

# The Boy from Kings

## Charlie Cochrane

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*Cambridge, 1932.*

“So that’s your boy from Kings?” Jonty Stewart—expert on the sonnets and admirer of a fine male form—asked. He and Orlando Coppersmith—Professor in Applied Mathematics and no less an aficionado of masculine beauty—watched the slim, slightly untidy figure as it moved along Kings Parade.

“Less mine than Dr. Panesar’s,” Orlando replied, wrinkling his brow. “They talk machines for hours on end, apparently.”

“Then that boy does Cambridge a great service. If Maurice Panesar is talking about machines he can’t be blowing the university up with them.”

“Dr. Panesar hasn’t produced an explosion in...two weeks, at least.” Orlando grinned. “He’s lost some integral piece of apparatus. I think Turing’s helping him find it.”

Jonty wrinkled his nose. “Turing? That’s the boy’s name?”

“Yes, and he’s not a boy. That’s you showing your age. Everybody looks young to you.”

“Pfft,” Jonty replied. “Does this Turing talk numbers, too?”

“He does. To me. He’s got great potential.” Orlando tipped his head towards the tea shop.

“Fancy a cake?”

“Yes, but back at home. This cold wind goes right through me.” While Jonty would never admit to aging—his mind still flitted about like a twenty year old—his body was starting to feel the extra thirty odd years on top of that. “My work at the department is all done for the day.”

“Same here. Cab?”

Jonty beamed at the magical word “cab” and the prospect of avoiding the long walk up the Madingley Road. “Oh, yes. Shall we go back to St. Bride’s and get the porters to hail one or take our chances?”

“Bride’s, I think.” Orlando looked up to the heavens. “It looks like rain.”

The first, fat drops started to fall when they were still fifty yards short of the porters’ lodge, so two sopping wet Cambridge dons came pell-mell into the college, sneezing and wheezing at the unaccustomed exercise, to fall into the arms of an agitated Dr. Panesar.

“It’s gone,” he said, flinging his hands up.

“What’s gone?” Jonty asked, shaking water from himself like a hound.

“My computational engine.” Panesar looked as though he’d either explode or cry. Orlando put a wet arm round his shoulder. “Let’s get you to the Senior Common Room where Dr. Stewart can dry out his arthritic old joints and you can tell us all about it.”

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By the time Panesar was making any sense, Jonty was almost dry and they’d each consumed a large glass of sherry.

“So, let me get this straight,” Orlando said, enumerating points on his fingers. “You lost the ‘subsidiary computational drive’ for your machine last week. Young Turing helped you turn the lab upside down, but it had gone. Today the rest of the machine disappeared into thin air.” “It didn’t transport itself to 2015, I suppose?” Jonty asked, safe in the knowledge he was outside of whacking range.

Panesar groaned. “I usually appreciate your jokes, Dr. Stewart, but not at this moment. And it wasn’t one of my prototype time travelling machines. It was an engine intended to perform complex mathematical calculations. Invaluable if it comes to fruition. Someone has stolen it, I’m certain.”

“It would be worth stealing,” Orlando said. “If one understood enough to make it function.”

“And does it actually function? A lot of ‘ifs’ seem to be bandying themselves about.” Jonty said, just repressing a snort.

“Not yet,” Panesar said, defiantly. “That’s what young Turing’s supposed to be helping me with. He has the ideas and I’m trying to supply the machinery to fulfil them. We can work out what to do but not how to do it. And now, we’ve not even got what little we had.”

“I see,” Jonty replied, not seeing at all. Sometimes Panesar’s conversation was as hard to follow as his ideas. “So, how do we go about getting the thing back?”

“Perhaps we could go down to your lab and see if we can spot any clues?” Orlando suggested, hopefully.

“Excellent idea!” Panesar leapt out of his chair, grabbed Orlando’s arm and pulled him out of *his*. “The game’s afoot.”

Jonty saw Orlando wince at the reference to Holmes and suppressed a grin.

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The first thought which struck Jonty as he entered Panesar’s lab was that it seemed impossible for anyone to know if anything was missing. He’d never seen so many cogs, lengths of wire, wooden frames and small metallic objects of indeterminate purpose.

“It was here.” Panesar pointed to a part of the lab which seemed slightly less cluttered than the others.

“Actually, it wasn’t.” A quiet, slightly hesitant voice behind them made Jonty spin round, nearly knocking over a pile of valves.

“Ah, Turing.” Panesar quickly effected some rather perfunctory introductions.

“Delighted to meet you, Dr. Stewart. Professor Coppersmith I know, of course.” Turing smiled. “I moved the machine. Yesterday. The rain was hitting the window at right angles and coming round that gap along the frame. The thing was getting spattered with water.”

“Oh,” said Panesar, much relieved. “Where is it?”

“I have no idea.” Turing chewed on his fingernail. “This is where I moved it to.” He led them to a far corner of the lab, where a palpable something-shaped gap could be seen. “Next to the chronoport.”

“Chrono-what?” Jonty asked, bewildered.

“Chronoport. The prototype time machine you make such fun of.” Orlando answered, as though Jonty were one of his least intelligent students. He squatted on his haunches to inspect the marks left on the floor. “It must have been a huge piece of machinery. Heavy, with it, given the indentations it left.”

