



PREFACE

This is a story about what happens when the lunatics take over the asylum. About how those quiet champions of common sense and moderation, the chartered accountants, stand up to be counted in the cause of justice and decency. About how they are persecuted, driven underground, and silenced. For a while.

It is a story about the chaos, economic and social, that ensues when the world is unable to count, and its most venal, self-serving and manipulative elements are thus rendered unaccountable.

Finally, it is a story about how accountancy proves to be inextinguishable, how its practitioners answer the call, rise to the challenge and emerge as the saviours of freedom and democracy, and drag our society back from the brink of the Dark Ages.

Any questions?

When there's a downturn in the economic cycle, the first to get it in the neck are the proprietors of small businesses. The banks pull in their loans and, lacking the reserves set aside by bigger companies, their fragile cash flow is mortally disrupted and they simply implode.

The effect in terms of human misery and hardship has gone unchronicled. Homes are forfeited, marriages destroyed, families torn apart. The damage to the confidence and self-esteem of the bankrupt is often irreparable.

In 2010, after a twenty-year boom, the economy finally teetered about its tipping point and commenced the unstoppable, descending spiral of self-fulfilling prophecy that signals recession.

One-man bands and back-room enterprises could only fear the worst. They noted a distinct fall in temperature at the bank – formal letters arrived, the first rumblings of thunder at the end of a fine summer's day. Assistant managers with unfamiliar names requested clarification on projected incomes and avoidable outlays, urged all available economies, alluded to the possibility of accelerated repayment schedules.

To anyone who had lived through the dark days of 1988, there was a depressing inevitability about it all. On the other hand, an entire generation had grown up with bulls and wouldn't recognise a bear if it strolled up and bit their heads off. Which seemed an increasingly likely course of events.

As usual, there was incredulity in Whitehall and in the City when the juggernaut's engine first developed its ominous stutter. This time, it was supposed to have been different. The unchaining

of the Bank of England, the increasing sophistication of the computers that governed the global tides of currency and stocks, the taming of inflationary pressures with new, smarter, financial instruments – all contributed to the belief that we had finally eliminated the old ‘boom and bust’ swings of the last century.

Commentators rapidly divided into two camps: the ‘brave new worlders’ who dismissed the whole business as a minor case of the jitters or, better still, a ‘necessary readjustment’ that would ‘take the heat out of the market’ – and the hand-wringing old-worlders who saw the spectres of plummeting confidence, evaporating demand, stagnant markets and mass unemployment rising from their graves and once more stalking the land.

Within a few months, reality had exceeded the worst predictions of the pessimists...

‘What’s that noise, Alan? What time is it?’

Gold stood at the bedroom window and stared down at the extraordinary scene in the street. A hundred men, perhaps more, wearing the familiar red overalls of the Albion Party were milling angrily around the HSBC bank on the corner of Heath Street.

There was a great deal of shouting and some half-hearted throwing of stones and bottles.

‘They’re attacking the bank again.’

‘Are the police there?’

‘Not yet.’

A ragged cheer went up when a red mechanical digger rumbled unsteadily up Fitzjohns Avenue. The mob parted and it clanked to a halt before the bank.

As it slowly raised its bucket, the street resounded to the whoop of a siren and an armoured police van nosed its way up from Rosslyn Hill.

For a moment, the clumsy arm of the JCB froze in mid-air and the crowd fell silent. Then with a throaty roar, the arm folded into a fist and in cartoon slow-motion, smote the bank doors, flattening them in a swirling cloud of dust and debris.

The closest Albionites clambered over the wreckage and disappeared into the building while the rest turned to face the police van in a belligerent wall. They began to advance slowly, in step, taunting the police with raucous chanting. A sprinkling of missiles rapidly swelled to a torrent.

The police decided that in the case, valour was all about discretion and the van backed gingerly off down the hill like an injured rhinoceros.

There was much hooting and high-fiveing as the remaining Albionites scrambled after their comrades into the bank.

Gold and his wife watched in dismay as the first, tentative flames licked the sills of the shattered windows.

'They won't get into the vault,' said Gold.

'Why not?' retorted his wife. 'Who's going to stop them? They've got all the time in the world.'

