

ELIZABETH PERKINS

THE PASOLINI EXPERIMENT

"Helen Gray, Scottish spinster and scientist, recently awarded an O B E for outstanding contribution to Australian agriculture," murmured Chisholm, lifting his beer in a salute, half-mocking, half-serious, to a group on the distant eighteenth green.

Rattigan laughed. "I'll bet she's mad about that reporter chap following her on to the course. Thought he'd have been back in the club-house hours ago drowning a large flea in his ear."

"Must have got round the old lady somehow. Perhaps he's a golf fanatic too." Chisholm, a stocky, good-natured young man rose to greet the group walking towards the club-house verandah, checking their score cards with much bantering. The pure Scottish vowels of the woman sounded clear above the voices of the four men.

A lively conversation lasted a few minutes before the golfers went off to wash and Chisholm went in to order drinks. The young red-haired reporter, introduced as MacMahon, had acquired a distinctly Scottish burr on the course. It muffled his native broad Australian.

"Mr MacMahon has family near Oban," said Helen Gray, handing drinks from the tray a few minutes later. She looked the complete motherly hostess. It was difficult to reconcile manner and appearance with her brilliant reputation as a scientist and her record as a golfer. The latter achievement regarded as hardly less formidable by her colleagues.

Chisholm thought Helen Gray was more likely to draw the young reporter to tell the story of his life than to hold the floor and reveal much about herself. But she was a fine raconteur, or a great spinner of yarns, when she was in the mood. Chisholm decided to try to help the resourceful reporter.

"I was thinking of a story I heard recently," he said.

He gazed thoughtfully at his glass, being something of an actor whereas he was nothing of a golfer.

"It was rather strange. It was — er — it happened on the Mull of Galloway, if I remember rightly. Your mention of Oban brought it to mind."

"There are plenty of stories from the west coast," said MacMahon. "A few in our family too. I suppose it's the same with yours, Dr Gray?"

"You mean supernatural?" asked one of the others. "Now what would a scientist do with spooks, eh, Doctor?"

Helen Gray smiled but seemed to look more thoughtfully over the fairways and trees darkening in the swift twilight. In the silence they watched a mob of wallabies hop from the shadows and begin nibbling the cultivated grass. At that time of evening when dusk gives an illusion of coolness a fey Gaelic tale might not be out of place in an isolated research station at the edge of the Australian desert.

"Well, Helen?" said the oldest of the group, "have you got a story for us? We've none of us any objection to mixing science and the supernatural."

Rattigan's easy laugh came out of the twilight. He waved his hand across the landscape.

"I can tell you it seemed definitely supernatural to me to find an eighteen hole course out in the backblocks. No one at home believed me until I sent snapshots. To a bloke like myself, thinking I'd given up the only recreation I care for when I took on this job, it seemed darned uncanny to find a landscape dominated by one of the best country courses I've played on. And this uncanny phenomenon is entirely due to science."

"It's entirely due to Helen's love of golf," corrected the elderly man with a chuckle.

But Helen Gray shook her head.

"What would anyone do with all these acres of experimental pasture besides play golf on them?" she asked reasonably.

"Maybe that's what accounts for the supernatural," said Wilding-Reed. He was a tall, shy, brilliant man who having lost the sight of one eye in a laboratory experiment many years ago had completely devoted himself to his work. He was one of Helen Gray's permanent team, accompanying her on assignments from one side of the world to the other. Wilding-Reed seldom spoke but when he did it was to offer as now a tentative explanation or a solution. In the laboratory his suggestions proved uncannily correct. The others turned to him attentively.

"I mean," he said, and he spoke so slowly he might have been waiting for permission to continue, "that a supernatural event is always brought about by natural phenomenon and activated by very powerful forces generated by the human psyche. But these human forces are natural ones, even if they are unusually powerful."

"Like Helen's love of golf! Now that's a powerful natural force if you like!"

There was a long pause and the young reporter might have felt that the eminent scientist had fallen into a dignified huff, but the others

knew better. At length she spoke, and although she addressed them all her question was intended for one man.

"Shall I tell the story then? It's a very common one, really, and I've no doubt myself that John's explanation is quite correct."

Chisholm begged her to delay her story until he had collected more drinks for the party, and the rest settled themselves to listen, like children at bedtime.

"You will all have heard stories concerning the appearance of mysterious assistants to people who are desperately in need of help. The situation is saved, the rescuer disappears. Later it is discovered that just such an old man or young child once lived thereabouts, but had in fact died years ago. You know the sort of thing."

