

THE WORLD BENEATH THEIR FEET

SMAPLE CHAPTER ONLY

In the last hour before the dawn, when even the ghosts and vampires have retired, he heard him long before he saw him. Turnkey, without a doubt, making his way on the path down through the trees, having arrived on the first tram of the day.

Einstein put out his cigarette—far from his first that morning—but remained sitting on the one of the logs that were used to make a fence around the car park. The motorcar that he had been anticipating—that should have been there—had not arrived, but Turnkey, descending upon him at his waddling gait, was coming to the rescue. The keys rattled madly as he came, all the keys to all the doors in The Ground. Marley’s ghost, searching for another Scrooge.

That was when the light came on. High up on the great rounded wall that towered over him, just a small, yellow, feeble light at a tiny window, but significant, nevertheless. It shone out like a beacon at the end of night. Einstein saw it and shook his head, smiling to himself. Talk about ghosts haunting places, but this ghost—the one that needed a light to see by—was very human, even if it did spend most of its time haunting.

He was think far too much about ghosts, to prevent himself from worrying about why bloody Harry Forth wasn’t here yet.

But Turnkey was, and now Einstein stood and stepped out of the shadows.

“Ahh, shit. What the...?” The old man gasped, but it was the way his keys rattled all the madder that was the greatest effect.

“Morning, Turnkey,” Einstein chuckled.

Turnkey needed to sit on the log that Einstein had just vacated, clutching his heart as he did so.

“Just cos it’s easy for you black guys to hide in the dark don’t mean you ought to go around scaring a bloke half to death.”

Right now, Einstein's teeth and eyes could not have been more prominent, but instead he grabbed the old man's arm to help him up.

"Sorry, old fella," he grinned. "Wasn't really any way it could have been averted, you were in such a hurry."

"Big day," Turnkey said seriously. "Wanted to get here and make sure everything is okay."

"Yeah, big day alright," Einstein said, knowing at least two things that had gone wrong already, before it even began.

Old Turnkey was no fool, and noticed both things, straightaway.

"There's a light!"

"Yes. It just came on a few minutes ago."

"How can there be a light when there's no one in there?"

Einstein smiled. Since Turnkey believed he possessed all the keys to all the doors of The Ground, it was impossible for him to accept that anyone could get into anywhere without him being there to let them in. And he, Turnkey, had not quite arrived yet.

"Maybe an automatic timer or something," Einstein said, mostly to aided the old man in his delusions.

"Nothing like that up there. Looks like it's coming from the museum."

"Well, Groote always reckoned that place was haunted."

Gladly, they had reached the door, just beside the Member's Entrance and Turnkey immediately picked the right key from the dozens of possibilities that hung from a ring on a chain attached to his belt. As they entered, the second mystery occurred to the old gatekeeper.

"Where is Harry?"

"No here yet," Einstein said matter-of-factly.

"Harry is always here at this time."

"Not today."

Turnkey fretted. "Such a big day and already things are going wrong."

"Harry will be here," Einstein said.

Truth was, there had never been a previously occasion in the three years that he had worked here that Harry Forth had not arrived before him. But there was nothing he could do about that. Whereas the light in the museum was another matter.

Turnkey's office was right beside the Member's Entrance, and from in there he could inspect the credentials of anyone wishing entry to the zone. Directly opposite was a door in the sheer concrete wall, one of innumerable such doors lining both sides of the roadway tunnel that ran all the way around The Ground beneath the terraces, but this door was Harry's Office. Einstein let himself in and turned on the light for a moment, as if to assure himself that Harry wasn't actually in there. He wasn't. The office was just large enough to accommodate the desk where Harry did his laborious though minimal paperwork, two visitor's chair and all manner of odd objects—flagpole, pick, shovel, tools of all kinds and many sundry object each of which require lengthy explanation of the reason for their presence, lined on all sides by raw concrete, amounting roughly to the approximate size of an average prison cell—solitary confinement style.

