter-question always amused Arul. It clearly implied that the answer to the original question depended on the caller's identity. Why should it? But that is the way the Secretariat functions. He knew that logic and commonsense, so essential to science, need not hold sway in the corridors of power. He thus avoided treading those corridors—unless forced to do so, as on that particular day.

Raghavan's message made it imperative for Arul to leave for Gauribidnur immediately—which meant taking the afternoon flight to Bangalore. A trip to the airline counter had given him the disturbing news that, as Mister Ordinary Citizen, he was seventy-fourth on the waiting list, unless, of course, he

could somehow get the VIP quota. VIPs, of course, being those with professed dedication to serving ordinary citizens like himself.

Vilas Jagdale, the Revenue Secretary and one-time classmate, was a close friend of Arul. It was to him that Arul turned in desperation for a confirmed seat from the VIP quota.

‘Sir, Mr Jagdale is not in his room right now. He has gone for a meeting with C.S.’

Arul knew well from experience that this reply was one of the five stock replies. Although he knew the question to be useless, he nevertheless asked, ‘And when do you expect him back?’

‘Can’t say! But he was to leave on a tour of Baramati with the Minister at 3 p.m.’

This was important news. He must get hold of Vilas before he took off for Baramati. Arul left his number for Vilas to call back. But he knew that, with a few exceptions, the bureaucrat does not believe in returning calls, just as he does not believe in replying to letters. So he kept calling Jagdale’s number every fifteen minutes. Finally, he succeeded at one o’clock. Thanks to Jagdale’s intercession, Arul was given a confirmed seat at last. To give the bureaucrat his due, Jagdale had a high regard for Arul as a scientist.

It was three-thirty in the afternoon when Arul finally packed his bag and set off for the airport. The plane was scheduled to depart at six and he was to report seventy-five minutes before departure. As he entered the terminal at four forty-five on the dot, he heard the announcement, ‘We regret to announce a delay in our flight 107 to Bangalore. This flight is now estimated to depart at eight-thirty p.m., twenty-thirty hours.’

There was, of course, no trace of regret in the announcer’s voice. For her this was merely a routine announcement. In any case, a monopolistic airline can afford to be callous towards passengers.

There was a time when Arul would get upset by this callousness. He had even gone as far as the General Manager on a couple of occasions to register his protests. But experience had taught him that it served no purpose, and only resulted in a waste of his time and energy. So Arul had grown not only philosophical about these delays, but had also learnt to put them to practical use. Selecting a corner chair he fished out a few papers from his briefcase and was soon engrossed in calculations.

The estimated time of departure of flight 107 as usual turned out to be optimistic. The airbus finally took off at ten o’clock and, by the time Arul entered the arrivals terminal in Bangalore, the clock was showing eleven-thirty. The faithful Raghavan was waiting outside.

Arul’s suppressed excitement finally found expression as their jeep sped eastwards on the highway.

‘Let’s hear about your treasure chest, Raghavan. Begin at the beginning—your voice was not very distinct over the phone.’

At Arul’s bidding Raghavan began in his rapid fire English, intensified all the more by the momentous news he wished to convey.

‘Dr Arul, I called you because during last night’s digging we encountered an unexpected obstacle ... You are aware of how we are working round the clock to catch up with our schedule ... last night we were down to twenty-eight metres and were planning to finish off the remaining four metres by dawn. But at about thirty metres’ depth we found a layer of metal ... metal so tough that our drill simply bounced off it.’

Arul whistled, but did not interrupt Raghavan’s narrative which had further accelerated.

‘This metallic layer turned out to be square-shaped, about three metres in size. Since the well we are digging is of a wider cross section I decided on the spot to keep digging round the obstacle ... for that was possible.’

‘Well done!’ Arul knew that he could rely on Raghavan’s initiative, which is why he had selected him to oversee this project over a host of qualified graduates.

‘As we went further down, we discovered that this metallic obstacle was not a natural one. It extended uniformly down to about three metres ... in fact it turned out to be a perfect cube ... and appears to be made of some unknown alloy.’