There was a clamour of assent, and several people cited famous novels and films they had read and seen based on this theme.

"Well, something like that happened to me once, and in the laboratory. I was very young then, which perhaps has something to do with it, and I had just come to Australia as an assistant to Professor Pasolini. Some of you may remember that he was responsible for developing several farinaceous strains for growing on the steppe lands of eastern Europe. In 1936 the Australian government engaged him to come here.

"Our research laboratories were primitive and mobile, and while we were stationed somewhere between the Murrumbidgee and the Darling, Gabriel Pasolini was drowned swimming in a creek."

The oldest scientist made a noise of recollection.

"It was flooded, wasn't it? Or there was something strange about his death as I remember."

"It wasn't flooded," said Helen Gray, "but there was something strange about the drowning, although not so strange to those who knew Pasolini. We think that he was swimming along the creek, close to the spot where the current had washed out a concave bank, and that he noticed some plant or grass growing up above water level. Wherever he was, or whatever he was doing, he always had eyes for a plant or a growth that interested him. Even for a familiar plant that seemed to be growing in unusual conditions."

There was a little burst of amusement, which she acknowledged. It was known that the only thing that could put Dr Gray off a golf stroke was even the minutest oddity in the growth of her fairway. Her golfing opponents often threatened to get up in the night and doctor the course in some interesting fashion.

"You'll understand then," she said, "something that the police found hard to understand because Pasolini was known to be an excellent

swimmer. We think that he climbed up or just stretched up out of the water to grasp the specimen and that the concave bank, being soft after rain, and simply a tangle of roots anyway, collapsed on top of him, bringing with it such an amount of earth that he was pushed down under it into the water. The circumstances certainly support that hypothesis.

"But the police could not understand why someone like Pasolini, who knew so much about soil, would attempt to climb out of the creek at a place which anyone could see was a very poor foothold. It was even thought that he may have seen a crocodile or something else that alarmed him and had to scramble out where he could. And of course the possibility of foul play was uppermost in their minds. In our minds, however, nothing seemed more natural than Pasolini scrambling after a specimen, regardless of anything else.

"It was difficult to convince the investigating officers because they didn't know Pasolini. And it was even more difficult to convince the local residents who didn't know him because, as a foreigner coming recently from work in a soviet country, it was assumed that he would be involved in all kinds of plots and espionage. I recall one suggestion that Pasolini had been trying to destroy the Australian wheat industry by introducing cunning visuses that couldn't be checked, and his death had been brought about by secret patriotic agents. On the other hand, there was a theory, popular among those who did know Pasolini in the district and who liked him, that he'd been murdered by Bolshies to prevent his using soviet techniques to improve Australian wheat."

"But surely the police didn't believe any of that," said one of the men, as the clear, gentle voice paused.

"No. It all seems more ludicrous than tragic, half a life-time later, but then it caused a great deal of pain and trouble. And there was a dreadful complicating factor." Again the scientist stopped, but no one spoke, and she went on.

"The police didn't believe the espionage stories, but they did think in terms of murder, or at least of a quarrel leading to Pasolini's drowning by some means. But they could find no one at all who could have wished him dead, or who would have had an opportunity to kill him. There was not even a trace of any sundowner tramping through that part of the country. Some big government projects further down the river had absorbed all the men looking for work. The same irrigation and pasture projects, in fact, that had brought us to the district.

"The other unhappy complication was the second accident that occurred within hours of Professor Pasolini's death. A young soil chemist, working with some saturated soils in our make-shift laboratory, was badly injured when a kerosene tin of chemically saturated soil exploded while he was heating it. He lost a hand in the explosion and particles of sand entered various parts of his body as well. You can imagine the kind of talk that immediately began when Pasolini was brought to the hospital mor-

tuary, and within a few minutes the young assistant was brought in maimed, and deeply impregnated with soil. No one in authority believed for a moment that there was any connection, but unsophisticated gossip created scenes of dynamiting and bolshevik murder down on the river bank. Many of the local residents had good reasons for connecting the river with dynamite, that being their favourite and illegal method of fishing."

Several voices indicated that that method of fishing was still occasionally practised. To listen in the gloaming to the pleasant voice telling of tragedies that had taken place "half a life-time before" was a strange experience. They felt oddly at one with each other, sharers in a world of feeling, strong but controlled in intensity, as though emotion through long reflection had become a kind of wisdom. No wonder, thought young Chisholm, who was the first to recognize the feeling in himself, no wonder that Helen Gray achieved such results with her laboratory teams.

