

Dirkby had acquired his information by intercepting a small package which Van Hogloot had sent to Pincher. The package contained an invitation to meet him at his home in the Needlelands, along with some instructions on how to get there and a small key. According to the instructions, Pincher was to travel to a town called Doorndorp, where he would find a bicycle waiting for him; the key would unlock the bicycle. Inside the bicycle's basket, concealed under a false bottom, there would be an envelope; and, inside the envelope, would be a map showing the way to the converted windmill where Van Hogloot lived. Following Van Hogloot's instructions to the letter, Snipper travelled to Doorndorp and took possession of the bicycle and the map.



As he rode out into the countryside, Snipper found that the wind was against him. Making progress was hard work, but the beauty of this blustery day more than made up for that. Small white clouds raced across the big open sky and, just ahead, a mass of tulips swayed in the wind. Keeping to the same canal towpath, Snipper passed through two villages and continued until he came to three black windmills, as described in Van Hogloot's letter. Here Snipper turned left onto a small wooden bridge. Then, having crossed the



canal, he carried on down a narrow country lane until eventually he came to a converted windmill surrounded by a white picket fence.

So this was Van Hogloot's home! It was charming and not particularly big - not an obvious choice for a criminal with international connections. But the instructions were clear enough, and Snipper was sure he had the right address. So he rang the bell and waited. The door was opened by Van Hogloot himself.

"Hallo, I'm Pincher," said Snipper, proffering his paw.

"Good. Please, komm in!"

They shook paws, and Snipper went inside.

"You would like shomm tea?"

"Yes, please... and, I wonder, would it be possible to have a slice of bread and jam to go with it? Only that bicycle ride has made me ravenous!"

Van Hogloot nodded and disappeared into the kitchen to put the kettle on. Meanwhile Snipper took advantage of his absence to look around the room. It was a homely space with several comfy chairs and a fire blazing in the hearth. Above the fireplace hung an oil painting; it was a copy of a famous portrait known as *The Hedgehog with the Pearl Earring*, by the great Needlelander painter, Furmeer. Snipper, knowing quite a lot about art, inspected the painting closely. It was a very good copy. If the original were not hanging up

in a public art gallery, Van Hogloot could undoubtedly have passed this off as the real thing; and, indeed, he could have sold it for a great deal more than it was worth.

"You Bristlish take milk and sugar in your tea - I am correct?" called Van Hogloot from the kitchen.

"Just milk for me, thanks."

Snipper heard the kettle coming to the boil and decided he had just enough time to peek into the adjoining room. He opened the door gently, so it would not be heard above the noise of the boiling water. It was a dining room, charmingly furnished in a manner reminiscent of a Furmeer painting. On its sturdy oak table stood an old-fashioned flagon and glass; and resting against one of the chairs was a lute. But the item which really caught his attention was the picture on the far wall.

It was a well-known painting called *The Concert*, also by Furmeer. In this case, however, the original had not been seen in public for years, for the simple reason that it had been stolen. Snipper felt sure that this was the original, and he was delighted. Here was some real hard evidence he could use against Van Hogloot. Until now, the Secret Service had possessed nothing which could be used against him in a court of law - shady though his banking activities undoubtedly were. Abandoning caution, Snipper



went over to the painting and examined it with his expert eye.

"What are you doing?"

It was Van Hogloot. He was standing in the doorway, with a gun in his paw.

"I was just admiring the painting," said Snipper airily, as though he had not noticed the gun. "It's very good, isn't it? In fact, so good I'd be willing to bet it's the original - though, as a rule, I'm not a betting hedgehog. That's worth quite a tidy sum - over a hundred million pounds, in fact. I hope you've got it insured?"

"Who are you?" snarled Van Hogloot.

"I work for the Bristlish Police - Art Squad."

Van Hogloot lifted the safety catch off his gun.

"I'd put that away if I were you," said Snipper. "You don't want to be charged for murder as well as theft, do you now?"

"Nobody vill hear de shots," retorted Van Hogloot. "Dere are no neighbours here."

"The police will hear - you don't imagine I just stumbled in here on my own, do you? I've been on your tail for some time. My visit is part of a joint operation between the Bristlish and Needlelander Police, and your home is surrounded."

Van Hogloot glanced out of the window. There was no sign of the police, but he would have expected them to be well hidden. That meant he only had this hedgehog's word for it, and in the criminal world a hedgehog's word was worth little.

"Prove it!" he said. "For all dat I am knowing, you may be a tief yourself."

