

On the fourth day, Elphinstone comes into my office with his driver. Drivers are more body-guards than anything else. Even Whitehall officials need them these days. I am reading the 'Times & Sun' at which Elphinstone sniffs before sitting down. I'll have to look him up and see his background. You bet it's thousands of acres, Georgian house in Chelsea, City directorships, anti-Europe since way back, and on the board of the Civil Service Outplacement Agency. His type are back since Labour finally went down the pan. He crosses one Savile Row leg over the other and says,

"Have you drawn up a list of the assets we might dispose of?"

"Sure." I pass him my list.

"H'm," he says and follows it with a few more 'h'm's'. Then,

"I think we'll have to be a shade more creative than this, you know. For a start, ships, steel, computers, aircraft, textiles, public utilities, publishing, banking, motor-cars and films have all gone. I'm surprised you listed those."

"It's a list of everything a country might have. I developed a complete list so we don't miss anything. Of course, I know those have gone."

"I'm glad to hear it. I hope there is something left for you to work on," he says sardonically. Then, looking at his watch. "I have fifteen minutes. Tell me about your success with the disposal of the Falkland Isles. I'm interested to hear the details."

I tell him that some time ago, after the small war down there, the government gave them a new airport, a hospital, a deep-water jetty, a water filtration plant, a protected fishing zone and new homes and gardens.

"I seem to remember a golf course," murmurs Elphinstone.

"You're right. And they also got big military protection in case the Argies came back again. Everything courtesy of the British tax-payer. But the locals weren't happy. They still wanted everything like it was in the good old days. When they all had jobs with big titles."

"How do you mean exactly?"

"The Head of this, the Chief of that, the Minister for whatever."

"Ah yes. Of course. The Islands had the full panoply of a Colonial Government. Do continue."

"Unbelievable. For two thousand people, they had a Treasury, a Government Printing Office, Posts & Telecommunications, Customs, Central Supply Stores, Courts of Justice, an Air Service, Police, Fire Brigade, Attorney General, and Departments of Agriculture, Education, Harbour, Medical, Meteorological, and Public Works. It's amazing they didn't have a Ministry for their King penguins. And each of these 'Colonial Offices' had a Chief and a Deputy and a Minutes Secretary and so on down the line. Because all that changed and they didn't have their tin-pot jobs and titles anymore, they were continuously complaining to London. The place was costing a ton of money so my firm was sent down there to sort it out and organise offers the Islanders couldn't refuse. And then dispose of the place."

"And you did remarkably well, I believe."

"Well, my boss got sick - lamb didn't agree with him. So I got my big chance."

"Indeed. And what about the Islanders?" asks Elphinstone not looking particularly concerned. "How did they feel about having to leave their homeland and then see it sold off?"

“They couldn’t wait to pocket the loot and get away. The only thing keeping the young ones there was the hope of finding oil and making a mountain of money. But that didn’t work out. So New Zealand and a big cash incentive looked great. And there I was. In charge, but with the government chasing me to get things done, the Islanders wanting to know when they could get their money and scam and Members of Parliament turning up in plane-loads on fact-finding missions. A bit late but then the trip was a freebie and it’s amazing where an M.P. will go for a free outing. The Army unit out there, which always had to receive them with a Guard of Honour, for Pete’s sake, reckoned there were four types of visitor. ‘Decent and bright. Decent and not so bright. Not so decent and not so bright. Nasty and very bright.’ Anyone who favoured the Argies was put in category three. Future Ministers in category four.”

Elphinstone smiles. He must have heard it before. His portapad beeps and the driver hands it to him.

“Lucius Elphinstone here.” Lucius? Where did his folks find that one?

“Good morning, Prime Minister. Yes, I’m with Briggs. We’re reviewing the asset list at this moment. Of course. Of course.” The driver takes back the Portapad.

“The Prime Minister asks me to tell you he is expecting rapid progress. An early realisation of income would be timely.”

“No problem. Really. No problem.” He gives me a calculating stare.

“To revert to the disposal of the Falklands. How did you divide up the spoils, as it were?”

“It wasn’t all that difficult. The biggest industry in the world is tourism. So I divided everything up into tourist attractions. First, there was the wild life. There were killer whales, leopard seals, elephant seals, sea lions, jackass penguins - you name it. And the star attraction, the 8 foot wing-span albatross. Not to mention icebergs and tabular bergs the size of Belgium. I sold the lot to Hitachi Disney. Exploitation rights in perpetuity but the land leasehold. The government wanted to keep this remaining piece of Empire as a pink bit on the map. Then I pitched the town - lock, stock and barrel and including a warship - to the National Trust as a Colonial Theme Park. They loved it. The Last Bastion of Colonial Government, complete and recently repainted. They even had the armchair of the woman Prime Minister at the time of the war, with her whiskey and water on a side table. I can’t remember her name.”

“Baroness Thatcher,” says Elphinstone.

“Yes. That one. And then I sold Puntas Arenas to Chile. They had always said it was theirs so they were welcome to it. The Argies got nothing, of course, but they didn’t seem to mind as they’d just won the World Cup. I sold the sheep to South Africa along with rights to farm for 99 years.”

“Quite a remarkable achievement, all in all,” he says.

“Thanks,” I say.

“And you negotiated excellent selling prices, as I recall. Perhaps it’s the American in you. That reminds me. The P.M. feels it would be best if, during the period of the asset sale, our buyers perceive you as British, rather than otherwise. I’m sure you’ll be agreeable to that?” For the money I’d pretend I’m a Gnu.

“Certainly. I’ll ensure I don’t say ‘Swell’ and ‘Yeah’.”

“Yes,” he says coolly. “I won’t keep you any longer. I’ll look in again later and we can

discuss progress.”

And off he goes, looking at the Generals and Admirals on the walls. His big driver turns to me as he gets to the door.

“My good lady’s looking forward to working with you, Sir. She’s going to be your driver.”

“I’m pleased to hear it,” I say. It never does any harm to have connections in the Drivers’ Pool.