
The System of the World

Neal Stephenson

Dartmoor

15 JANUARY 1714

In life there is nothing more foolish than inventing.

—JAMES WATT

“MEN HALF YOUR AGE and double your weight have been slain on these wastes by Extremity of Cold,” said the Earl of Lostwithiel, Lord Warden of the Stannaries, and Rider of the Forest and Chase of Dartmoor, to one of his two fellow-travelers.

The wind had paused, as though Boreas had exhausted his lungs and was drawing in a new breath of air from somewhere above Iceland. So the young Earl was able to say this in matter-of-fact tones. “Mr. Newcomen and I are very glad of your company, but—”

The wind struck them all deaf, as though the three men were candle-flames to be blown out. They staggered, planted their downwind feet against the black, stony ground, and leaned into it. Lostwithiel shouted: “We’ll not think you discourteous if you return to my coach!” He nodded to a black carriage stopped along the track a short distance away, rocking on its French suspension. It had been artfully made to appear lighter than it was, and looked as if the only thing preventing it from tumbling end-over-end across the moor was the motley team of draught-horses harnessed to it, shaggy manes standing out horizontally in the gale.

“I am astonished that you should call this an extremity of cold,” answered the old man. “In Boston, as you know, this would pass without remark. I am garbed for Boston.” He was shrouded in a rustic leather cape, which he parted in the front to reveal a lining pieced together from the pelts of many raccoons. “After that passage through the intestinal windings of the Gorge of Lyd, we are all in want of fresh air—especially, if I read the signs rightly, Mr. Newcomen.”

That was all the leave Thomas Newcomen wanted. His face, which was as pale as the moon, bobbed once, which was as close as this Dart mouth blacksmith would ever come to a formal bow. Having thus taken his leave, he turned his broad back upon them and trudged quickly downwind. Soon he became hard to distinguish from the numerous upright boulders—which might be read as a comment on his physique, or on the gloominess of the day, or on the badness of Daniel’s eyesight.

“The Druids loved to set great stones on end,” commented the Earl. “For what purpose, I cannot imagine.”

“You have answered the question by asking it.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Dwelling as they did in this God-forsaken place, they did it so that men would come upon these standing stones two thousand years after they were dead, and know they had been here. The Duke of Marlborough, throwing up that famous Pile of Blenheim Palace, is no different.”

The Earl of Lostwithiel felt it wise to let this pass without comment. He turned and kicked a path through some stiff withered grass to a strange up-cropping of lichen-covered stone. Following him, Daniel understood it as one corner of a ruined building. The ground yielded under their feet. It was spread thin over a shambles of tumbledown rafters and disintegrating peat-turves. Anyway the angle gave them shelter from the wind.

“Speaking now in my capacity as Lord Warden of the Stannaries, I welcome you to Dartmoor, Daniel Waterhouse, on behalf of the Lord of the Manor.”

Daniel sighed. “If I’d been in London the last twenty years, keeping up with my Heraldic Arcana, and going to tea with the Bluemantle Pursuivant, I would know who the hell that was. But as matters stand—”

“Dartmoor was created part of the Duchy of Cornwall in 1338, and as such became part of the possessions of the Prince of Wales—a title created by King Edward I in—”

“So in a roundabout way, you are welcoming me on behalf of the Prince of Wales,” Daniel said abruptly, in a bid to yank the Earl back before he rambled any deeper into the labyrinth of feudal hierarchy. “And the Princess. Who, if the Hanovers come, shall be—”

“Princess Caroline of Ansbach. Yes. Her name keeps coming up. Did she send you to track me down in the streets of Plymouth?”

The Earl looked a little wounded. “I am the son of your old friend. I encountered you by luck. My surprise was genuine. The welcome given you by my wife and children was unaffected. If you doubt it, come to our house next Christmas.”

“Then why do you go out of your way to bring up the Princess?”

“Only because I wish to be plain-spoken. Where you are going next it is all intrigue. There is a sickness of the mind that comes over those who bide too long in London, which causes otherwise rational men to put forced and absurd meanings on events that are accidental.”

“I have observed that sickness in full flower,” Daniel allowed, thinking of one man in particular.

“I do not wish you to think, six months from now, when you become aware of all this, ‘Aha, the Earl of Lostwithiel was nothing more than a cat’s paw for Caroline—who knows what other lies he may have told me!’ ”

“Very well. For you to disclose it now exhibits wisdom beyond your years.”

“Some would call it timidity originating in the disasters that befell my father, and his father.”

“I do not take that view of it,” Daniel said curtly.

He was startled by bulk and motion to one side, and feared it was a standing-stone toppled by the wind; but it was only Thomas Newcomen, looking a good deal pinker. “God willing, that carriage-ride is the closest I shall ever come to a sea-voyage!” he declared.

“May the Lord so bless you,” Daniel returned. “In the storms of the month past, we were pitched and tossed about so much that all hands were too sick to eat for days. I went from praying we would not run aground, to praying that we would.” Daniel paused to draw breath as the other two laughed. Newcomen had brought out a claypipe and tobacco-pouch, and Lostwithiel now did the same. The Earl clapped his hands to draw his coachman’s eye, and signalled that fire should be brought out.

Daniel declined the tobacco with a wave of his hand. “One day that Indian weed will kill more white men, than white men have killed Indians.”

“But not today,” Newcomen said.

If this fifty-year-old blacksmith seemed strangely blunt and direct in the presence of an Earl, it was because he and that Earl had been working together for a year, building something. “The balance of the voyage was easier, I trust, Dr. Waterhouse?”