"I have ID," said Snipper reaching for the inside pocket of his jacket.

"Not so fast, Mr... whoever you are!" said Van Hogloot fiercely. "If dat is a gun for which you are reaching, you will be dead before you will be able to use it."

Snipper smiled in acknowledgement of this point. Then, very slowly, he put his paw inside his jacket and pulled out a warrant card. Van Hogloot took it and read:

*POLICE OFFICER*

*Warrant No. 7991 Detective Inspector Hobjay-Dart.*

*This is the warrant and authority for executing the duties of their office.*

Attached to the warrant card was a photograph of Sniper in police uniform. Detective Inspector Hobjay-Dart was one of the many aliases he used in the course of his work as a secret agent. The knowledge of art which he used to support his every-day cover, with friends and family, also meant he had little difficulty in passing himself off as a detective from the Art Squad. Had he reached for another pocket, other documents supporting other identities were also available to him. Right now, however, Detective Inspector Hobjay-Dart suited him perfectly.

"I am not going to let you to arrest me," said Van Hogloot, with an air of desperation now.

"No, I don't suppose you are," said Sniper, "and, fortunately for you, I don't want to arrest you. You see, I've got bigger fish to fry. What I want from you is information."

Sniper saw Van Hogloot's paw relax its grip on the trigger.

"What sort of information?" asked Van Hogloot suspiciously.

"Why don't we discuss that over tea?" suggested Sniper with a smile, hoping now to put the discussion on a slightly more friendly footing. "Before it gets cold."

Van Hogloot frowned, puzzled that this police officer should be thinking of tea at a time like this. But the Bristlish were well known for their obsession with tea drinking, so perhaps this was just normal behaviour. Returning to the sitting room, Van Hogloot put away his gun and poured the tea. Sniper followed and helped himself to a cup. Then, after adding a little milk and stirring it for a few seconds, he produced a photograph of Mr E.

"I need to find this hedgehog," he said, passing the photograph to Van Hogloot, before taking a seat. "I believe he's a client of yours."

"Maybe he is; maybe he is not," said Van Hogloot, shiftily.

"You do know that you're going to have to do a lot better than that, don't you?" said Sniper. He tried to speak in as friendly a manner as possible.

"I am sorry, I cannot help you," insisted Van Hogloot. He grabbed his tea cup, which had started to clatter in its saucer; Sniper noticed his paws were shaking. "If my clients vill find out I am informing about dem, I am - how do you say? - a dead hedgehog... I vould be better off in prison."

"Not if we arrest your client first," said Sniper.

"But vill you? Dat may be your plan but you may fail. De risk is too big."



Snipper did not respond immediately. He gave his tea a vigorous stir. Then he got up and walked over to the window to think. Van Hogloot was clearly very frightened, and it was going to take more than the threat of prison to get him to talk. Gazing out of the window at the dead-flat landscape, Snipper reflected that the Needlelands was one of the lowest countries in the world - with much of it lying below the current sea level. If Mr E and Gotha-Höhhog succeeded in raising the sea by seven metres, two thirds of the country would end up under water - including Van Hogloot's windmill. It was therefore ironic that Van Hogloot should be the banker for this unholy project. It also seemed very unlikely that he would ever have got involved with Mr E and Gotha-Höhhog had he known what they were up to.

Snipper turned round and looked Van Hogloot directly in the eye. "I won't pretend it's without risk," he admitted, "though your identity as the source of this information will, naturally, be a closely guarded secret. However, if you don't help me, it's a dead certainty you'll go to prison; and when - eventually - you come out, you'll find your home has been swept away along with much of the rest of your country... that is, assuming you survive that long."

"What do you mean?" responded Van Hogloot sharply.

"This hedgehog," said Snipper, tapping the photograph of Mr E with a claw, "and his chums are plotting to raise the sea level by

seven metres. As I'm sure you don't need me to tell you, the Needlelands would experience the worst floods in its history should the plot succeed. Your property and the surrounding countryside would all be underwater... As," he added pointedly, "would many of the prisons be, too."

Van Hogloot stared at Snipper, aghast at the very thought of his home consigned to the waves forever. But should he believe him? The claim was surely preposterous. And why would the Art Squad be investigating such a plot anyway?

"You said you vere from de Art Sqvad," said Van Hogloot, and there was a note of challenge in his voice. "Vhat has any of dis to do vid *you*?"

