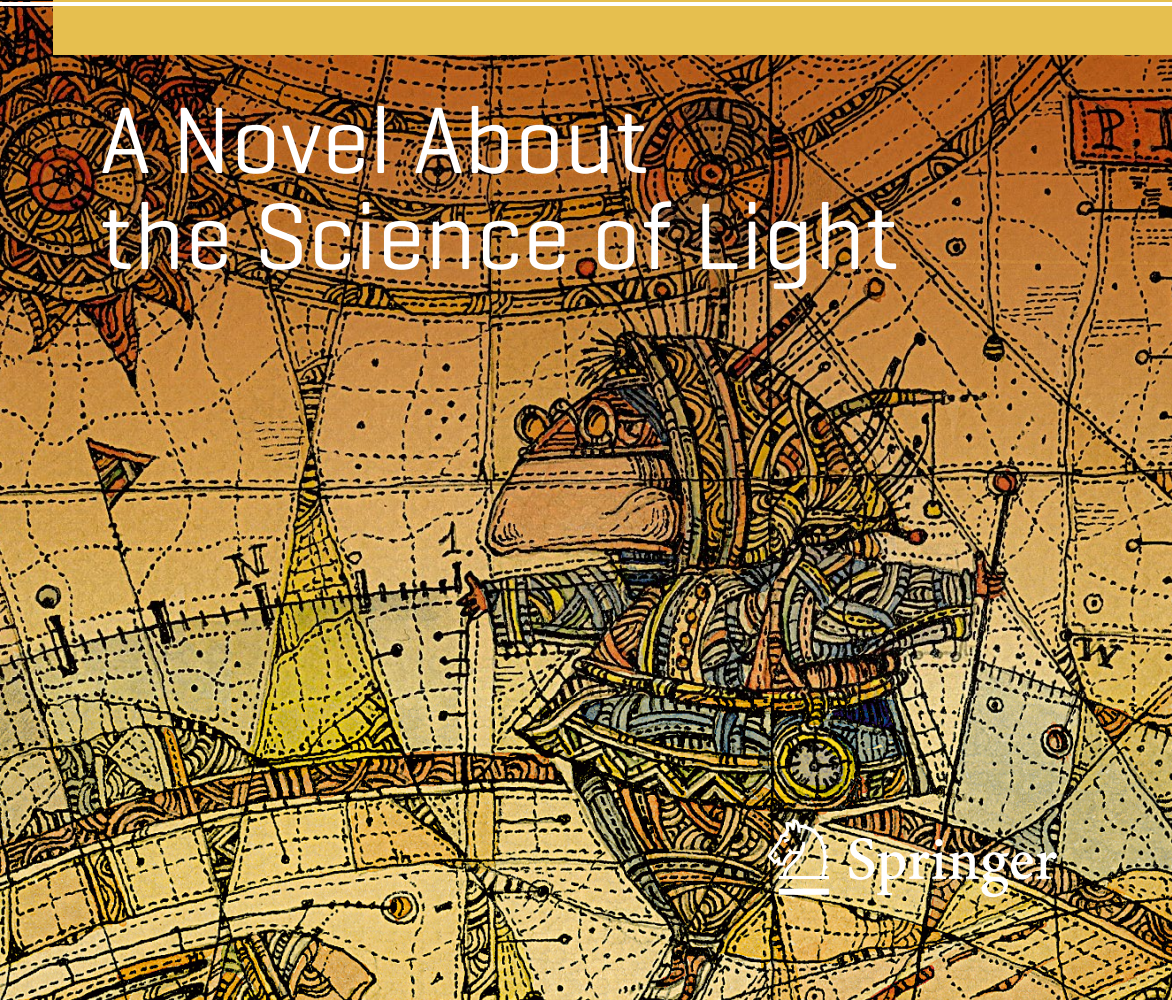


Ulf Leonhardt

Mission Invisible

A Novel About
the Science of Light



 Springer

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A Novel About the Science of Light

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Mission Invisible

1

Life is a journey, but today's journey did not begin well. Rain had made the sky grey and had clogged the streets with cars and buses, as people made their way to work. Iain never took his car to the Office; there was no car park there anywhere. He was sitting in a minibus, trying to fall asleep, but kept awake by the loud oriental music from the driver's radio, and by the driver's forte falsetto singing to the tune. At least the driver was happy, although not for much longer. After they had finally cleared the traffic jam and collected another passenger from the roadside, the minibus rushed back into the traffic flow, cutting off a white van. The van honked with a strength exceeding the sum of its horsepower, and began to chase the minibus. The van pulled over and placed itself firmly in front of the offender. The driver of the minibus took the challenge and pressed the accelerator to the screams of the passengers, chasing the van, pulling over, and blocking it at the next traffic lights. Two, then three times the two vehicles sparred. Then, suddenly, by some signal Iain could not see, the two drivers jumped out to settle the score; first with words and then with fists. They were evenly matched, neither could defeat the other, so after another round of verbal abuse, they took pictures of each other's license plates and climbed back to their seats.

