

Finale

They slept all morning -- again, in separate rooms -- and then Madison wrote a letter containing everything he knew about the Nazis' plans. He added only one fabrication to an otherwise accurate document. St.-Germain's occult machine, he claimed, would be complete and operational on Christmas Eve at midnight, and would have done its job by morning. He hoped that everyone who received the letter would raid Kidron at midnight on December 24th, three days away.

He mailed one signed copy to Miss Douglas-Hume of the Foreign Office. Another went to a random street address in Batei-Ungarn, where Madison assumed that any resident would give it to the Irgun. Marta mailed a copy to Starobin, explaining that the priceless information contained therein was a token of her revived loyalty to the Soviet Union. She didn't expect the Colonel to believe her completely, but he wouldn't be able to resist investigating Kidron on Christmas Eve.

Madison sent an unsigned duplicate to the chief intelligence officer of Hagganah. Just to be on the safe side, he telegraphed a translation to the French colonial authorities in Damascus. He also sent a copy to the Franciscan Monetary of Terra-Sancta in Jerusalem. Although the Franciscans were peaceful and meek, they were the official Christian custodians of the Holy Land, and they could be trusted to pass important information to the Vatican, which had less peaceable departments. Finally, Madison enclosed a copy with his thank-you letter to Yousef Uweiwi, expecting the good doctor to give the note to Palestinian nationalists. In all, Madison hoped, seven groups would raid the Nazi operation on Christmas Eve. He and Marta would form the eighth.

Marta had procured a hand gun from some unnamed source, probably the Armenian authorities. She and Madison also collected spelunking equipment in case they had to enter an underground complex. Otherwise, they rested and tended their injuries as Christmas Eve approached.

December 24 was a chilly, clear day. Late in the afternoon, they walked into Kidron, disguised once more as Armenian clergy. The valley was full of Christian pilgrims, because a major road to Bethlehem began there. Most walked determinedly southward, but

a few seemed happy to wander in the valley itself. Madison wondered whether any of these alleged Catholic monks and Episcopal priests were really Jewish guerrillas or Communist agents, British secret policemen or French spies. Examining three Franciscans who loitered on the Shiloah Road, he quoted to himself: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches toward Bethlehem?"

Marta had found an obelisk-shaped cenotaph that was surrounded by cypresses. It stood halfway up the Mount of Olives, with a clear view of Temple Mount and the Golden Gate to the west. She and Madison wandered into the grove behind it, looking like curious tourists, but they did not emerge until the sun had set over Jerusalem. In the clear desert air, darkness came abruptly, and there was no artificial light in Kidron. Madison and Marta snuck into the open and lay on a grassy monument with a cliff at their backs, trusting their dark costumes to keep them hidden.

Was it his imagination, or were many other eyes trained on the area below the Golden Gate? Jehosaphat was a spooky place, but Madison was more concerned about live soldiers than departed spirits. Whenever he heard something rustle, his whole body tensed. An owl swooped down from the cypress nearby to slaughter a mouse, and Madison nearly had a heart attack. But the only human beings in the valley were a few tardy pilgrims, defying police orders by walking to Bethlehem after dark. By eleven o'clock, as Midnight Mass in Manger Square was about to begin, all was quiet in Kidron.

Marta tapped Madison on the shoulder and pointed to the Hagganah ambulance, which again purred along the Shiloah Road, its headlights off. It stopped at the expected spot below the Golden Gate, and a group of commandos climbed down. Other men materialized at the side of the road, and the nightly exchange began. But just as the ambulance doors closed behind the last soldier, Madison heard the "phut-phut-phut" of silenced gunfire. Two of the newly arrived Germans screamed and fell to the ground. The rest dove for cover and returned fire, apparently aiming at random. At the sound of their unsilenced guns, the ambulance stopped and the remaining commandos poured out, dispersing and taking cover expertly.

The ensuing firefight was difficult to follow in the darkness.

In fact, Madison couldn't see the Germans' attackers at all -- only the flashes of light from their gun barrels. But he had the impression that the ambushers were hidden on the Mount of Olives, while the Germans lay on the Temple Mount side of Kidron Valley. Orange tracer bullets flew back and forth across Shiloah Road.