“It was.” Turing said. “I had to get a friend to help me move it.”

Jonty’s ears pricked up. “That friend couldn’t have come back and moved it again? For his own gain?”

“No,” said Panesar, as Turing protested his friend’s trustworthiness. “I keep the laboratory locked. “

“So how did *you* get in?” Orlando asked.

“The man at the desk knows me. He wouldn’t give just anyone admittance.” Turing rolled his eyes.

Jonty bit his lip, restraining a smile at the resemblance to *his* mathematician.

“What puzzles me is the lack of evidence of it being moved. I can see where you manhandled it from its original spot—it’s made a mess of the floor—but there isn’t an equivalent set of marks here.” Orlando ran his fingers over the wooden floorboards. “As though it was winched from its place.”

“But how could anybody get it out of the building? It’s too large to get out the door of this room. And if you dismantled it you’d have to pass the man at the door a dozen times to get it all away.”

“The man at the desk must leave it sometimes, surely? For a call of nature, perhaps?”

Orlando only seemed to have half a mind on the question and its answer, too busy eyeing up the window and ceiling and anywhere else the machine could have been spirited through.

Jonty watched and listened as his colleagues searched and talked and went round in circles, sometimes literally. Only *he* seemed to be aware of a strange buzzing noise, the origin of which appeared to be close to hand.

Something, somewhere, was running, with exactly the sort of noise he imagined would come from Orlando’s head when the man was working out a problem, should *he* be able to tune into the correct wavelength to hear it. This time it wasn’t Orlando’s noddle, but the chronoport.

The merest mustard seed of an idea started to germinate in his mind. If he could only get a few minutes to think it over, logically...

“What are you up to?” Orlando asked, making Jonty jump, so lost had he been in contemplation of the outlandish machine.

“Exercising my theory,” Jonty replied. “Look at this. There’s a little light winking at me.”

“Is there?” Panesar shrieked, discarded the pile of papers he was looking under and ran across. “Is it green?”

“Yes.” Jonty was almost bouncing with delight at having made progress on the problem before his lover managed to. “Is that important?”

“It means it’s worked. For the first time ever. And we missed it, Turing,” Panesar said, clearly torn between delight at his “baby’s” first steps and frustration at not having witnessed them.

“But it’s still here,” Orlando said, looking puzzled.

“Ah,” Turing replied, “Dr. Panesar has been genius enough to devise a machine which transports other things, not itself.”

“Does this funnel thing have anything to do with that?” Jonty felt even more smug, now.

“The one which is pointing towards where the sums machine was? The sums machine which has mysteriously vanished?”

A hubbub broke out, everyone talking at once, and Jonty only catching random snatches along the lines of “It isn’t a sums machine, it’s a calculation engine”, “Why did I have to leave it switched on?” and “Get away just in case it transports *us!*”

“But where has it been transported *to?*” Jonty asked, when sanity had at last broken out.

“Ah.” Panesar rummaged in his pocket for a notebook. “Give us a moment.”

He and Turing set to, noting down the readings from all the dials and clocks, after which they enlisted the help of Orlando, a set of log tables, a map and a lot of brain power. Jonty, as a mere expert on Shakespeare’s sonnets was left to perform the valuable—yet neglected—function of turning the machine off.

“Do we have an answer?” he asked, once the machine was rendered safe and he was getting a bit bored.

“We do. Almost,” Orlando said, evidently displeased at not having an exact date and location.

“No more than ten years into the future, probably a bit less,” Panesar said, holding up a page of what looked like hieroglyphics.

“And somewhere almost equidistant between Oxford and Cambridge. I favour Ampthill but Turing thinks I may be out by a few miles.”

“Bletchley,” said Turing, pointing to the map. “That’s where it’ll turn up. We just have to wait.”

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The man at the desk had called for a cab. As Jonty and Orlando awaited its arrival, under skies now clear of rainclouds, the world seemed a wonderful place. Funny how solving a mystery always improved one’s mood.

“I’m sorry he didn’t get his doo-dah back,” Jonty said, “even though it seems a lot of stuff and nonsense.”

“It may be stuff, but it isn’t nonsense by any means.” Orlando’s eyes glinted, even in the waning light. “It will happen, the creation of a machine to perform computations. Maybe not in our lifetime, but it will. That boy, as you like to call Turing, will make it happen. He can think around corners.”

“You should invite him home for tea or dinner, if he’d come. He might be too star struck. Ah!” Jonty waved as the cab approached.

“What?”

“He likes you. I could see it in his eye as we were talking. Unmistakable. Just as well you’re old enough to be his father or else I’d be worried.”

“Perhaps I shouldn’t invite him, then.” Orlando’s grin belied his words. They’d grown beyond any worries about another party disrupting their domesticity. “Unless you particularly want to entertain him.”

“I do. He’s a one-off, like dear Maurice Panesar. Mama always said one should cultivate one-offs.” Jonty smiled fondly in remembrance of a woman who herself had been without equal. “You’ve taken a shine to him as well, I can see. Why?” Orlando touched his friend’s arm, as the cab drew up.

“Isn’t it obvious? He reminds me of you.”

Orlando snorted. “I should hope I turn myself out a lot more neatly!”

But his smile, swiftly hidden, showed he was delighted at the comparison.