On the desk was a single sheet of paper on which Harry had scrawled a list of things to be done as a result of his final inspection before he turned off the lights and went home the night before. Einstein quickly ran his eye down the list, but there was nothing for him. And since Harry wasn't there, there was no reason that Einstein should be. He turned off the light, locked the office and set off on what would be the first of several hundred trips jogging along the roadway tunnel.

This initial jog took him to a place that announced the presence of an elevator—something he very rarely utilised since it was always quicker to use the stairs. But the indicator said it was positioned at *G* and when he pressed the button, the doors did indeed apart, hurling light into the darkness of the tunnel. He rode to the top, four floors up which brought him to a corridor that had a sloping roof, above which were the very highest seats in the Member's Stand.

By the time he arrived, the florescent lights overhead were flickering on—plain Turnkey had reached the Member's Stand switchboard. He made his way along to a single door of polished mahogany which bore in large gold letters the inscription Museum.

The museum was the most sacred of places—a series of broad rooms with panelled walls and highly polished wood grain floors running right along the entire top level of The Members' Stand. It was a huge collection of sporting

memorabilia of course—a series of galleries with glass display cases freestanding about the floor and paintings and old photographs completely covering the walls, all of which accumulated to preserve the full history and significance of all of the events that had happened at The Ground.

It was in darkness now though not entirely—sufficient light came in from behind Einstein to cast all manner of weird shadows and create static glimpses of unexpected shapes. Most dominant was the life-size statue of Dreadnought, the greatest of all batsmen, with his monstrous beard and fiery eyes, standing with his bat in his gnarled hand clutched as a Cro-Magnon might his club. Elsewhere, the free-standing glass cases glinted for prominence, each of them remembering so past great event in The Ground.

All this Einstein saw and none of it, for what really grabbed his attention was a thin sliver of light, horizontal on the polished floor, coming from under one of the storeroom doors on the far side of the room. Immediately he went that way, treading carefully, mindful of the innumerable obstacles that might be collided with, but before he got there, the door fell open and there in silhouette was the terrible image of Groote.

Reminiscent of the fact that men had not always walked upright but once must have, like apes, wandered about in an intermediate quadra-bipedal state, Groote was a crumpled remnant of a man with a tiny head that seemed to emerge vulture-like from the middle of his chest while his shoulders hunched and loomed behind. He moved with an array of unsteady gyrations, hurling one foot forward and then heaving the rest of himself with a desperate thrust, the second foot dragging along behind, always looking as if he was about to fall but never doing so. It was impossible to believe that Groote was once a fine athlete, a great batsman and that his present deplorable state was the result of arthritis, induced by the many crippling blows his body had suffered. Yet with his every movement, he openly displayed the pain of every one of those ancient injuries.

Like Victor Hugo's Hunchback, Groote was kept out of sight and mind—he was curator of the museum and knew the details behind every exhibit. He also believed the great players of the past still walked this place at night, and seeing its gothic weirdness in the semi-darkness, Einstein found the idea hard to disagree with.

As he watched the lamentable Groote shuffle painfully across the room, Einstein hit the light switch by the main door, sending any spooks back to their rightful places and Groote himself almost to the hereafter.

“You!’ the twisted curator gasped in fierce accusation, “What are you doing here?!”

“That, I believe, is my question,” Einstein said calmly. As he advanced, he jerked his head toward the storeroom door. “You slept here. You know it isn’t allowed.”

Groote, though, knew Einstein well enough to have no fear of being dobbed in. “Yes. It was late. And I feared vandals.”

“Vandals?” Einstein chuckled, shaking his head. “Up here?”

“A great day, today,” Groote ventured. “The Centenary. Everything must be... just so.”

“Everything has been... just so... up here for about a decade. Really, old fella. Don’t you have a home to go to?”

In fact, almost unbelievably, Groote had wife and kids and lived in a nice suburban home. It was Einstein who didn’t have any worthwhile home to go to.

But they were gravitating, like stars around a black hole, to a place at the very centre of the long room, and now they came to stand stand-by side, before a huge, ceiling-high, display case with glass shelving but no other contents. Yet both carefully observed the nothing that wasn’t in there.