After a few minutes of this, he heard sirens from Dung Gate. A pair of police cars pulled into sight. They were immediately hit from both sides of the road, bullets smashing the windshields and puncturing the doors. Just one uniformed officer managed to climb out, rolling to the side of the road.

Marta pointed to the Old City walls. Near the southeast corner of Temple Mount, a rope had been hung. Several men in billowing capes and skullcaps were descending, hand over hand. They dropped from the bottom of the rope onto the hillside, and then disappeared into the darkness.

"What shall we do?" Madison whispered.

"Let's wait and let these chaps do our work for us."

Where the police cars had appeared a few minutes earlier, there now came two armored cars with the Union Jack painted on their hoods. They screeched to a halt and men filed out, taking cover as a machine gun on the car's roof raked the lower valley. There were flashes of light in every direction: Madison thought of fireflies on a Massachusetts summer evening.

A searchlight beam emerged from the top of the armored car, sweeping the hillside beneath Temple Mount. When it caught the leg of a running man, automatic weapons erupted from several directions and he went down. The light lingered on him long enough to show that he was a European dressed in civilian clothes, carrying a machine pistol.

"Where did he come from?" Madison whispered.

"Sssh."

A grenade exploded near the armored car; its shrapnel knocked the searchlight out. There was a muffled scream across the valley, and Madison imagined a knife at someone's throat, a gloved hand over the victim's mouth. Madison's own throat was very dry.

The gunfire was becoming sporadic. Marta led Madison down the hillside toward Temple Mount. They crept nearly doubled over, slipping from rock to rock. Intermittent gunshots

made Madison's shoulders hunch, and he ducked every time he heard a bullet's whine. But you never heard the one that hit you, he told himself.

He and Marta crept close to the armored cars, passing several corpses and one moaning, wounded soldier. They heard men whispering in Australian accents.

"Is this an ambush, d'you think? We could still clear out."

"No, it's just that we have some competition. Let's get that light working so we can find where all these Hun are coming from."

Across the street, two men in robes appeared, clutching automatic weapons. They opened fire, hitting one of the Australians, but the other managed to climb inside his car and fire the machine gun back. The men in Arab costumes vanished, and after a few minutes, the searchlight came back on. Its beam swept Temple Mount until it illuminated a pile of bodies near a black cave. A stone had been rolled aside to reveal the mouth.

Madison heard, "Allons-y! J'ai vu la caverne allemande!"

Someone fired at the armored car until the light was extinguished for a second time. Meanwhile, there was a general scramble toward the cave. Madison saw shadowy figures heading in that direction from several points, some wearing the broad hats of British infantrymen.

He and Marta approached until they could see tommies near the cave mouth. The soldiers fell to their stomachs as they neared the pile of bodies.

"Don't use grenades," someone barked, in an English accent. "We want to preserve what's inside."

Out of the cave ran three men and a woman in Western dress. The tommies opened fire, and the newcomers shot back. Madison saw that the men in this group wore yarmelkes. "Where did *they* come from?" an Australian voice asked.

Marta and Madison ducked behind a tombstone as heavy fire began all around the cave. But nothing seemed to emerge from its mouth. Someone shouted, "Right, lads, in we go then!" The tommies scrambled to their feet and charged inside, bayonets at the ready.

Everyone else in the valley stopped shooting, presumably content to wait for the British to re-emerge. In the silence, Madison

was able to feel and think once more. He discovered that he was shivering, and he smelled acrid gunsmoke drifting in the chill wind.

The English soldiers reappeared after a period that seemed like hours, although it might have been only five minutes. They walked confidently out, and one told the other: "Well, the Jews must have found a back way in. They certainly did a job on those Huns."

Someone fired three times with a heavy-caliber rifle, bringing down one of the Englishmen. The others hit the ground and wriggled out of the cave, firing back. Marta said, "It's time for us to go in."

She and Madison climbed higher on the hillside, then crawled back toward the top of the cave mouth. There was a fierce firefight in progress below them, with British soldiers hiding behind slain Nazis. Marta jumped lightly to the ground and disappeared into the cave. A bullet whistled harmlessly over her head. Madison followed her.

