

# Zaharoff/Richter Mark V, Ray Bradbury

Zaharoff/Richter Mark V

In the twilight just before sunrise, it was the most ordinary-looking building he had seen since the chicken farm of his youth. It stood in the middle of an empty field full of cricket weeds and cacti, mostly dust and some neglected footpaths in the half darkness.

Charlie Crowe left the Rolls-Royce engine run-fling at the curb behind him and babbled going along the shadowed path, leading the way for Rank Gibson, who glanced back at the gently purring car.

"Shouldn't you-"

"No, no," Charlie Crowe cut in. "No one would steal a Rolls-Royce, now, would they? How far would they get, to the next corner? Before someone else stole it from them! Come along!"

"What's the hurry, we've got all morning!"

"That's what you think, chum. We've got-' Charlie Crowe eyed his watch. "Twenty minutes, maybe fifteen for the fast tour, the coming disaster, the revelations, the whole bit!"

"Don't talk so fast and slow down, you'll give me a heart attack."

"Save it for breakfast. Here. Put this in your pocket."

Hank Gibson looked at the coupon-green diploma.

"Insurance?"

"On your house, as of yesterday."

"But we don't need-"

"Yes, you do, but don't know it. Sign the duplicate. Here. Can you see? Here's my flashlight and my pen. Thatsa boy. Give one to me. One for you-"

"Christ-"

"No swearing. You're all protected now, no matter what. Jig time."  
And before he knew it, Hank Gibson was elbow-fetched through a paint-flaked door inside to yet another locked door, which opened when Charlie Crowe pointed his electric laser at it. They stepped into-  
"An elevator! What's an elevator doing in a shack in an empty lot at five in the morning-"  
"Hush."

The floor sank under them and they traveled what might have been seventy or eighty feet straight down to where another door whispered aside and they stepped out into a long hall of a dozen doors on each side with a few dozen pleasantly glowing lights above. Before he could exclaim again, Hank Gibson was hustled past these doors that bore the names of cities and countries.

"Damn," cried Hank Gibson, "I hate being rushed through one god-awful mystery after another. I'm working on a novel and a feature for my newspaper. I've no time-"

"For the biggest story in the world? Bosh! You and I will write it, share the profits! You can't resist. Calamities. Chaos. Holocausts !"  
"You were always great for hyperbole-"

"Quiet. It's my turn to show and tell." Charlie Crowe displayed his wristwatch. "We're wasting time. Where do we start?" He waved at the two dozen shut doors surrounding them with labels marked CONSTANTINOPLE, MEXICO CITY, LIMA, SAN FRANCISCO on one side.

Eighteen ninety-seven, 1914, 1938, 1963 on the other. Also, a special door marked HAUSSMANN, 1870.

"Places and dates, dates and places. How in hell should I know why or how to choose?"

"Don't these cities and dates ring any bells, stir any dust? Peek here. Glance there. Go on."

Hank Gibson peeked.

To one side, through a glass window on the topmost part of a door marked 1789, he saw:

"Looks like Paris."

"Press the button there under the glass."

Hank Gibson pressed the button.

"Now look!"

Hank Gibson looked.

"My God, Paris. In flames. And there's the guillotine!"

"Correct. Now. Next door. Next window."

Hank Gibson moved and peeked.

"Paris again, by God. Do I press the button?"

"Why not?"

He pressed.

"Jesus, it's still burning. But this time it's 1870. The Commune?"

"Paris fighting Hessians outside the city, Parisians killing Parisians inside the city. Nothing like the French, eh? Move!"

They reached a third window. Gibson peered.

"Paris. But not burning. There go the taxicabs. I know. Nineteen sixteen. Paris saved by one thousand Paris taxis carrying troops to fend off the Germans outside the city!"

"A-One! Next?"

At a fourth window.

"Paris intact. But over here. Dresden? Berlin? London? All destroyed."

"Right. How do you like the three-dimension virtual reality? Superb! Enough of cities and war. Across the hall. Go down the line. All those doors with different kinds of devastation."

"Mexico City? I was there once, in '46."

"Press."

Hank Gibson pressed the button.

The city fell, shook, fell.

"The earthquake of '84?"

"Eight-five, to be exact."

"Christ, those poor people. Bad enough they're poor. But thousands killed, maimed, made poorer. And the government-"

"Not giving a damn. Move."

