

The opening pages of  
**The Inventor's Folly**  
By David Pennant

Sequel to *The Piano Teacher*, and prequel to *The Investigator's Choice*

## Part the First: Far-flung Concerto

"Bruce, whatever's the matter?" asked Araminta, as he sat up violently in bed, waking her up in the process. It was still dark. The alarm was not due to go off for another hour yet.

"I've just had such a strange dream, Araminta" replied her husband. He liked to call her by her full name. "About the most vivid dream I can ever remember. I feel very worried for them."

"For who?"

Bruce shook his head and tried to clear his thoughts.

"Jim and Pikel."

Araminta sighed. She was not keen on being woken early, and although she wanted to take Bruce seriously, she was fighting with sleep. In addition, she found Pikel rather threatening. Pikel (pronounced Pickle) had tried to seduce Bruce when they were both single, and even though Pikel was now married to Jim Pond, Araminta still did not feel comfortable. Bruce had admitted that he found her stunningly attractive. Jim was not much better. He was a brilliant inventor, true; the flying suits and sky-cars had come from him. He had made a fortune out of anti-gravity. But he was also entirely unpredictable. Bruce was very taken with him. She wished that he would forget them both. Vivid dreams about them were just what she did not want.

Bruce got out of bed and began to pace up and down, undeterred by having to face about every three steps, through the shortness of the room. There was clearly going to be no more sleep that night.

"Quiet, or you'll wake the children. Now, take a grip, and tell me what the dream was about."

Bruce sat on the edge of the bed. He took a moment to gather his thoughts.

"I was flying along over a desert – in my flying suit, not a sky-car. There was nothing but sand as far as I could see. I was on my way to an appointment. I did not know with whom. Then I saw something way ahead of me floating in the air which looked like a nuclear submarine – long and oval shaped. It was grey all over. Like a huge barrage balloon or a Zeppelin. I imagined I would need to land on the top and find a door to get in, but as I approached, I realised the structure was not solid. It was like a mist, but it was firm at the same time. What I mean is, it never occurred to me that it might blow away in the wind as a mist might. So all I needed to do was to fly gently in through the wall. I could already see Jim and Pikel inside one of the rooms. I should say that I could see through all the walls, and observe the interior of the whole ship. It looked very modern. Lots of equipment and wires everywhere. Perhaps it was a spaceship. I don't know. Anyway, I floated in, and there they were. They both had pained expressions on their faces and were holding out their hands towards me, but when I tried to touch them, my hand went straight through theirs. It was horrible. They could see me, that was quite clear, and they were trying to speak, but no sound came. I sensed they were in need, and wanted to tell me about it. Then I began drifting down through the floor, quite slowly, but when I tried to fly back up again, I found I couldn't. Maybe it was the ship that was going higher; I don't know. Fairly soon, I was out of the bottom of it. I soon lost sight of Jim and Pikel. I could only watch helplessly as the large hull moved off away from me, and eventually out of sight. That was when I woke up. What do you think?" Bruce added, anxiously.

“Sounds very weird to me. Were they alone, or were there others?”

“No, nobody else. Just the two of them, in obvious anguish. I’m worried that they may be in trouble of some kind.”

This was exactly what Araminta had been afraid of. Around the time of their marriage, Bruce had been mixed up in all sorts of strange goings-on, involving Jim and some sort of secret agents. The climax of it all had been Bruce’s dash to the asteroid belt in a space rocket. He and his dad had succeeded in boarding an alien spacecraft and reversing its instructions to multiply indefinitely, thereby staving off a threat to the solar system from self-replicating machines. Sadly, Bruce’s dad had died in a tragic accident during the trip.

Since then, life had been rather more normal, to Araminta’s relief. Jim and Pikel had disappeared, and the children had come along. The twins, Hannah and Chloe, who were thankfully not identical, had now started at playgroup, which gave Araminta a breather for three hours each morning, but Ben was very demanding at present. He had recently turned two. Araminta had always wanted children, and she was very pleased with their family, but nevertheless, it was hard work. She valued Bruce being at home a bit during the day. His work as a piano teacher took him into school in the mornings, but from midday until three-thirty, he was generally around, unless there was shopping to be done, or the occasional funeral to play for. There were also a few adults who came to the home in the middle of the day for lessons. But once it got to four, Bruce was tied up with pupils until seven or eight. Araminta needed to get the dinner and put the children to bed single-handed. At present, it was the summer holiday, so Bruce was around more than usual.

All in all, their life was going along pretty smoothly. Oh yes, there were also the homeless men as well. Bruce had bought several houses nearby and allowed former friends of Will’s to live there free of charge. They had expected problems, but so far, things had gone alright. Araminta had even been enrolled for a university degree by correspondence course. However, the arrival of the children had held her back a year, and there was a danger she would have to drop back another year once again. Young children and academic studies do not go well together! She was not unhappy about the impact on her studies, but the thought of Bruce getting taken up with Jim and Pikel again had no appeal whatever. However, Bruce was very committed to Jim. She would need to tread carefully.

Bruce had begun pacing up and down again.

“What do you want to do?” asked Araminta, anxiously.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure there’s anything I can do. However, maybe I had the dream for a reason. I feel perplexed.”

“Please don’t go charging off somewhere. I’m finding things pretty hard at present, and I really value your support. Also, there’s our summer holiday in a fortnight.”

“Don’t worry. I know I’m needed here. I’m looking forward to taking them to the seaside. I just hope that Jim and Pikel haven’t got into a mess of some kind. Even if they have, there’s nothing I can do to help. I think the best thing to do is to forget about it.”

This was music to Araminta’s ears.

“Thanks, Bruce. It means a lot. Now, come back to bed and let’s have a cuddle.”