They were in a long corridor, rough-hewn, unilluminated, and filled with bodies. Even though their eyes had long ago adjusted to the night, they could barely see where they were going.

Madison said, "Flashlight?"

Marta whispered, "Not on your life. If there's anyone alive in here, a torch would be fatal."

So they inched deeper into the cave, Madison keeping a hand on Marta's shoulder. They tested each step cautiously before taking it, but the only obstacle was an occasional corpse.

They could hear a voice ahead, very faintly at first. It seemed monotonous, untroubled by the violence. They drew closer, but Madison still couldn't make out what was being said.

There was a very dim light in the distance. As they approached, Madison saw that it was a bright slit on the ground. They reached a door and Marta kicked it open, her revolver drawn.

Blinking, they found themselves in a square room, carved directly out of the rock. Six or seven dead men lay inside, mostly Germans with swastika armbands, although there was also a guerrilla with a yarmelke. In the light, Madison realized that he and Marta still wore Armenian clerical garb. He saw only one piece of furniture, a table, on which a radio had been set. It was the source

of the voice that they had heard in the hall. In calm, measured, deliberate tones, it was saying: "Ram. Sto. Alm. Ohm. Tha. Carm. Sko. Al. Ang. Dot. Scam" -- and so on, endlessly.

Marta had closed the door behind her. She pointed to a wire that ran from the radio to a tiny hole in the baseboard. They saw no opening other than the door that they had entered, but when Marta knocked on the back wall, she produced a hollow sound.

"I'll bet anything," Madison whispered, "that St.-Germain's machine is in there."

"How do we get to it?"

"I don't know, and we don't have much time. Someone's going to walk up that hall any minute."

The radio said, "Oo. Sko. Crat. Slad. Hanx. Plek. Qua. Mef. Zed."

Marta found a light switch and turned it off, completely blackening the room. "If the door opens," she said, "I'll have a nasty surprise for whoever arrives."

"All right, but what should we do, besides waiting to ambush some poor limeys or frogs?"

"I'm *thinking*. What is that machine saying?"

"Not completely random phonemes," said Madison.

"Pardon?"

The radio said, "Cra. Oot. Pag. Lop. Jim. Gig. Alb. Zoy. Yil."

"Did you hear that?" Marta whispered.

"What?" Madison thought that she had detected some pattern in the gibberish, but she explained: "There's someone above us."

Over the sound of the radio, Madison could barely discern a light patting sound: footsteps that disappeared into the distance. Marta flipped on the light, temporarily blinding him. Through his tears, he saw a trap door in the ceiling.

They set the table under the trap door. Marta climbed first, assisted by the taller Madison. Just as he pulled his feet up, the main door flew open into the room below.

Marta fired a few rounds with her pistol, hitting a man who wore a red cummerbund around his white cape and carried a scimitar. She shot the light out; then they slid the trapdoor closed and began crawling into total darkness. They felt a stone floor below, but otherwise they had no idea what surrounded them.

"Take a chance with the flashlight," said Madison.

Marta found it in her bag and switched it on. The beam revealed stone walls on either side, for they were in another corridor. They saw that the trapdoor behind them could be closed by rolling a boulder over it. Once they'd done this, they walked uphill, presumably deeper into Temple Mount.

The hallway forked; they took the right path. After a few minutes, they heard the same voice as before. Marta switched off her flashlight when she saw another bright slit near the floor. She kicked the door open, gun in hand.

There was no one inside this room, but it did contain a great deal of machinery. The first object that Madison saw was an old piece of metal furniture, painted black and gold, with the kind of curved iron legs that might support a Victorian sewing machine. The upper part of this apparatus looked like a row of office pigeonholes, filled with neatly stacked cards. The lower part contained wheels and spokes and an electric motor. Gold letters announced: "The International Business Machines Corporation."

"What is this?" Marta asked.

"It's a punch-card sorter." Madison removed a card and showed her that several square holes had been cut at points in the printed grid. "You can use it to sort data according to various criteria."