They stopped at a door marked ARMENIA 1988.

Gibson squinted in, pressed the button.

"Major country, Armenia. Major country-gone."

"Biggest quake in that territory in half a century."

They paused at two more windows: TOKYO, 1932, and SAN FRANCISCO, 1905. Both whole, entire, intact at first glance. Touch the button: all fall down!

Gibson turned away, shaken and pale.

"Well?" said his friend Charlie. "What's the sum?"

Gibson stared along the hall to left and right.

"War and Peace? Or Peace destroying itself without War?"

"Touche' !"

"Why are you showing me all this?"

"For your future and mine, untold riches, in-credible revelations, amazing truths. Andale. Vamoose!"

Charlie Crowe flashed his laser pen at the largest door at the far end of the hall. The double locks hissed; the door sank away to one side, revealing a large boardroom with a huge table forty feet in length, surrounded by twenty leather chairs on each side and something like a throne, some-what elevated, at the far end.

"Go sit up at the end," said Charlie.

Hank Gibson moved slowly

"Oh, for Christ sake, shake a leg. We've only seven more minutes before the end of the world."

"End-?"

"Just joking. Ready?"

Hank Gibson sat. "Fire away."

The table, the chairs, and the room shook.

Gibson leaped up.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." Charlie Crowe checked his watch. "At least not yet. Sit back. What have you seen?"

Gibson settled in his chair uneasily, grasping the arms. "Damned if I know. History?"

"Yes, but what kind?"

"War and Peace. Peace and War. Bad Peace, of course. Earthquakes and fire."

"Admirable. Now, who's responsible for all that destruction, two kinds?"

"What, war? Politicians, I guess. Ethnic mobs. Greed. Jealousy. Munitions manufacturers. The Krupp works in Germany. Zaharoff, wasn't that his name? The big munitions king, the grand mullah of all the warmongers, films of him on the newsreels in cinemas when I was a kid. Zaharoff?"

"Yes! What about the other side of the hall? The earthquakes."

"God did it."

"Only God? No helpers?"

"How can anyone help an earthquake?"

"Partially. Indirectly. Collaboratively."

"An earthquake is an earthquake. A city just happens to be in its way. Underfoot."

"Wrong, Hank."

"Wrong!?"

"What if I told you that those cities were not accidentally built there? What if I told you w had planned to build them there, on purpose, to be destroyed?"

"Nuts!"

"No, Hank, creative annihilation. We were up to these tricks as far back as the Tang dynasty earthquakewise on the one hand. Citywise? Paris 1789 warwise."

"We? We? Who's we?"

"Me, Hank, and my cohorts, not in crimson and gold, but good dark cloth and decent ties and fine architectural school graduates. We did it, Hank We built the cities so as to tear them down. To knock them apart with earthquakes or kill their with bombs and war, war and bombs."

"We? We!?"

"In this room or rooms like it, all across the world, men sat in those chairs on the left and right, with the grand mucky-muck of all architects there where you sit-"

"Architects!"

"You don't think all of those earthquakes, all of those wars, happened by mere accident, pure chance? We did it, Hank, the blueprint urban-plan architects of the world. Not the munitions makers Or politicians, oh, we used them as puppets, marionettes, useful idiots, but we, the superb hired city architects, set out to build and then destroy our pets, our buildings, our cities!"

"For God's sake, how insane! Why?"

"Why? So that every forty, fifty, sixty, ninety years we could start over with fresh projects, new concepts, renewed jobs, cash on the line for everyone - blueprinters, planners, craftsmen, builders, stonemasons, diggers, carpenters, glaziers, gardeners. Knock it all down, start new!"

"You mean you-?"

"Studied where the earthquakes hid, where they might erupt, every seam, crack, and fault in every territory, stage, land in the world! That's where we built the cities! Or most of them."

"B.S.! You couldn't do that, you and your planners! People would find out!"

"They never knew or found out. We met in secret, covered our tracks. A small klan, a wee band of conspirators in every country in every age. Like the Masons, eh? Or some Inquisitional Catholic sect? Or an underground Muslim grot. It doesn't take many or much. And the

average politician, dumb or stupid, took our word for it. This is the site, here's the very place, plant your capital here, your town there. Perfectly safe. Until the next quake, eh, Hank?"

"Poppycock!"