‘Cubical shape?’ Arul had heard Raghavan mention this over the phone in the morning. But somehow the significance of it had not registered with him then. No natural rock could be exactly cubical in shape.

‘Exactly a cube, Dr Arul,’ emphasized Raghavan, who had obviously thought about this aspect. ‘I have had it measured very accurately ... it is slightly less than three metres in size. Judging from the sound it makes when tapped, it appears to be hollow. But perhaps it is a container for something valuable. You know, if this box were in Bombay, an entire family could live in it.’

‘It is all very well for you to criticize Bombay’s overcrowding. But remember that Bangalore, as the fastest growing city in India, is heading the same way ... But seriously, Raghavan, have you opened the container, or at least had it lifted? You have the big crane still with you.’

Raghavan had suddenly gone quiet. Finally, he managed to blurt out, ‘No, Arul, I have done nothing ... this whole business seems to me too queer to handle on my own.’

‘But why?’

‘Well, to begin with, there is no lid to this box! Moreover there are strange letters and figures all over its sides.’

‘Could you identify the script?’

‘No! Today I spent several hours in Bangalore’s libraries. I showed the script, which I had copied on my writing pad, to some experts. But apparently no one had seen it before. And in the meantime fresh trouble is brewing on the site, which is why I am glad you are here.’

‘What’s the problem?’ Arul had a feeling that Raghavan had throughout been working his way to this point. He waited for the punch line.

‘One of the technicians on the site had seen an English film about a box found during an excavation in Egypt. When the box was opened ... so the story goes ... a live mummy emerged.’

‘Hollywood nonsense’, muttered Arul. ‘Surely you don’t accept such fantasy?’

‘I don’t, but this silly ass talked about it at tea, and now no labourer is willing to come near our pit. The work is at a standstill.’

Arul gave vent to an expletive. But he still had a feeling that Raghavan had more to say, something that he was hesitating to air. To draw him out he asked, ‘How do you react to this development?’

Raghavan was quiet for a while. Then he mumbled, ‘I don’t buy this mummy nonsense, of course. But you should see the drawings on this container.’

‘What about them?’

‘I wouldn’t call them exactly pleasant. In fact ... all of us at the site agree that they look ... well ... positively sinister.’

3 The Archaeologist

The lights had barely changed when the red car in the right lane raced away, making a smooth turn of ninety degrees. It was well past the intersection before the rest of the traffic recovered from this demonstration of boom and speed. Then the normal traffic lumbered along Aurobindo Marg.

‘That is what I call a car ... what we drive here is a bullock cart,’ muttered the Sardarji in the Punjabi Hindi of Delhi taxi drivers.

‘Must belong to some foreign diplomat,’ suggested his passenger in envious tones.

‘No sir! The car is foreign, but the owner is a Delhiwalla ... all of us in Delhi know this car. It has been on the streets for the last five months.’ As if inspired by the performance of the foreign car, the taxi driver stepped on the accelerator, but this hardly changed the speed of his dilapidated Ambassador.

The red Jaguar had meanwhile turned off the ring road towards Vasant Vihar. Navin Chandra Pande was justifiably proud of this acquisition of his. Ever since his school days Navin had been fascinated by speed—from racing

motorcycles to fast trains, fast aeroplanes and fast cars. It had always been his ambition to own a car—not a Rolls or a Mercedes which are merely status symbols—but a really smart, fast car. During his extensive travels abroad Navin had inspected many models and studied several motoring magazines. And finally he was captivated by this bright red Jaguar. He willingly paid the heavy import duties and brought his toy home, a toy that soon became famous in the capital.

Having crossed two lanes of the smart Vasant Vihar residential area, Navin turned his car into the driveway of an elegant house and came to a halt a few metres from the garage. He took out a small box-like instrument from his pocket. It had two buttons; Navin pressed the one on the left. The garage door went up smoothly, making room for Navin to drive in.