Ariadne Gold manoeuvred her very substantial form back into their bed and lit up a cheroot. Alan winced. 'I wish you wouldn't smoke those things.'

'I wish, I wish,' mimicked his wife. Then she added darkly, 'There are lots of things I wish, too.'

'Like what?' As if he didn't know off by heart what was coming.

The cheroot glowed pensively in the darkness. 'I remember what Poppy said when I told him I was seeing you. We were in the drawing room. He puffed away furiously on that big old double-barrelled Meerschaum pipe of his and he said, "On no account, Ariadne, marry a numby." (That was his special name for accountants). "Theirs is not men's work."

Alan appealed to God beneath his breath. 'But that simply isn't true, my pet. What about my father's partner, Oliver Cockshead?'

A derisive snort in the darkness.

'He was Regimental Accountant with the Royal Dorsetshire Fusiliers, yet he insisted on accompanying the men into battle. In 1943, during the commando raid on the missile base at Peenemunde, he won the Military Cross for capturing an AFCOM – an Advanced Financial Calculating Machine. It's been estimated that by his action, he shortened the war by a year.'

'Hah!'

Alan bristled. 'And then,' he persisted, 'he joined the Corps of Official Receivers. He was among the first into the Berlin bunker where Hitler killed himself.'

'He never saw the body, of course – the SS had sneaked it out through another tunnel. He used to joke that the Germans were masters of the double entry.'

'It was incredibly dangerous work – most of the ledgers were booby-trapped – but in the end they were able to wind up the Nazis' affairs quite satisfactorily. Europe couldn't begin the recovery process, you see, until the Third Reich was formally declared bankrupt.'

Long, red shadows danced about the room as across the road, fire took hold of the bank. Ariadne was weeping quietly. A livid crescent glowed upon her ashen cheek. She had never divulged the history of this disfigurement, but Alan suspected it was a duelling scar.

'I'd leave you if I had anywhere to go,' she whispered.

At this, Alan's heart melted. He sat down on the edge of the bed and rested his hand gently upon her shoulder. 'Oh, my poor little popsicle. There are plenty of places you could go! There's your sister's for a start. She'd be...'

Ariadne pushed his hand away and her sobs ripened into wails.

John 'Jack' Wright was the younger son of Edwin Callender Wright of Wolverhampton – a scrap merchant who fifty years earlier, had experienced a sort of epiphany regarding his business.

As a 'rag and bone' man, he noticed that he spent far more time and energy disposing of the worthless items he was obliged to pick up, than he did redeeming for cash the few valuable ones that appeared in his daily haul.

He reasoned that there might be more money to be made by ridding the world of its waste, than by combing that waste for the occasional diamond.

Wright (Waste) Ltd became one of the great industrial successes of the West Midlands - the classic 'brass from muck' story.

When Edwin died, the business passed to his elder, favourite and woefully less able son, William.

Seething with resentment, John turned down a directorship in the company and emigrated to New Zealand.

He started a small food distribution business that neither grew nor shrank, yet provided for the modest needs of a private, middle-aged bachelor with, seemingly, no ambitions other than to live out his days in peaceful nonentity.

And so it might have been, had not a visitor arrived one evening at his small wooden home on the outskirts of Christchurch.

Herbert Wright was a nervous fidget of a man, thin, pale and stooped.

'Ahem. Hello, Uncle. I trust you are well?'

Jack surveyed his nephew coldly and raised one eyebrow.

Herbert shifted uncomfortably on the doorstep. 'Yes, of course. I expect you're wondering quite why I'm here. Well, it's a delicate matter, Uncle. Uncle, do you mind if I come in?'

Wordlessly, Jack pushed open the door and gestured Herbert towards the kitchen.

'I don't know if you're aware, Uncle – perhaps not, all the way...down here – but there's been a spot of bother, economically.'

Jack raised the eyebrow a further millimetre.

Herbert swallowed. 'Actually, a catastrophic collapse. Globally. You know, like the Great Depression. Businesses going bust, fellows jumping off buildings and everything.'

The eyebrow arched like a caterpillar to its most extreme extent.

'No, no, don't worry. We're having a bit of trouble with the bank, but the firm is alright. Just about. However, I'm afraid the strain has proved too much for father. He's had a sort of... breakdown.'