At one end of the sorter, the cards fell onto a conveyor belt made of modern, utilitarian components. They passed from there into a large machine that consisted mainly of vacuum tubes soldered onto narrow shelves. An impenetrable tangle of wires connected the tubes. One set of thick cables emerged from this device and ran to a steel bookcase, on which sat rows of commercial tape recorders: perhaps fifty in all. Madison saw that these machines were busy clicking on and off, seemingly at random. Meanwhile, a cathedral-style radio intoned the words that the recorders produced: "Tra. Grag. Nun. Proy. Brald. Ulk. Skla."

Once read, the cards returned to the sorter, entering on the opposite side from which they had left.

"What's going on here?" Marta asked.

Madison looked at a punch card on the conveyor belt and said, "I'll tell you, but it'll take me a minute."

"Go ahead."

"All right. When God made the world, it was composed of basic elements, ordered perfectly according to His providential plan. Each element had a corresponding word; and if you uttered them all in the correct order, it would make God's Name. Thus God and Creation were as one. But how many elements were there? For example, does each of your teeth have its own name, since God made them all? Or is there one name for 'teeth' in general? Perhaps all matter has a single name. We don't know."

"Get on with it," said Marta.

"All right. We do know that in every mystical tradition, certain sounds have been discovered that have magical potency. These must be examples of true names; and the objects or ideas that they control must be basic elements. Evidently, St.-Germain believes that he has collected every one of these words, so he possesses God's Name."

"But in the wrong order?" Marta said.

"Exactly, which is why he bought a machine from IBM. Every sign can be described by coordinates that show its place within a three-dimensional logical space. Each sign can also be assigned a *sound*, just as written words correspond to spoken ones. St.-Germain has discovered that one method for turning shapes into numbers, and numbers into sounds, produces accurate results in *all* mystical systems. For instance, if you turn gypsy dance steps into numbers, you can generate words that make sense in Romany; and the same algorithm also turns Hebrew words into Hebrew sounds. Therefore, all these signs belong to one logical space."

Marta said, "So, he has loaded the coordinates for these basic words into a card sorter --"

"Right, which is randomly shuffling them and enunciating the sounds that result."

"Until what happens?" Marta asked.

"Until the heavens and earth shake, and the sun and the moon are darkened."

"Won't St.-Germain be destroyed, if he summons God to the Temple?" Her voice was slightly hushed, and she regarded the machinery with respect.

"Presumably, he has thought that through," Madison said. "Perhaps he isn't nearby at the moment. He may be listening to the machine from somewhere safely distant. When Temple Mount goes

up in smoke, he'll know that he's found God's Name, which he can then use for potent necromancy."

"We need to destroy the whole mechanism immediately," Marta said.

"Can't I study it first? It's absolutely fascinating."

Marta thought. "All right. Take this for protection." She handed him her pistol. "I'll see what else is around. I'll be back in a little while."

Madison started to look at punch cards, absorbed by the data that they contained. After a while, the cards stopped passing along the conveyor belt and collected in the sorter. This part of the apparatus then shook into action, shuffling like a superhuman casino dealer. The sorting continued for about three minutes, after which the conveyor belts went back into action and the voice resumed its intonations. Madison amused himself by picking cards out of the sorter and feeding them into the audio machine. He was busy playing with a whole stack when he heard steps in the hall. He slipped behind the vacuum-tube array, grabbing a few more punch cards as he went.

The door opened and in stepped two men. One had high cheekbones and pale skin; the other wore his hair in a ponytail.

"How much longer?" Starobin rasped. His voice was low and almost unnatural -- painful sounding.

"It's all a matter of probability," said St.-Germain. "Every time the machine speaks nonsense, the chance of a correct answer increases the next time. It's been running for six days, so by now the odds are quite good."

"Are we safe here?"

"We should be. I was expecting all this chaos. After all, it was prophesied that a hostile army would come unto Jehosaphat. 'They shall run like mighty men; they shall climb the wall like men of war; and they shall march every one on his ways. ... The appearance of them is as the appearance of horses; and as horsemen, so shall they run.'"

"Stop that nonsense," Starobin hissed. "Will anyone find this room?"