“It will be a great event,” Groote was saying. “There will be many fine mementos before this test match is done.”

“How can you be sure?’ Einstein asked. “Maybe it will be a dull game in which nothing interesting happens.”

“Australia and England, the two mightiest teams in the world, and so many great players. It cannot help but be remarkable.”

“Enough to fill this?” Einstein said, indicating the empty display.

“I fear only that I have not allowed enough space.”

“Old man,” Einstein said. “You are weird. You better go back to bed. The game doesn’t start for four hours yet. Nothing can happen before then.”

“I must be ready.”

Einstein moved away. He didn't bother to tell the old man that something had happened already.

Things were certainly happening by the time Einstein made his way down to Harry's office. He did so by the most circuitous route possible without actually leaving The Ground—jogging all the way around the roadway tunnel until he returned almost to where he had begun. That plus Harry's list gave him all he needed.

The carpenters, Jesus and Joseph, were hanging around by the door of Turnkey's office when he arrived. They had just punched their cards in the time-clock just inside the door.

"Okay," Einstein said to them. "You're back fixing those seats in Bay 20. But before that, get those long tables fixed. They'll need them later."

The two carpenters did not respond. They just stood looking at each other.

"We need to check with Harry," they said.

Einstein offered no objection. It was habit, tradition, time honoured that they check with Harry before starting any jobs. "Harry isn't here yet."

"Of course he is. He must be." They looked around as if they thought Einstein was hiding him somewhere. Einstein unlocked Harry's office and showed them that Harry wasn't in there, and then waved the list under their noses to demonstrate that Harry's orders existed, even if he didn't.

Shaking their heads in bewilderment, they walked away. Most days they would disappear into their workshop under Bay 9 and never be seen until knock-off time, and Einstein supposed today would be no different.

He went back to Turnkey's office and punched his own card. It was always best if no one ever knew exactly what time he arrived. Then the plumbers were there—Flash, Speedy and Zapper.

"Bay 17. There's a major leak from the Ladies toilet."

They looked at each other and then all around.

"Harry's orders," Einstein added. It was a lie—he had seen the water cascading himself on his circuit of the ground. But the three brothers had half a brain between them and jogged off down the tunnel.

Outside the door, on the concourse, a weird vehicle halted. It had once been a Ford utility but now was some strange abstract work of art for it was covered with streaks and drops of paint of every imaginable colour. A mobile Jackson Pollack, Einstein had remarked, but there was no one else capable of getting the joke. Michelangelo and Leonardo was another of his jokes, but the painters simple accepted them as their rightful names.

“Where’s Harry?” Michelangelo or Leonardo asked—Einstein could never tell which was which.

“Not here,” Einstein replied.

“Didn’t hear of any major pranks on the South Eastern freeway,” Leonardo or Michelangelo said.

“Still he must be dead,” M or L declared.

“Maybe he’s just late,” Einstein offered.

They both laughed at the stupidity of that suggestion.

“There’s graffiti all the way around,” L or M said, waving a vague hand. “The kids have been real busy.”

“Will you have time to get rid of it all before the start of play?” Einstein asked.

“Suer we will.”

“And there’s that job up of the scoreboard.”

“That too.”

M or L revered the engine and the avant-garde ute blew smoke all over the concourse. “You’ll tell us when the funeral is,” L or M asked.

“Funeral?”

“Harry’s. Ain’t here. Must be dead.”

“Get outa here.”

One hour after dawn it was time for Hillingdale to arrive and so he duly did. He parked his car in exactly the same place that he always did, got out and walked around to the boot, opened it, and, seeing that there was nothing to take out, closed it again. He gave his usual hearty wave to the row of old oak trees that bordered the car park, and exchanged his customary few words with the wild daisies that grew down by the fence. He

and the horticulture were just about to agree that all was well in the world when he suddenly observed that it wasn't.

