

NONESUCH

EXCLUSIVE
CHAPTER
SAMPLER



FRANCIS SPUFFORD

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IT'S THE SUMMER OF 1939.

London is on the brink of catastrophic war. Iris Hawkins, an ambitious young woman in the stuffy world of City finance, has a chance encounter with Geoff, a technical whizz at the BBC's nascent television unit.

What was supposed to be one night of abandon draws her instead into an odyssey of otherworldly pursuit – into a reality where time bends, spirits can be summoned and history hangs by a thread. Soon there are Nazi planes overhead, bombs dropping every night.

But Iris has more to contend with than the terrors of the Blitz. Above the rooftops of burning London, in the twisted passages between past and present, a fascist fanatic is travelling with a gun in her hand.

Only Iris can stop her from altering the course of history forever.

'My god can he write'

RICHARD OSMAN

PROLOGUE

The time to do it, if she was going to try something so mad at all, was in the gap between the closing of the office and the first checking of the blackout. Mr Seaton, the ARP warden for the Mariner Building, worked in the insurance office on the second floor, and when he put on his tin hat at the end of the day and turned into the voice of authority, he liked to start from the ground and work upwards. There ought to be a few minutes before he got up to the ninth floor. He was somewhere down by the feet of the immense statue of the sea-king that rose from bottom to top of the facade; she was up by its chin.

The other girls were putting on coats and hats and mufflers and leaving one by one. She had already gone through the whole routine of shutting down the teleprinter, but when Mr Cornellis put his head around the door to turn off the light, she ducked down onto the floor behind the desk and pretended to be busy in the supply drawer.

'I'm just changing the ribbon for tomorrow, sir,' she said.

'I thought you'd delegated all the purely clerical stuff,' he said.

'It's a temperamental beast. Sonia hasn't quite got the knack yet.'

'Oh, very well, very well,' he said. 'Lights off quickly, though, please, when you're done.'

'You can do it now, sir. I can see in the light from the window.'

'All right, then. Safe home, everybody.' He tipped his hat, flipped the switch and took his anxious frown away, footsteps receding down the parquet corridor of Cornellis & Blome, brokers. Ordinarily,

he would have waited to be the last out, and to lock the door of his kingdom behind him, but the keys were now surrendered to Seaton downstairs, to do his rounds, and to let in the firemen if the worst came to the worst and a German incendiary came spitting and flaring down among the filing cabinets.

In the twilight, the others shuffled out fast. Only Sonia lingered at the door, just sixteen, on her first job and inclined to cling.

'You doing anything tonight, Iris?' she said hopefully. 'You seeing your feller?'

'I should be so lucky. Another night in the Anderson, I expect, reading *Playford on Securities*.'

'D'you want to get the Tube together, then?'

'Sorry, I need to hang on here while I sort this out. It's been playing up all day. You go on. Good night!'

Finally, she went. Iris gave it a few seconds and then shut the door after her. She listened, but the sounds were dwindling ones, retreating ones.

The office was all grey outlines and blue voids, in the last of the daylight. Outside, the blue haze of coal smoke that always hung over the City was dimming, and seeming as it did so to be coagulating back onto the bulk of the buildings, turning them too hazy and indistinct, heavy masses with uncertain edges. The little piece of the river she could see was gunmetal grey, light-absorbent; the dome of St Paul's looked as if it had been cut out of purple paper. By now, there should have been a cheerful glitter of electricity and neon brightening it all, the money that had been made during the day in the veil of smoke shining back out of it in spendthrift promises of food, laughter, pleasure. Instead there was this stillness, this dim abandoned hush, as if the tiny figures departing down there in the gloom were not just getting out of reach of tonight's probable raid – six nights out of the last seven, the bombers had come – but were deserting the Square Mile altogether, fleeing it for good. Or as if this

had never been a greedy, wily, striving, noisy, contentious, elbows-out, non-stop temple to human appetites, but had come into being in some silent submarine process. A dark reef, secreted in its marble and brick with no reference to human beings.

She opened the steel-framed window beside her desk. A cold breath of autumn blew in, dusty, riverine, but with a burnt edge from the buildings ruined in last night's raid, and the one before's. She sat down, feeling ridiculous. The words she had insisted Geoffrey write down were on a twist of paper in her bag. She smoothed it out. His precise draughtsman's lettering was still legible in the gloom. She cleared her throat. *If you must do this*, she heard him saying irritably in her head, *you better speak it out, good and clear. It's all in the harmonics, remember. You're setting a hook in the air.*

Meruzababel, read the first line on the paper. 'Me-ru-za-ba-bel,' she said out loud, thinking to herself, *Abracadabra. Hocus-pocus. Honestly, girl, what do you expect to achieve?*

The rest of the – spell, she supposed you would have to call it, made a diminishing triangle.

Eruzababel
Ruzababel
Uzababel
Zababel
Ababel
Babel
Abel
Bel
El
L

She said it all, hesitating over how to sound the last line. 'Luh,' she said. 'Lah? Ell?'

Nothing happened. The letters swam. It was really very dark now. She sighed and rubbed her eyes. When she opened them, it was if anything darker, suddenly darker. And looking to see why, she found that the giant granite head of the Mariner statue that gave the Mariner Building its name had turned, and was blocking the window as it gazed in at her.

It had had only rough stone dimples for eyes. Now, it had opened stone lids, and pupils of black marble as big as coffee saucers regarded her. Black circles, within crystal-blue circles, within eye-whites of marble again. The eyes glistened, but like rainwater on a pavement. That was the awful thing: that the statue had begun to live, yet without turning into flesh, or anything like it. It was still stone, still cold, still hard. Muscles were not making the expression on the huge face, but some mineral stirring. Yet she could read it. A furious, weary contempt.

The mouth of the statue opened with a creak. Behind it a gullet deepened, literally deepened as she watched, a flue burrowing away down into the stone dark, to give the Mariner something it had no need for, except to obey her command. No breathing had ever happened in those depths; no swallowing or digesting. On the inner surface of the mouth, ribbed like a cavern, a pale bloom like frost came and went.

At the far end of the corridor, she heard Mr Seaton turn his key in the door of Cornellis & Blome.

'What,' said the Mariner, and its voice was like a glacier grinding on a cliff, 'Do. You. Want.'

She could feel her pulse in her jaw, a throb under her ear.

'Tell me where all past years are,' she said.

But that was much later.

READER REVIEWS FOR *NONESUCH*

‘Beautifully written. Highly recommend’



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**AN ANCIENT
SECRET IS
AWAKENING
IN THE STONES
OF LONDON ...**



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the deep satisfactions of children’s literature
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