"I don't think so -- at least, not before the inverted Divine Name is spoken. We've closed the Temple entrance, and there's a boulder on the trapdoor."

"Don't be so sure." Madison emerged with a gun in his hand.

"Well, you again," said St.-Germain, as he and Starobin reached for their holsters.

"Hands in the air," Madison commanded.

The machine said, "Tho. Cra. Blat. Old. Frung. Chi. Smoll. Grag."

St.-Germain approached Madison slowly. He said, "I have a theory about you, Dr. Brown. A Quaker, aren't you? A bleeding-heart pacifist. Are you really going to shoot a man dead? Inside the walls of God's own Temple?"

Madison held his gun, trembling. St.-Germain reached out and grasped the barrel, his eyes focused on Madison like a snake charmer's. He yanked the gun away.

Both Starobin and St.-Germain now had their revolvers pointed at Madison's head. He tore up the punch cards that he'd been holding. The Count said, "What are you doing?"

"Destroying some of your data."

The machine said, "Fly. Scad. Wed. Muck. Dread. Sink. End. Die."

St.-Germain blinked. He said, "Tell me the numbers on the cards you just ruined."

"No," said Madison, "I don't think I will."

St.-Germain approached. "Then I will torture you," he said.

Madison raised his left hand, in which he grasped an electric cord. "One step closer, and I'll pull the plug. Your vacuum tubes have been painstakingly programmed with algorithms, am I right? Would you like me to erase the electronic memory?"

"Pull it, and I'll shoot," said St.-Germain.

Madison now faced two gun barrels, a power cord in his hand. As the electrons rushed through the wire, the machine said, "Slip. Out. Ring. Took. Call. Sing. Fall."

Madison recognized the voice that had recorded all these phonemes: it was St.-Germain's.

"Trying to invert God's Name, are you?" Madison asked.

"Something like that."

"You know, the Lord isn't a jinni in a bottle. You can't fool an omniscient, omnipotent deity into serving you, just by saying the right words in the right place."

"We'll see about that."

"You *can* make Him angry."

The door kicked open and Marta stood in the opening, pointing a German machine pistol at the Count. She had pulled her nun's hood down around her shoulders, but she still wore the black cape. St.-Germain hardly flinched. In a calm voice -- not unlike the machine's -- he said, "Shoot one of us, and the other will kill your boyfriend."

Starobin slowly turned his pistol toward Marta.

She said, "If you shoot me, I'll kill the German."

"I'm not sure that I care about that." Starobin's voice emerged from somewhere deep in his damaged throat.

"You'd better," said St.-Germain. "I'm the only one who knows what to do when the sky starts flaming."

Madison told the Count, "If you let Starobin shoot Marta, I'll pull the plug. Then all your work will be ruined."

Marta and the Soviet officer each focussed on the other's trigger. It was hot in the room; everyone poured sweat.

Madison spoke in unison with the machine: "Droll. Few. Tuck. Rot."

"How is he doing that?" Starobin asked, directing his question to no one in particular.

"I know the pattern," said Madison. "And I know what was omitted when I pulled those three cards. Do you want me to complete the Divine Name? Those who are present when it's done had better be righteous in the eyes of the Lord."

Starobin said to St. Germain, "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" The two men stood almost back to back, their guns pointed in opposite directions.

"You'd better trust your friend," Madison said. "He's taking an awful chance with this act of sacrilege."

"Maybe we ought to stop the machine," the Russian hissed.

"Not on your life," said St.-Germain.

Madison addressed Starobin. "If God's Name is spoken in this room, there isn't a chance that *you'll* pull through. Marta and I are fairly righteous people, I hope; and the Count obviously has a plan for himself. But you'll be heading straight to Hell, you godless Communist. 'For the day of the LORD is great and very terrible, and who shall abide it?'"

"He's lying," said St.-Germain. "The machine is programmed to *invert* God's Name. The backward version will summon Satan and give us unlimited power, as long as we continue to commit blasphemous deeds."

"I'd say the odds are about equal," Madison observed. "The Name could come out backwards, or it could come out right."

"Is this true?" Starobin asked.

"Not at all," said St. Germain. "I mathematically eliminated any chance that we'd hear the true Name."