"Espionage and political revenges were just so much nonsense, but there was a real problem that I suppose was political, although to those of us who were left of Pasolini's staff the matter was rather one of principle. You see, on the one hand we were under-equipped and under-staffed. On the other hand, gathered together in this corner of the world, we had some of the best technical knowledge and experience that could be found anywhere at that time. There was some urgency about our work too, because the government had made much of what Pasolini was doing and had already promised the wheat-growers, farmers and graziers untold benefits from the outcome of our research. We were operating under conditions which one both enjoys and dislikes. A sense of urgency that spurs you on and the fear that haste will spoil your experiments and invalidate your results."

Again there was a murmur of assent, even the reporter MacMahon knew this situation in his work. Chisholm offered to get more drinks, but had no takers, everyone seemed to have set aside all other interests besides the quiet evening and the story teller.

"After the inquest and the funeral we threw ourselves back to work and I was left in charge of the little laboratory with instructions to go ahead and complete the work if possible. Although Pasolini had refused to give a date by which results could be promised, I found that somehow a deadline had been imposed on us. An important scientist working in Sydney was nominally our supervisor, but he was too much involved in his own work to take any interest in us, and after one visit he left us alone. I think," said Helen Gray without rancour, "that when he found a woman in charge he gave the project away as a waste of money better spent on his own concerns. This put me on my mettle. But funds for equipment became harder to get, and we almost despaired of finishing anything at all with our meagre resources. The accident with the soils would not have happened if we hadn't been working with make-shift equipment." Helen Gray's voice, in the heavy twilight, sounded a little apologetic. She went on after a pause which was not so much awkward as thoughtful.

"I wouldn't dwell so long on this lack of funds if it weren't really an important part of what Frederick has called the scientists and spooks mixture. And it's also important for John's idea that supernatural events originate in the human psyche under especially great pressure. You must remember that I was very young at the time, and although I'd begun to understand that somehow a good scientist must also be very skilful at getting money from wherever he can in order to be recognised as a good scientist, I hadn't yet developed the technique of selling myself and my work."

Her audience smiled audibly. Dr Gray's public relations were now the envy of every scientist in her field. No one knew how she managed it, and perhaps she herself did not really understand why government and private funds reached her laboratory as they did, with the full approval of that deity, more honoured in speech than in observance, their ubiquitous majesties, The Tax-payers.

"Pasolini had been one of those men who can get money from authorities, and as nominal head of the team I was more concerned about my lack of financial expertise than about my professional ability. And I was fairly modest about that too, even when it had the most comfortable circumstances to function in. So you can understand my state of mind when we reached the final stage of our project and our results depended on three days' intensive work, and we knew we lacked both staff and equipment to carry through this crucial period. There was nothing for it but to go ahead.

"There were only three of us left in the laboratory. One man had been seconded to the Sydney centre and our injured colleague was supposed to keep out of the laboratory for another month. He didn't, of course, and was already training himself to work one handed. His brain power was more important to us than his manual work, in any case.

"The last thirty-six hours of the experiment involved subjecting a huge sampling of cultures, seeds and plants to a series of tests and to heat and moisture exposures. Minutes, no, seconds, were crucial. We really required a large team and shift work and much more apparatus.

"Now, in the face of impossible circumstances every stage progressed smoothly. Results were satisfactory and seemed to lead in the direction we hoped, although in the middle of things we couldn't stop to analyse the data we were accumulating. I hardly had time to realize that we were apparently working at unearthly speed and efficiency. Just as well I didn't perhaps, or I may have thought I was dreaming the whole experiment. Jim Rosenberg, our old technician, was the first to say what I'd been half aware of all along. That there seemed to be more than three and a half people at work in the laboratory."

"Three and a half?"

"Yes, because the injured man was working as we were but could only handle about half the jobs we could. Yet, when we were organised on

a kind of conveyor belt principle, as sometimes was necessary, it was perfectly obvious, and perfectly absurd, that he was in fact keeping up with the other three.

"It was about eight in the morning when I burst out without wanting to say anything. 'Jim was right last night. There is something happening here. Someone is helping me to process these pans. And, look! three graph sheets made out completely in half an hour. I could not have done more than one by myself'. My voice was shaking because what I was saying was literally true. I seemed perfectly aware of what the graphs recorded and where the data came from, but I had not done the particular job that would have given me the information. What on earth was happening in our laboratory?