Now Jack's lip curled, almost imperceptibly. He had never been able to abide weakness – particularly in his brother.

'And...and they've asked me (the Board, that is) if... Actually, to find out whether you'd consider...possibly....in the circumstances...you know...'

The second eyebrow arched to mirror the first.

Herbert gulped. 'Whether you'd...come back?'

An eternity seemed to pass. Then Jack nodded. Just once, very slightly.

Sometimes the merest gesture is enough to nudge the boulder of history from its fragile equilibrium and send it crashing down into the valley with disastrous consequences for all that stand in its way.

Nobody knows what passed between Jack Wright and the regional manager of the Qatar and Dudley Bank on the very first morning of the new Chairman's regime.

The heavy oak panelling of the manager's office ensured that the Assistant Manager and clerks, even with their ears pressed to the door, could only make out a fractious to-ing and fro-ing, like the heave of a restless sea.

To the dumb surprise of the staff, it was their manager who emerged first. Without a word and with averted eyes he almost ran from the premises, never to return.

Then Jack Wright appeared. Slowly, inscrutably, he surveyed the bewildered staff. Then he sauntered out into the bleak, Wolverhampton sunshine.

Under his chairmanship, Wright (Waste) Ltd grew exponentially. The company responded quickly to the growth of the environmental movement and the welter of new European legislation relating to the disposal of hazardous materials. But it remained in essence a 'small to medium enterprise', privately owned and run in a paternalistic, almost Victorian style, in which hard work was rewarded and no dissent brooked.

'Brother Jack' was feared even more than he was respected. His silky, almost effeminate voice could mesmerise the poor object of his displeasure as the hiss of the cobra will paralyse its prey. And then would come the lethal, lightning strike and the bewildered victim would be off-site, clutching a P45 and the sad little consolations of the office cubbyhole, tipped into a carrier bag.

And now as the economic turbulence grew in intensity, Jack Wright was called once more – this time to be the champion of small business against the faceless monoliths of the City.

This was not the first time the nation had endured the strictures of economic recession. But where divided, demoralised small businesses would once have lapsed into despondency, a shiver of resistance now ran through their community.

Chambers of Commerce in Tamworth and Darlington and Frome convened extraordinary general meetings. Butchers and builders, ironmongers and motor engineers gathered and compared the degrees of humiliation and hardship imposed upon them by their respective bankers. The mood changed rapidly from petulance to outright anger.

Unharnessed, this new energy might have exhausted itself and melted away, and the world reverted to 'small business as usual'. But something was different. And the difference was Jack.

A single hand, strong and steady, reached out and fanned the flickering flame of revolt that had spontaneously ignited across the country.

Was it destiny, or political astuteness or mere coincidence that drove the man to grasp the moment?

Jack did not believe in coincidence. And destiny was something you had to make for yourself. It was all a matter of heeding the call.

Now he was calling, and tens of thousands heeded.

In happier times, you might have mistaken them for football supporters – albeit supporters whose team has just been beaten four-nil. They swept out of Victoria station in a grim tide and further swelled the great throng that was gathered outside the Horticultural Halls.

An official wearing an Albion Party arm band addressed them through a loud hailer. 'No more room inside! You'll be able to see it all on the big screen behind you.'

Opposite in a little square a broad expanse of white fabric billowed slowly in the evening breeze, like a galleon's mainsail.

There was a low murmur from the crowd, which exploded into wild cheers as the monstrous figure of Jack Wright flickered onto the screen.

Savile Row's finest worsted could not disguise his striking similarity to a toad. Old-fashioned, black-framed spectacles reinforced the faint suggestion of sinister excess.

Yet when he spoke, his voice was soft and curiously feminine, like the purr of a cat, and his audience were at once lulled into a dreamy trance of acquiescence.

Brother Jack might have advocated the grinding up of infants for bone meal and it have somehow sounded reasonable.

In this he was the antithesis of those rabble-rousers and pedagogues whose technique is to ramp up the volume and the fury until the audience is bludgeoned into a state of hysterical ecstasy.

By contrast, the quieter and calmer Brother Jack's delivery, the less discerning became his followers and the more atrocious the suggestions he was able to insinuate into their bewitched imaginations.