He stood, a long angular man of about sixty with a disorderly eruption of pure white hair and his face locked in the baffled expression of a man who knew he was looking at something that wasn't there. It irritated him. His annoyance, once registered, would endure for the remainder of the day. He snatched his jacket and the rolled-up newspaper from the front seat of the car, slammed the door, punched the paper under his armpit and slung the jacket over his shoulder, and grumpily made his way down to the broad green doors of the entrance to The Ground.

Turnkey inhabited a small, cluttered dingy office right by—in fact part of—the entrance, and Hillingdale needed only two strides from the portals to place himself inside Turnkey's domain. Turnkey was there, at his table by the window but then Turnkey always was. Hillingdale supposed he should be thankful that something was going right.

“Good Morning, Turnkey.”

“Morning, Mr Hillingdale.”

With that, Hillingdale took the newspaper out from under his armpit and laid it carefully across the top of the time clock installed by the door, and might have been about to leave, but couldn't. The disorder weighed too heavily on his mind. Turnkey continued doing what he had been doing all along, which was checking his register of keys.

“Didn't see Harry's car in the car park,” Hillingdale said significantly.

“Not here yet,” Turnkey said, as if it didn't matter.

But it did matter. Hillingdale checked his watch against the time clock, just to be sure. “But Harry always gets here before me.”

“Not today.”

“How do you explain it, Turnkey.”

“He must be late,” Turnkey said self evidently.

“Late! Harry! Never been late once in twenty years.”

“Is today.”

“But there's so much to be done. It's a big day.”

“Was yesterday too.”

“Was what?”

“Late.”

“Oh yes.”

“And we had this conversation yesterday. When he was late.”

“Now that you mention it...”

“And then he arrived.”

“So he did.”

“So don't worry about it. He'll be here.”

“Still, it is strange.”

“I guess.”

“Never happened before. Except yesterday...”

“No. And anyway, Einstein's here,” Turnkey said, not looking up from his work.

“Where?” Hillingdale asked, in a panic, and seemed about to physically search the office.

“Only Harry ever knows where Einstein is,” Turnkey grinned. But Harry wasn't there.

Grimly, Hillingdale made his way across the tunnel and passed into the first opening, there following a dank narrow corridor that took him slightly upward and finally up a dozen concrete steps and out into daylight. He hurried downward then to the fence, where there was a gate that at this stage stood open, although later it would be firmly locked. He pushed through it and then paused, and stepped as gently as he could onto the still dew-wet grass.

Treading softly, perhaps even apologetically, he went forward a few paces and halted, always looking downward. He squatted on his haunches and reached to touch the blades of grass lightly with the runs of his fingers, caressingly. He smiled softly, warmly. Each blade of grass was exactly the same size as all around it, clipped evenly, neatly, immaculately—just the way that grass most liked to be clipped. It was so because Hillingdale saw to it that it was so.

He raised his head slightly to look farther, taking in a more general perspective of the greenness. He could see clearly the broad circular pattern caused by the mower completing one circuit clockwise, the next counterclockwise, then back again. So even. So regimented.

Hillingdale sighed and spoke with immense tenderness:

“Be calm, my beauties. I know you’ll do us proud...”

The blades of grass at his fingertips seemed to cringe with nervousness as he caressed them.

Around the very top of Olympic Stand was a great curved parapet—the highest point in The Ground that anyone could stand, and here Einstein was now standing. Before him was the most spectacular view of the city in all directions that was to be had anywhere and it always gave him pause. Right there, a kilometre away, the gleaming towers of the CBD gave way to the railway yards and then parklands that extended all the way to the point directly beneath his nose if he dared look straight down—vertigo insisted that he did not. But there, he saw, the crowd was already beginning to gather, even though the gates would not open for over two hours yet.

Turning around offered an very different view, that of the entirety of the public arena, field and terraces. The Ground, considered in its physical form rather than as the institution and ideals for which its name was more commonly synonymous, was totally circular. It was an immense squat cylinder lying flat side down with the general proportions of a discarded motorcar tyre except that it would have fitted a vehicle of Gargantuan dimensions since the external circular wall averaged six storeys high and it was about five hundred paces across the diameter.