"Nothing," said Snipper. "Nothing at all. Or so I thought. Until this week, in fact, I knew nothing of the plot. I was hot on the trail of the picture you stole; but yesterday I was called in by my boss. He filled me in on the bigger picture. He wasn't able to explain the reason for the plot - I don't think he knew - but no doubt there's some sort of profit to be made out of it. What he did tell me was that my help was needed to track down the ring-leaders' banker. He also told me in no uncertain terms that I would have to give up any idea of arresting you - *if* you agreed to spill the beans. I won't say I was happy about it - not after all those months of painstaking investigation... but we all have to consider the greater good every now and then, don't we?"

It was now Van Hogloot's turn to look Snipper directly in the eye. He considered the explanation for a minute. It appeared to make sense. At the very least, something had to be afoot that was considerably more serious than the theft of a one hundred million pound painting. Otherwise, Hobjay-Dart would surely have arrested him straight away. After all, he had had the advantage of surprise, and the place was surrounded.

Van Hogloot considered his options. Not co-operating meant arrest at best; at worst - if the police officer was telling the truth - his home and much of his beloved country would be destroyed. Co-operating, on the other hand, meant freedom from prosecution for theft; and, judging by the police officer's silence on the matter, there was no hard evidence which could put him away for his financial activities. But what if it got out that he was talking to the police? It was no good asking for police protection. He might just as well put

up a sign declaring that he was a police informer! But he could always go away somewhere... just until this all blew over.

"All right... yes, I know dis hedgehog," said Van Hogloot, pawing the photograph. "But, if I tell you vhat you vant to know, I shall be forced to go away for a time. I vill need money."

Snipper knew very well that the one thing Van Hogloot did not lack was money, but this was no time to argue. "One thousand pounds," he said firmly, as though he would not make another offer.

"Dat vill hardly get me very far!" protested Van Hogloot. "Dis hedgehog whom you are seeking vill be a very dangerous enemy. If I betray him, I vill feel safe only when I am on de far side of de world... My ticket alone vill cost me several tousand pounds... and den I must pay for an hotel and a car. I could not survive for long on less dan twenty tousand."

"Done," said Snipper, who felt it was money well spent with the future of the world at stake. "The money will be in your account tonight. Now, how about that name?"

"His name is Heer Bernaald," said Van Hogloot at last. "I have his business card - here, take it. So, is dat all you vant? You vill go now?"

"That's all for now," said Snipper, taking the card.

"So, I can keep de painting?"

Snipper looked at Van Hogloot in faint surprise. He had very nearly forgotten all about the painting; but there was no way that Detective Inspector Hobjay-Dart would have walked out empty pawed. So he took the painting off the wall and made Van Hogloot wrap it up for him. Then he popped it on his bicycle and left.

Cycling away from the windmill, Snipper pedalled fast. It would not take Van Hogloot long to realize there was no police back-up - no officers hiding in the shrubbery outside his windmill. When, however, Snipper had at last put enough distance between himself and the windmill, he got off his bike and, sitting down on a grassy bank, read the card.

*Heer Bernaald, Scherpstraat 12, 1000NE Hogeveen, Naalderland.*

So here was yet another identity for Mr E - but none so far began with the letter E. Snipper wondered how on earth he would ever find out his real identity. Still, at last he had an address for his adversary. Taking out his smartphone, he had a look at a map of the



Needlelands. The town of Hogeveen lay to the north - not far away, but it was worth checking the address with H.Q. before going there. So he sent the details to Pinmoney and waited for her reply. It would do no harm to sit there for a bit, watching the boat sails gracefully gliding along the nearby canals. On a bright sunny day like today, a flat landscape like this came into its own. It was awful to think of it being swallowed up by the sea. He frowned at this thought and opened up Mr E's maps: as he had suspected, a seven metre rise in the sea level would leave Doordorp well and truly under water; Hogeveen, however, would become a coastal town.



Snipper's phone beeped: it was Pinmoney with the information he had asked for. The Hogeveen address was a hotel; Heer Bernaald was its owner. He never visited but had his post forwarded to an address in Scrapejavik; this was the capital city of Icepeak, the island which Scratch had recently visited. Pinmoney had already run some checks on the Scrapejavik address. It was a small office, said her email, run by a single hedgehog who was apparently kept very busy. The local police reported that the office received a lot of visitors and a steady stream of deliveries. In view of this latest information, Snipper decided that Mr E was just using the Hogeveen address to cover his tracks. The office in Icepeak sounded much

more interesting. He emailed Pinmoney back, asking her to book him a flight to Scrapejavik.