'You and I,' he began, caressing the crowd with his bleak, reptilian stare, 'we're the same. We're individualists. We believe that a businessman has the right to profit from his own skill, energy and intelligence. We don't rely upon others to put food on our plates or shoes on our children.

'If you get it right, then we expect to be able to enjoy the fruits of our labour without interference from government busy-bodies, be they in Whitehall or in Brussels.

'If we get it wrong, then we'll damn well live with the consequences. We'll not run bleating to the tax payers for a free hand-out. We'll stand or fall on our own efforts. Because we're business people. *Small* business people. Not fat cat directors of publicly-owned multinationals, with their off-shore accounts and their multi-million pound pension packages.

'No, we're small and we're proud of it. In fact, when people ask me what it is the Albion Party stands for, I tell them straight, we want to put the small back into Great Britain.'

By now, Brother Jack's face filled the huge screen and his voice was little more than a murmur – as if he were reading the final lines of a fairy story to a sleepy child.

'You know,' he intoned, 'Somebody once dismissed us *a nation of shopkeepers*. It was meant to be an insult, But if it were true – and when we have our way, it will be – I would be the proudest man on Earth.'

A spontaneous sigh emanated from the crowd. Many of the older listeners were close to tears.

ONE YEAR LATER

Ariadne Gold peered myopically at the editorial page of her *Daily Mail* with its strident new strapline: *The voice of young enterprise*.

The leader was a savage piece of invective against the perpetrators of the industrial action that was engulfing the nation in the wake of its economic difficulties.

Under the headline: BOOK LACK IN ONGAR, it berated the leaders of the East London librarians' strike which had now spread and paralysed most public services across the capital.

It is outrageous in this day and age that a handful of Left-leaning miscreants and ne'er-do-wells with a political axe to grind can hold the British people to ransom.

No employer can unilaterally break a contract with an employee without incurring a huge compensation claim. So why don't the same rules apply to employees?

The fact is that while strikes, legal and illegal, are now the rule rather than the exception in large companies and in the lumbering institutions of the public sector, they are incredibly rare in small businesses.

Jack Wright, charismatic leader of the Albion Party and widely accepted as the champion of the smaller enterprise, has made very clear his views on the matter: Strikes are unpatriotic and politically suicidal, for they allow the big corporations and their shady accomplices in the City to seize the moral high ground and to characterise the working classes as shiftless and irresponsible.

Once again, small business is proving itself to be the true voice of sensible, right-thinking Britain: well-motivated and trustworthy, keeping its head when all around are losing theirs.

'That dreadful Jack Wright man must have shares in the *Mail*,' she remarked. 'There isn't a day goes by without some toadying, sick-making editorial about him. You'd think he was Jesus Christ, the way they go on. But then, I suppose you're right up there with them, clutching at his shirt tails.'

Gold winced. 'What makes you say that?'

'Well, he's always on about your small business people, isn't he? I bet half of your clients are paid-up members of the Albion Party. Money-grubbing little tradespeople with chips on their shoulders, who didn't dare say boo to a goose until Wright came along and made them feel important.'

Gold refused to rise to the bait. 'They *are* important, though. Perhaps not individually but together, as a sector of the economy.'

'You mean in the same way that termites are important?'

'I'm not sure I like your choice of example, but I suppose so, yes.'

'I think it's a perfect example. They're exactly like termites – contemptible and deeply unattractive but, in sufficient numbers, incredibly destructive. Look what they did across the road.' She waved a hand towards the window and the ruins of the bank across the street. 'That was Jack Wright's work, I'd put money on it.'

'There's no evidence that the Albion Party was directly involved.'

'That just shows how clever and dangerous they really are. They were hardly likely to demand a mention in the credits, were they?'

Gold sat down wearily. 'I'm not saying they're angels. They're in politics, after all. But you can't simply blame them for everything that's going wrong in society. It's too easy. And after all, they're right about one thing - we wouldn't be in this mess if it wasn't for the banks. The moment there was a bit of glitch in the economy, they just cut and run. They're more responsible for this mess than the small enterprises they put out of business.'