Today's journey did not begin well, but at least there was some drama to be watched. Most days felt empty and grey, although most days, the sun shone with Mediterranean clarity over the scenes and dramas played out down there in the city. Iain was not looking forward to the Office. He worked as a travel agent at the headquarters of a large tour operator. Yes, at least he was not

spending his days and nights at the last minute counter of the airport, selling overpriced tickets to desperate passengers who had got lost in the duty free or the Irish pub and had missed their flights. Eventually they got their tickets; Iain was grounded. His job consisted of organizing tours for incoming travel groups and trying to stay sane in the bedlam of the Office. Every working day, from his cubicle on the open office floor, he could hear shouts in English, French, Spanish, German, and Russian. The loudest were the French, of Maghrebi descent, who were constantly goading Iain's group, the British Department. Apparently, the Hundred Year's War was not over yet, the Battle of Agincourt not yet lost to France. Nobody spoke to the manager of the British Department, as she carried an air of superiority, but everyone was at liberty to shout at her underlings.

The great wars of the nations continued in miniature at the Office, while telephones rang demanding to be answered, salespeople rushed in advertising their hotels, tour guides came by to argue their fees, and Iain was trying to concentrate on his work. Over all this reigned the boss, commonly nicknamed Miss Piggy, as she looked and acted the part. Miss Piggy sat in state in her elevated glass cubicle, surveying the serfs beneath, ready to pounce, ready to growl, ready to pierce the air with her shriek. Her word was command.

In vain had Iain tried to get out of there. He had sent his CV everywhere he could think of; no prospective employer had recognized his natural curiosity, his talent for picking up languages, and his sense of order and clarity. Everyone had seen his degree in Persian poetry and his many years of working as a travel agent to finance his studies. So there he was, stuck in a minibus, on his way to work. Iain, who loved travel and adventure: lands unknown, languages unheard of; he had to organize the journeys of others, grounded in his cubicle at the Office.

Not that his usual clients were a particularly interesting lot. Most of his assignments were groups of pilgrims touring the religious sights, where they saw a predictable canon of places and heard a predictable canon of stories, over and over again, like the pearls of a rosary. Occasionally, Iain got some more exciting assignments—groups of ornithologists flocking to witness the migration of birds in spring and autumn, or groups of political activists who needed to be steered away from trouble. Sometimes he was assigned individual travellers, if they were sufficiently VIP. Last week, Iain had taken care of the complicated visa requirements of a British lady, Lucy de Phos, who was also an eminent professor of some kind. Lady Lucy needed to continue her journey to Saudi Arabia and Iran, countries that were bitter rivals and adversaries. She had a Saudi visa in her passport, but also required an Iranian one. How could she get it, with the visa of the arch-enemy already in her passport,

and within two days, and in a country without an Iranian consulate? Impossible! Miss Piggy had given Iain one day's leave from the Office to sort out Lady Lucy's visa.

Iain drove to the border, changed his car for a taxi on the other side, and was driven to the Iranian consulate, which he entered with his British passport. 'Her Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State Requests and requires in the Name of Her Majesty all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance, and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary.' This was written on the first page and, indeed, Iain was let in to the consulate, where he faced a gruff-looking uniformed officer below the portraits of the Ayatollah and the President. The officer was transformed, however, on hearing Iain speaking his language and noting how he spoke it, a beautiful classic Persian. And when Iain mixed a few of Hafez' verses in his plea, the officer shook his hand, tears in his eyes, and glued the visa into Lady Lucy's passport, without even turning a page.

Yet this was one day in a long series of days at the Office. Iain's life was a farce, a farce played badly, a farce without end. How could it ever end?

With a phone call.

2

'Iain!'

came the unmistakable shriek from the direction of the boss. Iain had put his mind in the state of an audio-visual nirvana so that he could concentrate on his screen while two of his cubicle neighbors were arguing with clients on the phone.

'Iain!'

The boss, nicknamed Miss Piggy by her inferiors at the Office, flung her scarf around her neck and set sail towards Iain's position. He woke from his nirvana when the first wave of her perfume wafted in.