A well equipped home in Vasant Vihar, an imported sports car, foreign trips ... one would have thought that Navin was a film star or a successful industrialist. But the reality was otherwise. For despite his liking for modern conveniences, Navin was basically interested in old things—the older the better. He was an expert and highly successful consultant to the Archaeology Department. As he always pointed out, the latest devices of modern science are indispensable for research into ancient relics. The secret of Navin's achievements lay in his appreciation of the latest techniques in archaeology which he used with great flair. The numerous additions to the museums run by the Archaeological Survey bore ample testimony to his efforts.

However, even an internationally recognized expert in archaeology like Navin would have found it hard to explain how he had acquired all his wealth. Had he been married, he could have pointed to a wealthy father-in-law as the source of his material welfare. But Navin regarded himself as one of nature's bachelors, one who went as far as acquiring a bevy of girlfriends, but not a wife. So he had to explain it all as inherited income and ensure adequately that the Income Tax Department would not probe the matter too deeply.

'Well, Ram Sevak, what's new?' Navin asked his usual question as he threw himself down on his favourite couch. Ram Sevak, his trusted servant, was already setting up the decanter on the low table by the side. He knew that his master enjoyed a 'scotch on the rocks' after returning from work.

'Miss Runa called, sir. She has invited you for dinner. So I have not bothered to cook anything here.' Ram Sevak was correct in his assessment, for Runa happened to be the current favourite amongst Navin's friends.

'And, sir, a peon delivered this letter for you', Ram Sevak added, pointing to an envelope on the drinks tray.

'Fine, Ram Sevak ... go and enjoy yourself for the evening.' Navin's face was benign in anticipation of his own enjoyment later in the day.

‘Thank you, sir.’ Ram Sevak had already telephoned a friend to get tickets for a film in a cinema house in Connaught Place.

As Ram Sevak withdrew, Navin idly reached for the decanter—when he saw the envelope. The sender’s name was not on it, but a look at the monogram embossed on the back brought a frown to the benign face. Reluctantly, he opened the envelope. It contained a typed but unsigned two-line message:

It’s been a long time since we met. Must rectify the omission. See you in Sheesh Mahal, Hotel Akbar, 8 p.m.—without fail.

Without fail! Those were the operative words. The summons had come—he had to obey. Navin dialled the phone.

‘Runa? ... Navin here. Yes, I got your message. But ... listen Runa, I just cannot make it tonight. I ... Don’t misunderstand Runa, it’s not like that ... Oh, what’s the use!’ he muttered to himself as he heard the abrupt click at the other end.

The Swiss cuckoo clock reminded Navin that it was seven-fifty. He got up to leave, his drink untasted.

At eight on the dot Navin entered the Sheesh Mahal restaurant. The dining room was only sparsely occupied as it was too early for the regular clientele to finish their pre-dinner drinking at the bar. It was thus easy for Navin to locate the person he had come to meet—a short, stout man in a blue safari suit.

‘Welcome, Navinbhai ... punctual as usual! So what will be the order of the day—drinks, dinner, or discussion? What comes first?’ The man was smiling, but Navin knew what lay beneath that urbane exterior.

‘Dinner, discussion—but no drinks’, he replied in an even tone.

‘Well, you *have* changed! But we shall see about the last part later.’

Navin quietly moved to the buffet table. He was ravenously hungry. His companion, who had to follow a strict diet, watched enviously as Navin tucked into the food. It was half an hour before Navin felt the need to talk. Looking up from a plate containing four different sweet delicacies, he turned to the business of the day.

‘Pyarelalji, how is your electronics business?’

‘Pyarelal was moodlily stirring his black coffee. ‘It is so-so ... but I came to ask you how things are at your end. What is new? ... Or rather, what is old? That would be more correct in your case.’

‘Nothing exceptional’, was Navin’s non-committal reply.

‘But surely, you are understating, Navin? You know how great the demand is. I need hardly remind you of the rewards ... how about an AC and a stereo system for that red car of yours?’

Pyarelal knew Navin's weaknesses. In fact, he knew the weaknesses of all his contacts, which was why he had been so successful in life.

'I have to be careful, Pyarelalji', Navin replied, dealing with an eclair. 'You know how I was nearly nabbed after that incident on *Vikramaditya*. Somebody followed me from Palam to my home—I am sure of it.'