"You may have," said Madison, "but then I started fooling around with your sorter."

"He's bluffing," St.-Germain muttered, a little uneasily.

Marta said, "Alexei Stefanovich, the only way to stop this mad Nazi is to shoot him now. Madison can't pull the cord without losing his life."

"Remember what I promised you, Starobin," said the Count, his eye twitching away from Madison for an instant. "Together, you and I will rule the New Order of Assassins."

"Why don't *you* shoot him," Starobin hissed to Marta. "Then the three of us can use the cards any way we want."

St.-Germain turned suddenly toward Starobin. Immediately, there was deafening gunfire, a brutal roar. Madison involuntarily sat down, having pulled the power cord. When he struggled to his feet, the Nazi and the Russian lay bleeding on the floor. Madison peered around the IBM machine in search of Marta. She rose with her gun at her side, grinning.

"Well done," she said. "They took care of each other."

Once Madison could speak again, he asked, "How do we get out of here?"

"There's a back entrance that takes you into the basement of the Dome of the Rock. That's where the Irgun guerrillas entered: they must know the plan of the Temple's foundation. Let's burn these cards and leave."

Madison looked at the piles of data. "Do we have to destroy them?" he asked. "They contain material of enormous scholarly value. Linguistics, philosophy, and comparative religion may never be the same again. There are twenty brilliant careers in those cards."

"Too dangerous," Marta said. "They can be used for evil

purposes.”

“We could donate them to a responsible institution of higher learning.”

“I believe,” said Marta, “that I’d rather entrust them to any spy service than to Harvard, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“The machine may be harmless. We have no way of knowing whether it would actually work.”

“But it might.”

“I just can’t bring myself to erase the scholarly find of the century,” Madison said, mournfully and a little stubbornly.

“In that case,” said Marta, “I may have another idea.”

A few weeks later, in the streets of the American Colony and down in Bethlehem, Arab peddlers began selling postcards for a farthing instead of the usual penny. They were nice cards, sepia photographs of the Wailing Wall, the Holy Sepulchre, and the Dome of the Rock -- something for everyone. Although slightly flawed, their price was a bargain, and they had pretty much disappeared from the peddlers’ stalls before Easter. Tourists mailed them home or pasted them in scrapbooks, and pilgrims hung them over humble doors to prove that they’d reached the Holy Land. A few were surrounded by votive candles, the object of meditation and prayer.

In this way, the cards dispersed from Buenos Aires to Manila, from Adis Ababa to Madison Avenue. Visitors used them to describe bad hotels and upset stomachs, desert vistas and religious epiphanies. Refugees lamented their lost homelands, travelers consoled distant families, lovers planned secret assignations, spies conversed in code, and toddlers drew cheerful pictures with blunt crayons. Whatever message the cards were *supposed* to convey, their recipients often drew different conclusions. Some who had been left behind interpreted routine phrases (“wish you were here,” “thinking of you”) as gratuitous insults, while others took the same formulas as startling confessions of tender love.

With all these human stories to cope with, hardly anyone stopped to interpret the three square holes that marred the surface of each card. Most people who noticed them at all assumed that they’d been punched accidentally by the sorting machines of the

Royal Mail. Just a few recipients held them to the sky, wondering whether the pattern was as random as it appeared, or whether sunlight was *meant* to shine just that way on the shrine that they revered. Thus, as soon as the original meaning of the cards was obliterated by their dispersal, people began to imbue them again with significance both personal and cosmic.

Meanwhile, an old xebec passed through Suez and into the Red Sea, leaving behind a low dusty shore and scattered palms. The skipper had relinquished his cedar cabin to a new friend, an American with a voyage-worth of yarns to contribute to his store. The captain was a pious man who wouldn't normally allow a passenger to bunk with a young woman; but this couple swore they had been married at Port Said just before the ship entered the Canal. From the way they behaved, he tended to believe them. Their ultimate destination was as uncertain as his ship's -- and Mehemet had been plying the ports between Malta and Singapore for more decades than he could count. But they were content to ride with him for the while, paying their way and sailing wherever the trade routes led them.