'Iain! How many times do I need to call you? I've got a phone call from that British lady you were supposed to get a visa for. What have you done to her visa?'

'I got it for her.'

'You must have made some mistake. She wants to see you at once.'

'At once?'

'She's a VIP client of the company and a real lady.' Miss Piggy elevated her stature and let her hair wave around, as if proof were required that she was a lady as well.

‘Clients and ladies are always right. Now,’ changing her vowels from those of a fair lady to the sounds of her native east end of London, ‘move it!’

Half an hour later, Iain found himself at the main entrance to the Intercontinental Hotel where Lady Lucy had taken her lodgings. The security guard at the door nodded and let him in. Iain was wondering what he could possibly have done wrong. Was the date of the visa incorrect, or was the name misspelled, or the forename and surname transposed? But Iain had checked the visa before he left the consulate; everything was in order. Maybe Lady Lucy had changed her plans and required a new visa.

Looking around the light-flooded, grand entrance hall of the hotel, Iain was wondering about Lady Lucy being a scientist. In his mind, he pictured scientists, in particular female ones, as spending their days in basement laboratories, starved of sunlight, dressed in white lab coats and doing cruel experiments on rats. But these were biologists. Iain recalled that Lady Lucy was a physicist, a theoretical physicist—neither of which would make her a member of the intercontinental set. Theoretical physicists were universally understood to spend their days in their offices, doing complicated sums, and their nights in shared apartments where they would collect the treasures from the comic-book store, eat pizza, and fantasize about G-string theory and the Big Bang. They were certainly not female—neuter, at best—and whatever they became whenever they grew up, they were definitely not the kind to stay in five-star international hotels.

Iain took the elevator, walked to Lady Lucy’s suite, and pressed the buzzer.

3

A tall, stern man, all suit and tie, opened the door and, upon hearing Iain’s name, showed him in. There she was, Lady Lucy, the picture of an English lady in her very best years, dressed in light tweed, wearing double strand pearls and a summer hat above her ash blond hair. She must have been well-past sixty, but was exceedingly well-preserved and well-presented.

‘This, I suppose, is the chap from the travel agency.’

‘Yes, milady,’ her assistant said. ‘Lady Lucy, may I present Iain. Iain, this is Lady Lucy de Phos.’

‘Your ladyship, I am honored.’ Iain tried to be very polite and polished, confronted as he was with a figure straight from Tatler Magazine. ‘How can I be of assistance, ma’am?’

‘You were responsible for my Iranian visa?’

‘I apologize if there is something wrong with it.’

‘No, not at all, the visa is fine. Everyone told me here that it was impossible to get an Iranian and a Saudi visa in the same passport; the visas annihilate each other, as their countries seem to be aspiring to. Tell me, how did you manage to do it?’

‘With Persian poetry, ma’am.’

‘Ah, so you do speak the language. Do you know the country as well?’

‘I have never been there in person, but often in mind. At university I studied Persian poetry and history, as well as Arabic.’

‘What other languages do you speak? Russian, by any chance?’

‘Yes I do, ma’am. I never had great difficulty in picking up languages. It all comes naturally: I simply listen and repeat what I hear—a bit like a parrot, first without understanding a word, but then gradually getting the meaning. I think this is the way children learn languages. I have never crammed vocabulary words, I have a very vague idea of grammar, but put me in a foreign environment and I will eventually get to speak the language.’

‘How extraordinary. Most British, including myself, assume the entire world speaks English anyway, and if not, they ought to. Are you quite sure you are British?’

Iain nodded.

‘Young man, I have a proposition to make. I shall visit Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, and perhaps a few other places on a journey around the world on science business. There I need someone capable of conversing with the locals in their own language, and generally speaking, to act on my behalf. I am afraid this man’—she pointed to the stern assistant—‘is rather hopeless with foreign languages. You seem to be the one I was looking for. You are a British subject, you said?’

Iain nodded again.

‘You will need a Saudi visa of course. I have a personal invitation by the King, and I am quite sure the King’s office can provide you with a Saudi visa in no time at all. You already know how to get an Iranian one. I will pay for travel, lodgings, and subsistence on my grant, and a monthly allowance of’—gauging Iain—‘a thousand pounds. Would that suit you?’

The only reply Iain could give was; ‘Yes, thank you very much, ma’am.’