His wife laughed bitterly. 'There you go! That's what I mean! You're hand in glove with that ghastly pedagogue and his nation of shopkeepers. I don't know why you couldn't have joined one of the big firms – Price Waterhouse or Deloitte, like Delia's Darren. He travels around the world in First Class. And they've got an apartment in Geneva.'

'I'm sure it's very nice, but it's not what I do. I'm not the corporate type.'

Ariadne got up from the table abruptly and marched into the kitchen, firing over her shoulder, 'That's just an excuse and you know it. The real truth is, you're frightened of success. You don't believe in yourself.' Gold glanced at his watch. Down the road, the meeting was about to begin. 'You never did.'

'I'm just popping out, dear,' he called. 'Back later.'

'Where are you going?' A sudden note of anxiety.

'To see a man about a dog.' And the heavy door clicked shut behind him as he slipped into the shared hallway.

For thirty years, the deconsecrated Victorian Church of St Chad had mouldered, brooding upon its decaying majesty.

Blistered plywood panels veiled from an unbelieving world grandiose stained-glass tableaux depicting the stainless lives of saints.

Coarse explosions of buddleia lent a false jollity to the porch with its great padlocked doors.

A wild man had holed up in the crypt like a wounded badger, emerging furtively at night, amassing senseless troves of timber and plastic, gradually assuming the church's rotting raiments of moss and mould.

And then, abruptly, the quiet indignities of the decades ceased. The white, brittle air of a November morning rang to the clang of steel axe upon steel chain; frost-browned husks of buddleia lay crushed by unheeding, ambitious boots; the great door groaned inwards on arthritic hinges; panic-stricken pigeons clattered beneath the saints' impassive gaze.

The Badger Man scuttled from the crypt, distraught. For a whole day, he hovered at the lych-gate, roaring unintelligible complaints and shaking a blackened fist at the workmen, to whom he was as invisible as a ghost. Then he shambled away.

The renovation of St Chad's proceeded with speed and real devotion. An orderly train of artisans filed down the aisle and the bright sky rejoiced to the hymn of drill, saw and angle grinder.

It was a Christmas Eve when a small convoy of saloon cars pulled up outside the church. A flurry of officials gathered around the middle car; one deferentially opened the rear door while the rest clamoured anxiously about.

Jack Wright extricated himself with some difficulty, then paused to catch his breath and smooth his suit before allowing himself to be escorted by his over-solicitous entourage along the path to the church.

It paused for a long moment to survey a newly varnished sign within the porch:

**Headquarters of
the Albion Party of All England
Founder and Chairman: Mr Jack D. Wright**

Then, with the faintest grunt of satisfaction, he entered the dark maw of this, the newly-consecrated cathedral of small-scale commerce and micro-business.

An hour later, he watched from his specially-reinforced pulpit as the first congregation poured into the Albion Party's headquarters. His eyes were pale blue fish in the thick aquarium lenses of his spectacles. His expression was inscrutable, although he must have been gratified by the turn-out – a capacity crowd and, judging by the proliferation of purple rosettes, not just curious passers-by but hardcore Party faithful.

An expectant hush fell over the crowd. He waited a full thirty seconds for dramatic effect, then spoke in the unnaturally quiet Wolverhampton brogue that was to become his trademark, mimicked in private throughout the land at dinner parties and publicly, with increasing circumspection, by political satirists.

'Thank you and welcome. We appreciate that many of you have travelled considerable distances at substantial expense to be with us this evening. That shows true commitment in these times of hardship and deprivation. We are touched and gladdened. And it is our fervent hope that we will be able to repay your loyalty by providing a focus for your disappointment and frustration.

'Members and supporters of the Albion movement will know that the self-serving leeches of the banking world have been exposed by this party as unscrupulous parasites who suck the blood from us hard-working small business people, then when they've bled us dry, drop off and crawl back to the filthy slime of the City with no thought nor care for their victims - you and me.'

The auditorium rumbled with approving murmurs.

'Well,' and here he permitted himself the bleak ghost of a smile, 'I can promise you that the bankers will get their comeuppance – aye, with interest, too, back-payable for a hundred years!' The murmur swelled to a ragged cheer. 'Which is no worse than what they deserve!

'However, today I want to warn you about a new enemy. No, not a new one – an old enemy that through lies and double-dealing has succeeded in disguising his true face and his sordid, grubby agenda. One that extends his right hand in friendship while all the time clutching a dagger in his left.