There was nothing she liked better than to lie in his arms. The rest of the world could go away as far as she was concerned. There were still twenty-five minutes before wake-up time.

-oOo-

“You’re looking tired,” Bruce said, as they cleared away the lunch things. “Would you like me to take the children to the swings so you can have a rest?”

Araminta nodded. “Can you take Gary too?”

Gary was a homeless man of about fifty who was living with them. He slept on a sofa bed in the lounge when he was there. Araminta found him a little odd. For one thing, he would take himself off for days, even weeks at a time, without explanation, and then turn up again as if nothing had happened. Bruce was keen to give him the freedom to treat them like a hotel. “Let him come and go,” he urged. “Give him space!”

Araminta did not feel easy with the homeless men around, but she had accepted that this was part of the challenge of helping them. Bruce was very keen on the project. The two bedrooms had locks on the door, which they never used. It had been Wilf, a former guest, who had suggested the locks. She wondered what had become of him now. It was good that the men felt able to come and go. Bruce was eager to make them feel welcome, and part of that was allowing them the freedom to move on when they chose. She had liked Wilf – he was very good with the girls. Gary was another matter. He did not say much. He seemed very guarded and rather tense. Araminta wondered what traumas he had been through in his life.

“Coming up the park?” Bruce called.

“Yes!” screamed the girls, charging into the room, followed more slowly by their brother. Ben showed pleasure in his own way, which was to clap his hands vigorously, over and over. He did not have many words yet. Araminta was worried that he was rather backward, but Bruce was sure he would turn out alright in time.

“Banjo never said a word ‘til she was three and a half, and then she started coming out with whole sentences. Now it’s a job to shut her up. I wouldn’t worry if I was you.”

Bancesca, to give her her proper name, was Bruce’s second cousin. The children loved her, although they were a little scared of her husband John. Banjo and John used to come over for Sunday lunch every two months or so. Araminta’s attempt to teach the girls how to say Bancesca correctly had not been a success; they now called her Auntie Bang. Never mind. Banjo thought it was a huge joke.

Ben was already snuggling happily into his pushchair. This being summer, there was no need for all that performance with coats. Hannah was strapping Ben in. She and Chloe would take it in turns to push him along for the first hundred yards; then he would be abandoned to his fate, while they ran on to the green. He would be scooped up by Bruce, bringing up the rear, although today, Gary was given the honour of pushing. Ben might have complained if he had realised it was Gary pushing him rather than Bruce, but he didn’t cotton on.

“Wait for me,” Bruce called to the twins. “Don’t start ‘til we get there.”

By the time Gary and Bruce reached the gate, the girls were poised ready at the roundabout. Today, Hannah was seated, and Chloe was going to push.

“Me, me!” cried Ben, but as usual, the girls were too quick for him. The roundabout was in full flow before he could arrive.

“Why don’t you let him join in sometimes?” asked Bruce. Children are funny!

“Ben, you come on the swing.” Gary had settled on the bench.

Ben loved the swing. Bruce knew how to make the ride exciting without it being frightening. Ben was soon whooping with joy. Before long the girls grew tired of the roundabout and shot over to the slide.

“Careful on there,” said Bruce. It was not long since Bruce had needed to stand at the foot of the steps, in case the twin climbing busily up had fallen off backwards and needed to be caught. Then, at the critical moment, he would run round ready to catch as the twin hurtled down the slide out of control. Meanwhile, the other one would already be climbing up, and after catching the human cannonball, Bruce would need to revert to the foot of the steps in a rush. It was demanding being a one-man safety team, especially as both girls were fearless. Apart from the inevitable grazed knees when the girls tripped over on the ground, there had never been a serious tumble so far.

Bruce hated it when a running child tripped and fell, taking the skin off the knees. He could feel the pain in his own legs in sympathy. He would quickly gather the child up in his arms and wait for the howl. He had noted that the longer the pause before the howl came, the greater its intensity would be. By now, he could judge from the delay whether it would be *forte*, *fortissimo*, or whatever you called *fff*. There must be a name for the latter, he reckoned, but *fortississimo* did not sound quite right.

Ben had already tired of the swing and wanted a go on the roundabout. The girls raced over to the long slide that was set in the bank. Not enough children used this to keep it shiny, as a rule, and it tended to get sticky, but today, following several sunny days, it was performing well. Bruce was

glad that it was not his job to keep the girls' outfits clean. How Araminta managed it he had no idea. The washing machine seemed to be permanently running. At least they had old clothes that they changed into before coming to the swings. Too many new outfits had been spoiled by the long slide.

All of a sudden, Bruce found he badly needed the toilet. This was strange, because he had visited the loo just before coming out. Araminta had trained the children and him in this. For some reason, she distrusted public conveniences. Bruce had never asked why; maybe a family member had once caught some serious illness and somebody had suggested the public toilet was responsible. At all events, she found it difficult when he went into the Gents when they were out and about. Never mind; the toilets here on the green were not too bad, and anyway, she would never know.

"Gary, can you keep an eye on them? I just need the toilet."

It was a short walk. The entrance was on the far side. Really, people complain about the council, Bruce thought, but you had to acknowledge that the Parks Department were excellent. These lawns were beautifully kept. Not a blade of grass out of place.

Bruce wondered why he needed to go again so soon. Perhaps he was not well. The words 'Urinary Infection' sprang to mind. Not that Bruce knew much about the condition, but his granddad had it once when he was small, and he had never forgotten the phrase. He was approaching the door when he lost his balance and felt himself tumbling forwards. How ridiculous! It must have been thinking about the children grazing their knees. Either that or he really was unwell. He put out a hand to check his fall, but he need not have bothered. A powerful suction pulled him backwards through the air. Without any warning, he blacked out and remembered no more.

-oOo-