

The Stone Scenario



Stephen William ROWE

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This story is a work of fiction.

All the characters involved are products of my imagination and any resemblance of the characters to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental

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The Stone Scenario

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Author's Note:

This novel is placed ten years in the future.

As a research scientist, the extrapolations I make from present situations seem reasonable. However, they may or may not prove to be exact. Time alone will tell.

The technical and scientific information I have used is reliable. At the time of writing this represents the present state-of-the-art.

I have done my utmost to double check all facts. However, if any errors have slipped through, I will update the text should it be felt necessary.

Chapter 1.

One rarely has the opportunity of attending a lecture by a Nobel prize winner. Unsurprisingly, the public had jumped at the chance, and only those arriving early managed to find places. Luckily for me, reporters from the "International Science Digest" count amongst the privileged on such occasions. I thus had a seat in the front row.

The speaker, Professor Ian MacGregor, had granted me a personal interview the following week. All the same, I wanted to see him in action. My experience has shown that the public can be relied on to ask unexpected and sometimes blatantly naive questions. On such occasions, one gets a far better idea of the man behind the reputation.

The Professor was a born communicator, so his speech was enthusiastically received. Moreover, he consistently used terms and notions everybody understood to support his often daring simplifications. As a result, participants invariably left his lectures feeling they understood things that had previously escaped them.

Having summed up, the "questions" session was opened.

The Chairman had shrewdly primed a trusted colleague with a question to get the ball rolling.

'After such a long struggle Professor,' the man said, 'it must be highly satisfying to have your work officially recognised at the highest possible level. With hindsight though, what advice would you give a young person considering a career in scientific research?'

The professor's face broke into the well-known grin that had adorned so many magazine covers. He burst out laughing and, with his broad Scottish accent, said, 'I'd say, "stop before it's too late". Secondly, whatever else you do, don't get married.'

The audience laughed and applauded. 'But joking apart,' he went on, 'I'd tell them that if they aren't animated by an all-consuming passion and thirst for knowledge, do something else. The path is long, difficult, and chock-full of disappointment. Poorly paid too.' He paused and looked out across the sea of heads. 'If that doesn't put you off, you might just be made of the right stuff.' He paused and smiled. 'Next, and most importantly, interest yourself in everything. Not just your pet subject. Breakthroughs always come from

innovative thinking, combining ideas and knowledge from different subject areas.' He nodded at the audience, then concluded, 'And finally, if you like expensive cars, drop science altogether.'

This statement was followed by a new burst of laughter from the appreciative public.

Next, the Chairman skilfully drew a few questions from the younger, intimidated audience members. They stumbled and stammered them out nervously. Each was rewarded with an encouraging nod, a wide grin, and a friendly reply from the great man.

There followed the inevitable series of politically biased questions, which he sidestepped with the ease of a seasoned public speaker.

Then came the equally predictable remarks about the unprecedented lack of public funding for government-controlled laboratories.

At this, his brow drew down as he listened, and my colleague from "Science Globe" leant over to me and whispered, 'That's asking for it!'

I nodded back, and we waited.

With a flash of the old highland fighting light in his eyes, MacGregor drummed his big hairy fingers on the rostrum and glared.

'Aye, maybe. Maybe.' He nodded, 'But some say that scientists who waste valuable time and energy grumbling are the ones with little to contribute to science anyway.'

Silence fell in the auditorium as each person did his best to appear innocent of entertaining such petty thoughts.

'The ones with their noses to the grindstone,' he continued, 'the ones wrestling with science at the very edge of present knowledge have no time for grumbling. Science is a tough taskmaster,' he nodded. 'You'll find big discoveries are rarely made by people who grumble about lack of funds. They're made by those who shrug in the face of adversity. The ones who find ways around the difficulties and get on with the job.'

This cooled the atmosphere considerably.

The Chairman coughed, 'One or two last questions,' he said. There followed several over-asked and rather sad questions dealing with the environment.

These were inescapable because the public assumes that a Nobel Prize winner knows the solution to all the world's troubles.

Once more, he surprised everyone by saying something completely unexpected.

'Most of you have heard that song by Amy Winehouse, "Rehab".'

There was a rumble of voices and a nodding of heads.

'Well, someone wrote alternative Lyrics to that song. You might like to ponder these.'

He paused, 'The first line is, "The Planet needs to go to Rehab". Clever that, I thought. And this is how the chorus goes.' And he went on to amaze everyone by quoting in a deep, rumbling, melodious voice:

"Speculators are not concerned,
Where profit comes from, or how it's earned.
But believe me, they'd clean up this mess
if they could make big money in the process.
As we can't run away,
let's think that out because we have to stay."

He looked around the amphitheatre once the applause had died down. 'Well said, don't you think? So, what if we were to offer payment for every ton of rubbish cleared out of the oceans.'

He paused and looked around the hall, 'or from anywhere else for that matter. You can bet your last euro that thousands of companies would be clamouring for concessions.'

He nodded, “Think it out”. That’s sound advice.’

There was a rumble of agreement,
‘In one of the verses, the guy wrote,’ and again he quoted;

“The scientist said, ‘trust in me.
Time’s run out; can’t you see.
The lobbyist shook his head; ‘money, dear,
is what life’s for. Just sign down here.’
‘Profit,’ he smiled, ‘makes businesses grow.’
‘That environmental crap is just for show.’”¹

He drew himself up and looked out across the expectant audience.

‘Not nice to hear, eh? But unhappily not all that far from the truth, I’d guess.’

He looked over at the Chairman to ensure he wasn’t going too far. The latter nodded encouragingly and smiled at him to continue.

‘Now, imagine that each country was to allocate as little as 0.05% of its budget to a “global-clean-up” fund,’ he continued. ‘That way, we’d have more than one hundred billion Euros to play with. That’s a hundred-thousand million

¹ See the last page for my full song lyrics.

Euros in everyday terms...' He paused to let this figure sink in, then, with a wry smile, added, 'every year of course....'

The audience waited, some perched on the edges of their chairs.

'If,' he continued, 'the desire of securing a slice of that cake doesn't trigger a bit of enthusiasm, then I have sadly misjudged my fellow man.'

He looked around the hall, 'That's a pretty big number.' He paused, 'About two hundred million euros for every person in this hall today... every year...'

He smiled over at the Chairman, who was getting to his feet to close the session.

The man turned to the Professor and nodded, 'So I suppose, professor, it's a question of "Stop complaining and get to work".'

'Exactly, Mr Chairman. If you'll allow me a concluding remark....'

The Chairman knew Professor MacGregor often kept his most reactionary remarks until the very end.

'Go ahead, Professor,' he smiled, chuckling to himself.

'I'd like to invite everyone to ponder the following,' said the Professor. 'If we humans won't look after the planet and its environment

properly, why should we expect the planet to look after humanity.' He nodded to the audience.

'Put yourselves in the planet's shoes for a moment.

Would you consider humans a valuable asset in the overall scheme of things?' He nodded, gazing around the amphitheatre. 'Or would you perhaps think they were a rather troublesome and expendable life form?' He gazed across the expanse of upturned faces, 'Think about it.'

The Chairman thanked everyone, and I stood to leave once we had finished our applause. As I did so, the Professor caught my eye and winked.

I left him as he stepped down into the crowd and was swallowed up by reporters and selfie addicts.