'I'm talking about the oldest profession in the world. One viler by far and more contemptible than the one usually enjoying that renown.

'Ladies, gentlemen, friends, Albionites – I'm talking about *the accountants!*'

Sandwiched on a pew between two Filey fish shop proprietors, each an impressive testament to the calorific value of his product, perched little Alan Gold.

He sported the purple rosette he'd found in the street outside the burned-out bank. It was a feeble disguise. Every atom of him seemed to scream 'Accountancy!' The green sleeveless pullover beneath the suit jacket, conservatively cut so as not to unnerve an ageing clientele; the black, lace-up shoes, so faithfully preserved for over a decade; the thinning, back-swept black hair, not quite so well-preserved; the narrow wedding band;

the discreet gold watch and the plain, enamel cufflinks. He might as well have had his professional qualifications tattooed across his forehead.

Which hadn't really been an issue until, out of the blue, Wright had commenced this ferocious torrent of invective against his profession – his modest, mild, reasonable, decent, humane, diligent, caring, loyal profession.

Now he felt like a kitten who'd sleep-walked into Battersea Dogs' Home. Or, given his race and the social affectations of the crowd, Daniel in the Lions Club Den.

Among the most enthusiastic of the Lions denizens was Laurie Montague, proprietor of *Cyclopaths*, a Kentish Town bike shop and Mecca to serious North London road racers and triathletes.

Laurie took over the business when his dad commenced a five-year stretch for drug dealing. The shop had been little more than a front for his marijuana courier service. In those days, it was called *Pedlars*.

Laurie had roundly rejected the lures of the Counter Culture. His father's Grateful Dead albums gathered fluff under his bed. He preferred Harry Connick Jr.

He was an indifferent cyclist but was fascinated by the equipment. When Ridley managed to shave three grams off their carbon fibre seat posts, he was transported into a state seldom attained by Vedic yogis.

Occasionally, he would startle browsing customers by exclaiming, 'Behold the bicycle! Wheels within wheels within wheels!' Then he would add, 'Just like the Universe, but twice as reliable and slightly more expensive.'

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Laurie lived alone above the shop.

As Gold glanced furtively around the Albionite congregation, his eye settled upon Laurie. There was something instantly likeable about the ramrod posture, the flush of cheek, the ardent brightness of eye. He reminded Gold of himself - albeit himself at primary school.

Then Gold remembered that the other's beatific state was induced by a dangerous, manipulative monster.

He was wrong, actually. Laurie was happy mainly because, for the first time in many months, he did not feel utterly alone. He was surrounded by people like himself – plumbers, IT engineers, restaurateurs, antique dealers, hairdressers – all of them struggling for survival in the aftermath of a worldwide economic tsunami.

The event was a kind of a group therapy. The fat man in the pulpit with his silky, cat-claw blandishments was only the icing on the cake.

In fact, the bike business wasn't such a bad one when set against a background of global meltdown. The top-end machines were still selling well: as ever, the media crowd were

prospering in a crisis. Demand was holding up, too, at the utilitarian end. His stout sit-up-and-beggars were rapidly displacing the Astras and Fiestas of low income families, peering over the precipice of ruin.

Nevertheless, the evidence of recession was all too visible. Half the businesses in the high street were boarded up, or else announcing that 'everything must go'. And the cycle market was, well, cyclical. Despite the soaring rate of petty theft, there had to be a point at which NW4 would be saturated with new bikes. At best, Laurie was clinging to the chimney while the flood waters rose inexorably around him.

And now, at last, here was someone who was going to do something about it. Someone with vision and energy and a passion for fair play. Someone who recognised that a small business is a microcosm of the whole economy; that without the pennies, there could be no pounds.

Had not the Albion Party pledged to give the banks a bloody nose?

Meanwhile, Gold had refocused his attention upon the forbidding figure in the pulpit and the momentous declaration of war he was launching upon accountants and accountancy.

'For years, since our fathers' generation at least, we have been cajoled into regarding our accountants as our natural allies, committed to protecting our interests against the predations of the Exchequer and the naked greed of the bankers.

'We trusted our accountants. They were *on our side*. They were our friends, professionally and often socially.