"Watch your language!"

"I refuse to believe-"

The room shook. The chairs trembled. Half out of his chair, Hank Gibson sank back. The color in his face sank, too.

"Two minutes to go," said Charlie Crowe. "Shall I talk fast? Well, you don't think the destiny of the world would be left to your ordinary farm-beast politico, do you? Have you ever sat at a Rotary/Lions lunch with those sweet imbecile Chamber of Commerce stallions? Sleep an dreams! Would you let the world jog along wit Zaharoff and his gun-maker-powder experts?"

Hell no. They only know how to fire steel and package nitro. So our people, the same people who built the cities on the earthquake fault lines to ensure new work to build more cities, we planned the wars, secretly.

"We provoked, guided, steered, influenced the politicians to boil over, one way or t'other, and Paris and the Terror followed, dogged by Napoleon, trailed by the Paris Commune in which Haussmann, taking advantage of the chaos, tore down and rebuilt the City to the madness of some delight of others. Consider Dresden, London, Tokyo, Hiroshima.

We architects paid cold cash to get Hitler out of jail in 1922! Then we architect mosquito-pestered the Japanese to invade Manchuria, import junk iron, antagonize Roosevelt, bomb Pearl Harbor.

Sure, the Emperor approved, sure the Generals knew delight, sure the kamikazes took off for oblivion, joyously happy. But behind the scenes, we architects, clapping hands, rubbing palms for the moola, shoved them up! Not the politicians, not the military, not the arms merchants,

but the sons of Haussmann and the future sons of Frank Lloyd Wright sent them on there way. Glory hallelujah!"

Hank Gibson exhaled a great gust and sat weighted with an ounce of information and a ton of confusion, at the head of this table. He stared down its length. "There were meetings here-"

"In 1932, 1936, 1939 to fester Tokyo, poison Washington for war. And at the same time make sure that San Francisco was built in the best way for a new downfall, and that California cities all up and down the cracks and seams nursed at the mother fault, San Andreas, so when the Big One came, it would rain money for forty days."

"Son of a bitch," said Hank Gibson.

"Yes, aren't I? Aren't we?"

"Son of a bitch," Hank Gibson repeated in a whisper. "Man's wars and God's earthquakes."

"What a collaboration, eh? All done by the secret government, the government of surprise architects across the world and into the next century."

The floor shook. The table and the chair and the ceiling did likewise.

"Time?" said Hank Gibson.

Charlie Crowe laughed, glancing at his watch.

"Time. Out!"

They ran for the door, ran down the hall past the doors marked TOKYO and London and Dresden, past the doors marked 1789 and 1870 and 1940 and past the doors marked ARMENIA and MEXICO CITY and SAN Francisco and shot up in the elevator, and along the way, Hank Gibson said:

"Again, why've you told me this?"

"I'm retiring. The others are gone. We won't use this place again. It'll be gone. Maybe now."



You write the book about all this fabulous stuff, I edit it, we'll grab the money and run."

"But who'll believe it!?"

"No one. But it's so sensational, everyone will buy. Millions of copies. And no one will investigate, for they're all guilty, city fathers, Chambers of Commerce, real estate salesmen, Army generals who thought they made up and fought their own wars, or made up and built their own cities! Pompous freaks! Here we are. Out."

They made it out of the elevator and the shack as the next quake came. Both fell and got up, with nervous laughter.

"Good old California, yes? Is my Rolls still there? Yep. No carjackers. In!" With his hand on the Rolls doorframe, Gibson stared over at his friend.

"Does the San Andreas Fault come through this block?"

"You better believe. Wanna go see your home?"

Gibson shut his eyes. "Christ, I'm afraid."

"Take courage from the insurance policy in your coat pocket. Shall we go?"

"In a moment." Gibson swallowed hard "What will we name our book?"

"What time is it and date?"

Gibson looked at the sun about to rise. "Early Six-thirty. And the date on my watch reads February fifth."

"Nineteen ninety-four?"

"Six-thirty a.m. February fifth, 1994."

"Then that's the title of our book. Or why not

Zaharoff add Richter for the earthquake Richter scale at Cal-Tech.

Zaharoff/Richter Mark V? Okay?"

"Okay."

The doors slammed. The motor roared.

"Do we go home?" "Go fast. Jesus. Fast." They went.

Fast.

The end