The purity of the circular form could not have been more evident, its towering ramparts rearing abruptly out of the surrounding terrain as the clearest possible division between the within and the without. This was an effect enhanced by the broad region of thinly-treed parkland all around the exterior that served as a buffer zone against the grittiness of the city, persisting with an illusion of rural isolation when in fact it lay at the very heart of a thriving metropolis. It all seemed inward turning in the way that a range of mountains and their foothills and the plains beyond might all seem to pay homage to the fuming volcanic cone in their midst, for every aspect of the city and landscape appeared to be pointing pulling straining collapsing into the centre that was the great concentric rings of The Ground.

The circle of The Ground itself was clearly divided into four uneven demarcations that had plainly been constructed in quite different eras, each in

accordance with the architectural ideals of its time. Largest by far of the four segments was The Outer, occupying almost half the circumference with its grossly ponderous and ugly form. Huge, draughty and uncomfortable, The Outer was the domain of the poor, the vulgar rabble.

Adjoining the eastern edge of The Outer and taking up another third of the circumference was the place atop which he now stood, The Olympic Stand, no less immense in its three-tiered bulk but lacking the brooding crudeness of The Outer. The Olympic Stand was positioned on natural high ground that had provided an excellent vantage point in times before it was built and was for those who, if not at all wealthy, still considered it worthwhile to pay a little more for the privilege of being segregated from the thundering squalid mob.

Abutting The Outer to the west was the most recent segment with its modern sharp lines and excellent appointments, occupying a quarter of the circumference and called The Scoreboard Stand. Needless to say, atop it was mounted the huge scoreboard with such prominence that everyone could see it clearly, except of course, those in the area that bore its name, since for them it was above and behind their heads. This was the realm of those who could pay a little more still or else whose station in life enabled them to gain some slight advantage by being part of or related to or connected with or able to exert influence over persons or groups in some way involved with events in The Ground. In its depths were all the offices of the administrators and the facilities for the participants and the press and atop it was the scoreboard and as such it might have been regarded as the nerve centre of The Ground, but that would have been to mistake what The Ground was really all about. The true focal point of it all lay in the fourth segment.

Now anyone with the slightest mathematical ability will perceive that a quarter plus a third plus a half—being the allotted proportions of The Scoreboard Stand, The Olympic Stand and The Outer respectively—adds up to more than a whole which is quite impossible and indeed this was so. In fact they accumulated to slightly less—ten percent less—and it was into this comparatively minute part that was squeezed the fourth, smallest and most ancient section of The Ground—The Members' Stand.

Ungenerous perhaps, but the majority of people would have said it was more than enough.

The Members' Stand, an almost Gothic structure laced with wrought iron ornamentation, stood apart from the rest in every way, even to its walls which were made not of harsh concrete like the remainder of The Ground, but warm red brick, and if it was wedged firmly between the extremities of The Olympic Stand and The Scoreboard Stand, still even the physical connection seemed disdainful. For The Members' Stand, for all its ancientness, was the kingdom of the privileged and like all things small, comfortable, antique and exclusive, was strictly for the captains and kings of the city and the world—the chosen place of the masters. With its quaint intricate design and characterful appointments, it belonged to a long past era, and so, it might have been argued, did its traditional occupants in this age of Socialism and Classless Societies, but if the age was not theirs it seemed to matter little to them since with their great individual wealth and immense personal power, they were the owners of everything, including time itself.

But enough of stunning vistas—Einstein had recovered his breath from the long climb up to this topmost place with his heavy burden that now lay at his feet. All along the parapet of the Olympic Stand were twenty-four flagpoles spaced at even distance, right at the very edge of the long drop to the earth below. On each of these poles a flag was flown on special occasions like this—flags of the various sponsors of the test match. Mostly they were the nation's largest corporations, and Einstein had in the sack each flag and a list to ensure he got them in the right order. He pulled out the first, that of the airline that had flown the players here from various distant places, and attached it to the halyard. In half an hour, every one of those flags would have been hoisted—a task that Einstein would not have dared entrust to anyone else.