4

Iain was lost for words. Was this not the answer to his prayers? Could he imagine a more glamorous escape from the daily farce? A journey around the world, all expenses paid! He would see places he had always dreamed of,

countries off-limits to tourists. Visiting Saudi Arabia had been impossible for tourists; one could travel there only on business with some sponsored invitation or as a Muslim pilgrim on the Hajj to the Holy City of Mecca. To be able to enter Saudi Arabia, Iain would have had to pretend to be a pilgrim, but his honest nature objected to all forms of deception. It was also difficult to visit Iran; Iain's Persia, his kingdom of poets, his Mecca. Recently, Russia had become off-bounds to Western tourists, too. Iain had picked up Russian from friends at university and had fallen in love with Russian literature. Perhaps he would get to see Dostoyevsky's Saint Petersburg or Bulgakov's Moscow. To which other forbidden places would this journey take him?

What also struck Iain was the similarity between Lady Lucy's proposition and a novel he had loved as a boy, "Around the World in Eighty Days" by Jules Verne. The novel took place in the Victorian age of steam and steel when, for the first time in human history, one could travel around the globe in speed and style. A rich British gentleman, Phileas Fogg, bet his fellow members of the exclusive Reform Club in London that he could manage the journey in eighty days, an almost impossible feat at the time. Together with his faithful servant Jean Passepartout, they would race by boat and rail, ride on an elephant, sail across the frozen American prairie, and burn their last boat to reach the Irish shore. Without a moment to spare, Phileas Fogg finally arrived at the Reform Club with the words 'Here I am, gentlemen'. Apart from winning his bet, he also discovered his human heart during the journey, winning in return the heart of a lovely lady travelling with him. Would anyone go around the world for less?

Iain was sure he would make a good Jean Passepartout for Lady Lucy de Phos. He already knew how to obtain tricky visas for her passport, and he would serve her with all his talents. Iain also approved of the reason for the journey, which was not an idle bet, as in Phileas Fogg's story, but science business, although he had never enjoyed science at school. And physics had been the worst, a random collection of disconnected facts with tedious explanations he could not follow. Worse than that, physics was a subject that did not speak to his heart; it did not make him laugh, it did not make him cry. Physics was not human. Iain dutifully acknowledged that most of modern technology derives from physics; he enjoyed its products if they worked, and got irritated and desperate if they did not. Autistic techno geeks were there to invent and fix technical gadgets, but they should leave him in peace with their physics.

Yet Lady Lucy's appearance had reminded Iain of something else: the royal roots of science, of pure science that is, not technology. Science first blossomed under the patronage of royalty. Iain remembered from his history lectures that in the sixteenth century one king of Denmark had spent a quarter

of the gross national product of the entire country on a single astronomer. This singular gift by a monarch had made modern astronomy possible. The patronage of royalty was also the reason why the first ever science academy is called the Royal Society of London. Is it then really a coincidence that the Nobel Prize is called Nobel, that is, noble?

Maybe the royal roots of science play a role when people make fun of scientists and their peculiar habits. People tend to hate what they do not understand—Iain's Persian poetry was no exception—and they ridicule what they secretly admire. If they laugh about the toffs, they laugh about the boffins, too.

Lady Lucy had a personal invitation by the King of Saudi Arabia. If an absolute monarch was interested in her work, it must be absolutely important. With all his heart, Iain wished to serve her. What could be nobler than her work?

So he thought.

5

The nuclear submarine had a visitor on board. Call him Ahab, or call him Nemo ('no-name' in Latin). He had inspected his forces before, he had flown in a supersonic strategic bomber, he had surveyed the vast intercontinental missile silos dug deep in caves, and now he was in a submarine in the abyss at the bottom of the sea. Nobody would dare to attack him, for from the depths of the ocean nuclear rockets would rise in retaliation, ascending to the surface, taking off towards the country he loathed and admired, America. If America dares to invade or merely interfere, darkness shall cover the Earth.

The temptation was always there to dial in the code and press the red button. His people were a resilient lot. They had learned to live with hardship. After Armageddon they would crawl up out of the ground with the cockroaches to replenish the Earth and subdue it, in his name.

The designer of the submarine's command center must have had a sense of humor: he had integrated the red button into the trigger of a gun protruding from the controls. It would feel like firing a gun. The submarine also had an organ in the grand saloon, presumably another of the designer's jokes, an organ just like the one in Jules Verne's *Nautilus*. Captain Nemo, fighting against colonial oppression, the liberator, safe in his *Nautilus*, surrounded by everything he needed to survive, he would play the organ as the missiles rose.

He was pleased with the submarine—it fitted his temperament: dwelling in darkness, in silence, invisible, invincible. He wished his other forces were as