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PENDRAGON SLIPPED HIS HAND beneath his coat and took a firm grip on the revolver. His palm was damp with a combination of the light rain and the sweat of anticipation. The police outrider, stern-faced and burly in his tight blue uniform, was now level with him as he and Henry Cox stood waiting at the corner of Piccadilly and the Regent Street Quadrant. The police outrider's face, shaved overdose between sidewhiskers and moustache, gleamed. It was ten minutes to noon on Thursday the 12th of October, 1856. For the two waiting men, seconds had become hours.

Sixty yards behind the police outrider, whose sole job was to clear the roadway ahead for the passage of the Royal entourage, trotted the first line of troopers of the Household Cavalry. Three fine young men, led by a boyish lieutenant carrying himself stiffly, his sword drawn; plumed helmets and silver breastplates glistened. Chained harness and equipment rang like fine bells.

"Smart turnout, Captain," hissed Henry Cox between his teeth, his trained military eye critical but admiring. His topcoat was turned up at the neck and he had pulled his flat cap forward. His ginger hair was so close cropped and fair that a casual observer would have guessed him bald beneath his headgear.

"The coach," Pendragon warned urgently. "On your toes, Cox." He drew the Adams pistol slowly from his waistband, still keeping it concealed beneath his coat, and thumbed back the hammer.

The Berlin, its shining black sides displaying the

Royal cipher, was thirty yards from them and approaching rapidly. The coachmen and postilions, in purple livery, watched ahead with official arrogance. The carriage drew nearer; matched grey horses highstepped in the fashionable style.

Pendragon could see Prince Albert clearly, the man's square Germanic face unemotional and barely smiling. He was leaning forward a little in his seat and nodding to those at the kerbside who doffed their hats, waved or curtseyed at his coach as he passed.

A barefooted street urchin, perhaps eight or nine years old and carrying a large basket of reeking herrings, forced his way cheekily between Cox and Pendragon. Cox reached down and pushed the boy to one side. The child swore at them, but edged away from the expected clip from Cox's hand.

The second line of State cavalry drew level. The coach was a bare ten yards away and followed by yet another half a dozen riders with pennanted lances.

"Now," shouted Pendragon. He had no time to watch Cox, but prayed the man was close beside him. At Pendragon's sudden and unexpected movement, the nearest cavalry horse swerved violently on the slippery cobbles, almost unseating its rider. The soldier's lance swung in a wide arc to clatter against the breastplate of another lancer. Pendragon reached the coach.

He grabbed at the polished gilt door handle and wrenched open the door. He saw Prince Albert only three feet away. The Prince's face showed no expression of fear, although instinctively he was pressing himself backwards against the leather upholstery. Pendragon swung his pistol upwards, aiming by instinct. He fired, and the explosion of the heavy charge deafened him within the confines of the carriage. He thumbed the hammer and fired again. Behind, he could hear screams and shouts distantly, as