At one point when this operation was all but completed, had Einstein dared look down he would have seen a tall man of about fifty with greying curly hair looking back up at him, which would have gone a long way to relieving his troubled mind. The man was dressed in neat slacks and cardigan, handsome and elegant, the eternal smile of a charmer, and this was Harry Forth. Harry had sneaked into the car park and immediately began a circumnavigation of the outside of The Ground, striding along with a breezy air.

It was not for the exercise but a morning ritual which he always indulged and from it he learned a great deal. He passed by the painter's Michelangelo and Leonardo who were so intent on restoring a door render multi-coloured by vandals to its bland dark green that they failed to notice him. On the second level at Bay 20, he saw water cascading but when he listened could distinctly hear the voices of the three brothers who were the plumbers, raucously on the job.

Now, most of the way around the great circle, he saw the flag of the nation's largest mining company being hoisted to the top of its pole. That would be Einstein up there and this told him that all was going well without him since if there was trouble, Einstein would surely have more important things to do than be fooling around with flags.

Harry sat on one of the perimeter logs and watched, but that wasn't really the reason. He had found his circuit had run him out of breath, which couldn't be good. Take it easy the doctor had warned him. So he sat, and took it easy. But really, the reason was that just around the curve, just out of sight, was the Member's entrance, and it just would not do for him to arrive there out of breath.

So he waited, until his breathing was completely restored.

There remained two more flags to be flown, the most difficult by far. At either end of the Member's Stand, extending high above the roof with two flagpoles, and to these the national flag of the two contesting countries were to be flown. The Australian flag which attended the pole at the southern end was reputed to be the largest Aussie flag in the world, and this Einstein more dealt with. He spread it out over twenty rows of seats and attached the halyard, summoned up all his strength and began to heave. Not a lot happened at first.

On windy days with would have been impossible for him to haul the giant flag up there alone, but today was still and there was no one to help him anyway. He had to place himself way across the terrace such that the angle to the top of the pole was forty-five degrees, to ensure the massive ensign did not tangle on anything on the way up. Soon his strength prevailed and the get mass of fabric began to rise, and it went okay until it cleared the parapet whereby a wind he hadn't observed until now picked it up, and Einstein along

with it. Hoisted off his feet, he danced along the tops of the seats as he clung desperately to the halyard, like a fish on the line once it was dragged clear of the water. His shins took a pounding, his shoulders all but torn out of their sockets, but he wrapped the tailing edge around him, anchored his feet, and hauled desperately. Still, two more time, it picked him up and moved him to a place about thirty yards away.

“Stupid bloody colonial symbols,” he muttered, along with many expletives, but at last it reached the top and, gathering the tailing halyard about him, he ran to the place where he could tie it off.

Finally, completely exhausted, he sat on the nearest seat and lit a cigarette although for some time there was no air with which to smoke it. He glanced up at the flag and cursed it again.

It was a very silly flag, for it clearly declared Australia to be a colony of England which it no longer was. But white Australia was like that. That they stood up for the wrong national anthem and saluted the wrong flag was only typical of a carefree nation which really didn't care about politics. Einstein shook his head at their silliness, and battled to regain his breath. There was, after all, the equal sized Pommie flag to get up there yet.

Then God was with them.

He stepped into Turnkey's office with his snappy suit and polished cranium and bestowed his heavenly smile upon the little gatekeeper.

“Good morning, Turnkey,” he spoke.

“Morning, sir,” Turnkey replied and looked as busy as possible when in fact he had nothing to do.

God raised his newspaper from off the top of the time-clock and poked it under his arm. “Where's Harry?”

Turnkey could not avoid giving the only answer anyone ever gave to that question.

“Only Einstein ever knows where Harry is.”

And God, as always, fell for it.

“And where's Einstein?”

“Only Harry ever knows where Einstein is.”

THE GROUND

God was so completely unaware of all other matters than himself and his own importance that he failed to realise he had fallen for that joke yet again. Instead he nodded.

“Well, tell Harry I want to see him right away.”

God hurried on his way, sure that all was running perfectly and his confident administrative hand.