'Nonsense! You are becoming nervous without reason. These CBI fellows are absolute fools—otherwise they would have got us long ago. No, my clients abroad have long waited for some really major stuff from you. Not since those Madhya Pradesh relics ...'

'I will try. Perhaps something from the Gupta period will turn up in Bihar. But I don't think that would fetch much', Navin broke in.

'You need not worry about prices—that's my concern. Look at this list now.'

Pyarelal produced a typed list and the two were soon engrossed in deep discussion.

At about ten o'clock Navin got up. 'Well I'll see what I can do. Meanwhile, goodbye.'

'What! No drinks? Come on, let's have one to seal our agreement.'

'Not now, I am driving.' Navin turned round and moved towards the exit.

'The fellow *has* changed!' muttered Pyarelal as he, too, followed Navin.

Neither of them saw the man with a military bearing get up from a neighbouring table.

4 The News Hounds

'Raghavan, this takes the whole matter beyond our jurisdiction, damn it.' Arul was naturally peeved at this further interruption in his project. Raghavan nodded and looked at his watch.

It was three-thirty in the morning. Though it was dark, arrangements had been made to continue digging under floodlights. Round the clock work was necessary to catch up with the schedule of the gravity experiment, but tonight no work had been done. The floodlights nevertheless operated to keep the mysterious cube under scrutiny.

'Neither you nor I can claim to be an archaeologist', Arul continued, 'but even we can see that this is not from recent times. The script is totally alien. What is more, the alloy—it probably contains iron—is unknown to our technology. Look how brightly it reflects light even after heaven knows how many centuries.'

‘How many, do you reckon?’ Raghavan was gradually leading to an issue that he did not want to mention directly. He hoped Arul would come round to it himself.

‘Can’t say! But I think—no, I am pretty sure, this alloy does not belong to our post-industrial revolution times. In fact, I can safely bet that the people who made it were technologically advanced, even well beyond our level. Isn’t it intriguing that the exterior of this box is so smooth that we cannot detect its lid?’

‘Indeed it is! But then, these people must belong to an era well before our relics of Harappa or Egypt.’ Raghavan scratched his tousled head.

‘Well said! This civilization must ante-date them by several thousand years. Somehow, I imagine, all its relics were wiped out and we lost contact with it—except for this container here. Wonder what’s in it.’

As Arul carefully inspected the walls of the container, Raghavan was reminded of his favourite sleuth in fiction. Sherlock Holmes would have similarly examined the surroundings of a place where a crime had been committed.

Arul suddenly burst out laughing. As Raghavan looked anxiously, he continued, ‘So much for your demons! These are not of flesh and blood.’ Arul was pointing to the sinister figures inscribed on the cube. This was where Raghavan had wanted to channel their line of inquiry. What were the figures?

‘Of course they are mechanical monsters—robots’, Arul seemed quite sure.

‘But they look sinister, don’t they?’ Raghavan was not sure how Arul would react to this remark.

Surprisingly, Arul took it seriously. ‘I agree with you, Raghavan. They do look sinister. But then, we may be influenced by our ideas of what a benign robot should look like. On the other hand, I suspect that the “artist” who drew these figures shared our reaction. Did he dislike them too, I wonder?’

Emboldened by this sympathetic response, Raghavan advanced his own conjecture.

‘One normally does not associate feelings with robots—but somehow these robots don’t appear to be the benevolent kind, do they?’

Arul did not reply. A shiver ran through Raghavan’s body as he matched his ideas with the surroundings. Of necessity, this well had been dug at a site far from human habitation. It had to provide a quiet environment for the experiment. So here they were, in a god-forsaken place, deep underground, and near a box that contained god-knows-what. If those robots decided to come out and attack them, what means did Raghavan and Arul have for retaliation or exit? He looked at the uninviting rope ladder going straight up—thirty metres of hard climb.

The Return of Vaman - A Scientific Novel

Narlikar, J.V.

2015, VII, 142 p. 2 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-16428-1