“When the weather lifted, those horrid rocks were in sight. As we sailed past them, we said a prayer for Sir Cloudesley Shovell and the two thousand soldiers who died there coming home from the Spanish front. And seeing men at work on the shore, we took turns peering through a perspective-glass, and saw them combing the strand with rakes.”

The Earl nodded knowingly at this and so Daniel turned towards Newcomen, who looked curious—though, come to think of it, he always looked curious when he was not in the middle of throwing up. “You see,” Daniel continued, “many a ship has gone down near the Isles of Scilly laden with Pieces of Eight, and sometimes a great tempest will cause the sea to vomit up silver onto dry land.”

The unfortunate choice of verb caused the blacksmith to flinch. The Earl stepped in with a little jest: “That’s the only silver that will find its way onto English soil as long as the Mint over-pays for gold.” “I wish I had understood as much when I reached Plymouth!” Daniel said. “All I had in my purse was

Pieces of Eight. Porters, drivers, innkeepers leapt after them like starving dogs—I fear I paid double or treble for everything at first.”

“What embarrassed you in Plymouth inns, may enrich you here, a few miles north,” said the Earl.

“It does not seem a propitious location,” Daniel said. “The poor folk who lived here could not even keep their roof off the floor.”

“No one lived here—this was what the Old Men call a jews-house. It means that there was a lode nearby,” said the Earl.

Newcomen added, “Over yonder by that little brook I saw the ruins of a trip-hammer, for crushing the shode.” Having got his pipe lit, he thrust his free hand into a pocket and pulled out a black stone about the size of a bun. He let it roll into Daniel’s hand. It was heavy, and felt colder than the air. “Feel its weight, Dr. Waterhouse. That is black tin. Such was brought here, where we are standing, and melted in a peat- fire. White tin ran out the bottom into a box hewn from granite, and when it cooled, what came out was a block of the pure metal.”

The Earl had his pipe blazing now too, which gave him a jovial, donnish affect, in spite of the fact that (1) he was all of twenty-three years old, and (2) he was wearing clothes that had gone out of fashion three hundred years ago, and furthermore was bedizened with diverse strange ancient artifacts, viz. some heraldic badges, a tin peatsaw, and a tiny bavin of scrub-oak twigs. “This is where I enter into it, or rather my predecessors do,” he remarked. “The block tin would be packed down the same sort of appalling road we just came up, to one of the four Stannary towns.” The Earl paused to grope among the clanking array of fetishes dangling from chains round his neck, and finally came up with a crusty old chisel-pointed hammer which he waved menacingly in the air—and unlike most Earls, he looked as if he might have actually used a hammer for some genuine purpose during his life. “The assayer would remove a corner from each block, and test its purity. An archaic word for ‘corner’ is ‘coign,’ whence we get, for example, ‘quoin’—”

Daniel nodded. “The wedge that gunners use, aboard ship, to elevate a cannon, is so called.”

“This came to be known as quoinage. And thence, our queer English word ‘coin,’ which bears no relation to any French or Latin words, or German. Our Continental friends say, loosely translated, ‘a piece of money,’ but we English—”

“Stop.”

“Is my discourse annoying to you, Dr. Waterhouse?”

“Only insofar as I like you, Will, and have liked you since I met you as a lad. You have always seemed of a level head. But I fear you are going the way of Alchemists and Autodidacts now. You were about to declare that English

money is different, and that its difference inheres in the purity of the metal, and is signified in the very word 'coin.' But I assure you that Frenchmen and Germans know what money is. And to think otherwise is to let Toryism overcome sound judgment."

"When you put it that way, it does sound a bit silly," the Earl said, cheerfully enough. Then he mused, "Perhaps that is why I have felt it necessary to make this journey with a blacksmith on one hand, and a sixty-seven-year-old Doctor on the other—to lend some gravity to the proposal."

By gestures so subtle and tasteful that they were almost subliminal, the Earl led them to understand that it was time they were underway. They returned to the coach, though the Earl lingered for a few moments on the running board to exchange civil words with a small posse of gentleman riders who had just come up out of the Gorge and recognized the arms painted on the carriage door.

For a quarter of an hour they trundled along in silence, the Earl gazing out an open window. The horizon was far away, smooth and gently varying except where it was shattered by peculiar hard shapes: protruding rocks, called Tors, shaped variously like schooners or Alchemists' furnaces or fortress-ramparts or mandibles of dead beasts.

"You put a stop to my discourse and quite rightly, Dr. Waterhouse. I was being glib," said the young Earl. "But there is nothing glib about this Dartmoor landscape, or would you disagree?"

"Plainly not."

"Then let the landscape say eloquently what I could not."

"What is it saying?"

By way of an answer, Will reached into a breast-pocket and pulled out a leaf of paper covered with writing. Angling this toward the window, he read from it. "The ancient tumuli, pagan barrows, Pendragonbattlegrounds, Druid-altars, Roman watch-towers, and the gouges in the earth wrought by the Old Men progressing west-to-east across the land, retracing the path of the Great Flood in their search for tin; all of it silently mocks London. It says that before there were Whigs and Tories, before Roundheads and Cavaliers, Catholics and Protestants— nay, before Normans, Angles, and Saxons, long before Julius Cæsar came to this island, there existed this commerce, a deep subterranean flow, a chthonic pulse of metal through primeval veins that grew like roots in the earth before Adam. We are only fleas gorging our petty appetites on what courses through the narrowest and most superficial capillaries." He looked up.

"Who wrote that?" Daniel asked.

"I did," said Will Comstock.