" 'Don't underestimate yourself,' said Jim. 'Look, that's your handwriting, Helen.' He was right, of course. But then the injured man held up two sheets of figures. 'Did any of you record these results in the last hour?' he asked.

" 'Do they look right?' asked our youngest assistant. He was a very practical and clever man whom most of you here know. I won't name him for fear he'd object to his part in this strange affair being made public. He's a very important man now, and quite above any superstitious nonsense.

" 'I'm pretty sure they are right,' said the injured man. 'I've been memorizing the main figures accurately. But these temperature variants aren't my data because I'd had to leave that part to one of you. It needs two hands. Who took these readings?'

"None of us had. The samples had been processed, the data recorded, and not one of the four of us knew anything about it. We'd each assumed the other had undertaken that job. On the chart pinned to the laboratory wall I'd listed every job required at each step of the experiment and we allocated ourselves certain jobs, and shared out some that the single-handed man could not do. We wrote one letter of our initials as we began a job and initialled it fully when we finished. Beside the temperature variants for this batch were a set of indecipherable initials.

"I grew angry under the tension. 'This isn't a time for chivalry. It's important to know who is working on what. Whose initials are these?'

" 'We can't tell you, Helen,' said the practical one, 'because we don't know. Let's hope the results are right and get on with the next step.'

" 'Whoever did it has been pretty busy,' said Jim drily. 'This scribble appears three times in the last twenty-four hours. I'd wondered who'd tidied that batch I left cooling at midnight. I thought you had, Helen. The chart is in your handwriting.'

"When I looked at the graph he held out I felt very peculiar. The figures were familiar but they were not mine.

" 'Those are Pasolini's numerals,' said the practical one quietly and decidedly. 'We had better stop ignoring what is going on here. That is Pasolini's seven with the stroke through it and that is how he always writes datum at the head of the column when we write data.'

" 'Wrote. Wrote,' cried the injured man. 'Pasolini is dead. When a thing is gone, it's gone for ever. It can't come back. Only in dreams.'

"We knew that the man had been tortured by nightmares in which he dreamt his right hand was restored. Dreams so vivid he would imagine his waking moment to be the beginning of a dream, and sometimes could not distinguish between the dream and the nightmare of reality. Now I began to wonder if I also dreamt. Outside the morning sun was blazing and the laboratory looked prosaic and solid.

" 'No, old chap,' said the practical scientist. 'But when the impossible happens it has to be accounted for. It's impossible we could have got through the experiment without completing the stages that are initialled like this. None of us did them. Even if someone has been working in his sleep he would have been seen, because at least one of us has been here and awake continually for the past three days. I've just checked the times and initials of the four of us.'

" 'Let's not account for it,' I heard myself saying. 'We shall just trust that the figures are accurate and derived from the experiments we did not do. So far they have not let us down. Will we continue in the hope that somehow we'll finish?'

"No one hesitated. And then the alarm rang to warn us that the last stage of the experiment had to begin. For nearly eight hours we scarcely exchanged a word unrelated to the job and I soon forgot about the uncanny speed and accuracy at which we were working. In fact, even under normal circumstances good teamwork can seem uncanny to the onlooker."

Helen Gray's audience agreed in the darkness. A football field, an operating theatre, an orchestral performance, the manoeuvres of a flight of sabre jets, all could create awe at something superbly executed by group training and trained instinct.

"Yes," said the woman. "But in our funny little laboratory group work and concentrated purpose seemed to have created something beyond the ordinary. Towards the end of the day the practical one returned from a scheduled ten minute break.

" 'Our unseen assistant is doing a good job,' he said calmly. 'I left these figures unchecked, and now these decimals have been carried two points further. I should have known that was necessary. At least I was bright enough to record them originally.'

'The injured man looked up briefly. 'Pasolini was fanatic about the ultimate decimal,' he said.

"And that was all," said Helen Gray simply. "You know the results of that experiment. It was famous enough and important enough to bring the four of us some fame and importance too. We called it the Pasolini experiment."

She stood up quietly and said goodnight in her gentle fashion and went out into the warm darkness.

"It's incredible," said Rattigan. "But I suppose it's true."

"It is true," said John Wilding-Reed, touching unconsciously as he often did, the patch over his right eye.