'We invited them into our confidence, into our premises, into our homes. What they advised we seldom questioned. We assumed that truth and honour still counted for something in the business fraternity.

'Oh, how unutterably, pathetically naïve we were! I'm actually embarrassed that, like all of us here, I was so utterly duped and taken in.

'With the wisdom of hindsight, of course, it's all too easy to see. They wormed their way into our confidence, *the better to exploit us.*'

To his alarm, Gold felt himself succumbing to Wright's rhetoric. He began to feel real indignation at the way these two-faced, conniving number crunchers had inveigled their way like Uriah Heep into the confidence and affections of their unsuspecting clients. He had to kick himself hard on the ankle bone to break the spell woven by Jack Wright with his seductive, mesmeric murmur.

'The accountants were in no hurry. In fact, I believe the security agencies have a name for such long-term traitors. Moles. My friends, that's exactly what accountants are. Moles. Blind rodents who burrow silently away in the darkness, undermining the very ground that gives them their sustenance.'

Surreptitiously, Gold removed his glasses.

Alan Gold walked briskly down Fitzroy Avenue from Hampstead Village. He kept close to the hedge and watched the traffic from the corner of his eye. He turned abruptly into Shepherds Lane, a long paved path that branched obliquely away from the main road. The detour would add ten minutes to his journey, but it was well-lit and straight: taking it was just the sort of sensible precaution that had kept him out of trouble these past months.

An accountant's life, he reflected, was rather like a game of cricket. It consisted of long periods of amiable, pleasantly dull inertia, punctuated by moments of breathtaking change. Change that, if you were day-dreaming and picking buttercups in the outfield, could take you dangerously unawares. The world, as Louis MacNeice observed, is suddener than we think.

Fortunately, Gold was not prone to picking wildflowers. He was a short, wiry, nervous man, who habitually expected the worst and was genuinely surprised when it didn't occur.

He was an adherent of what he called, 'the Rabbit's Nose principle'. Rabbits, someone had once told him, twitched their noses continually to renew their sense of smell. In this way, they avoided becoming inured to the scent of an approaching predator.

Gold was a rabbit fielder, way out by the boundary, twitching his nose and successfully resisting the urge to nod off.

Now he cut back along a broad avenue of Edwardian villas towards Swiss Cottage. He hurried through the subway with its harsh light like a hospital corridor's, keeping his head down and his collar high. Before long he ducked into the doorway of a dreary residential block and, after checking that he hadn't been followed, pressed the bell repeatedly in an elaborate pattern.

The lock clicked and he slipped inside.

'An Englishman, an Indian and a Jew walked into a pub,' Alan began.

'...and the barman said, is this some kind of joke?' Stephen Weatherby completed the story wearily.

Shirani Perera smiled indulgently. 'Good to see you, Alan.'

Gold had never overcome his instinctive surprise at hearing a broad Yorkshire accent on the lips of a pretty Asian woman.

'Mutual,' he replied and added unnecessarily, 'So we all made it OK then?'

'I was a bit worried on the train,' Shirani admitted. 'This man was staring at me all the time.'

'So?' replied Gold cheerfully. 'I stare at you all the time. I bet Stephen would, too, if he wasn't from Eastbourne and therefore sexually repressed.'

'I've had my moments,' muttered Stephen darkly. 'Now let's get on. What's the news?'

'First' said Gold, 'some basic housekeeping. I think we should have another safe house?'

'But why? We've only just found this one.'

'Three months ago – that's an age in the current climate. Remember it only took them two weeks to track down Roger and the rest in Hackney.'

'Perhaps they were just careless.'

'Careless is staying too long in one place. Careless is complacent.'

Shirani nodded, 'I agree with Alan. It's only a matter of time before some busy-body spots a pattern and tips off the CPs.'

'In any case,' Gold continued blithely, 'I may already have found us a place in the Suburb.'

'But that's even further north than here!' Stephen groaned. 'It'll add half an hour each way onto my journey.'

'Then I suggest you find us somewhere in Central London. Somewhere really quiet and inconspicuous, where the rent's cheap and we can trust the landlord. With our lives.'

'In any case, look on the bright side. It'll knock half an hour *off* my journey.'
