

SPOILSPORT

by Ben Jeapes

Originally published in Substance no. 1 (Winter 1994)

When Miranda Devere sent out invitations for her next party, most of the guests had already prepared their RSVPs. The news had gone round the social circuit that Miranda's latest hobby had paid off in a big way, and that she was to be honoured accordingly.

The guests poured in to her mansion overlooking the Brazilian jungle and spread out over the grounds for which Miranda was rightly renowned. A welter of exotic names from government, commerce and entertainment – anyone who was anyone within lunar orbit.

Miranda moved among them, chattering and smiling brilliantly; a slender figure in her coruscating, low cut dress, her hair never a micron out of place in the forcefield that held it gently. When asked what was planned for later, she would only smile and say, 'Wait for midnight, dear.'

Midnight came and the guests were waiting in a state of excitement. Miranda stood in their midst on a platform and waited for quiet. Next to her stood a small, oriental woman. It was she, not Miranda, who held up her hands for silence and who spoke first.

'Ladies and gentlemen.' Her amplified voice echoed across the grounds and jungle. 'We are here as the guests of a very special woman. Our host, Miranda Devere.' The applause was spontaneous and real. The woman held her hands up again. 'Some of you may be aware that Miranda and her brother, who was unable to join us here tonight, were of great assistance to the Corporation in our starship project. Well, I have news. The starship probes have successfully returned to the solar system. We are making huge advances with the starship prototypes and, given a few more years, humans will be able to travel on them. Miranda, you gave us the navigation charts and we are indebted to you.'

The guests erupted into cheers and shouts and more applause, and Miranda stood there, beaming, taking it in.

Naturally, a demonstration was called for, her hobby having been so openly praised. She selected her closest friends and invited them to the top of the small tower that stood in one corner of her grounds. 'My observatory,' she called it.

'My dear friends,' she began, 'thank you so much for coming, and thank you for giving so much to my little party.' Some guests still looked cynical and she smiled extra hard at them. She indicated the oriental woman in the crowd. 'You have heard from

Madam Zhao about my hobby, and I know many of you are bursting with questions. Well, I have nothing to hide and everything to share. Look.'

She subvocalised a command to her Household and the roof of the tower slid open. It was a clear night (she had arranged that it would be) and the stars were magnificent. The gasp from the guests was quite genuine.

'The stars!' she said. 'Aren't they beautiful? They guide our destinies, you know. They control us. The Ancients knew all about it. I know some of you may be a bit sceptical, but bear with me, I pray. You have to remember that astrologers were there long before astronomers. The Three Wise Men were astrologers. It was their kind who first mapped out the heavens for us. They observed phenomena and provided theories to explain them. Whatever certain parties might say, they were scientific in what they did and their work produced results.'

'Now, can I have a volunteer? Anyone will do. Darling Konstantin, yes, do come forward.'

Konstantin Gallier, son of the Corporation's Head of Marketing, stepped forward, giggling and trembling with anticipation. Miranda sat him down at the table on the platform and took her place opposite him. 'Now, Konstantin, will you confirm that you didn't know I would ask you up?'

'I had no idea,' Konstantin tittered.

'Good. Household, the birth chart of Konstantin Gallier, please.'

Symbols appeared in the air between them.

'Now, Konstantin, look,' Miranda said. 'And the rest of you. Konstantin was born under Capricorn. He is a goat.' She ignored the snigger from a nameless member of the audience. 'Konstantin can seem a little shy, but he can be tough too. Ambitious, but still pleasant. He's a romantic, but he hides it. That's a Capricorn.'

'Now, Mars is passing through Capricorn at the moment. I'll show you what that means. Look up, everyone.'

Everyone craned their necks upwards and a holographic pointer appeared above them.

'Capricorn is here,' Miranda said, tracing out its pattern with the pointer. 'And Mars is ... um ... is ...'

'That's Mars over there,' said someone. Peter Gallier, of course. Konstantin's hateful brother.

'Don't be silly, Peter dear,' Miranda said. 'It can't be. Planets don't jump around the sky. Mars is ... no, wait ...'

'No, he's right,' said someone else. 'That's Mars.'

It took five minutes to confirm that Mars was, indeed, in completely the wrong quadrant of the sky. Miranda's face was livid and she seemed on the verge of an outburst.

'Let me, Miranda.'

Madam Zhao stepped through the crowd, which opened up for her. She took her communicator from her belt and said a few words into it. 'Any moment now ...' she said.

With no warning and no transition, Mars was suddenly where it should be in the sky, and Miranda's demonstration proceeded as before.

When it was over, Miranda was still quivering. Zhao put a hand on her shoulder.

'Rise above it, dear. Show that you can.'

'Oh, Madam, why does he have to spoil everything?' Miranda said sadly.

* * *

Philip Devere was out in the garden. Like his twin sister he had his own carefully sculpted, tastefully landscaped grounds, though smaller: they were well lit and needed to be, because no light could make it through the two miles of sea above his forcebubble. 'I value my solitude,' was his usual, predictable response to anyone who queried his strange choice of habitat.

It was late but he had decided against going to bed. He knew full well that he would only be dragged out again ... shortly after midnight, Brazil time.

And he could never sleep, anyway, when the Philosophical Computer was in full flow.

It was currently debating his latest thoughts on the notion of universal properties of matter. Fifty-odd humaniform androids, toga-clad like their master, sat around the garden in little groups, under trees and by bushes, each group discussing an aspect or a development of the topic at hand. Every now and then a member of one group would get up and wander over to another to give them the results of their latest deliberations. These results would then be debated by the next group and passed on in turn; ultimately, one of them would approach Philip and tell him what the Philosophical Computer thought.

It was his pet idea, his favourite toy. A meeting of trained, organic minds that could discuss any subject under the sun in a precise, disciplined manner, using a purely logical language of his own devising, without a single 'you know ...' or 'I'm only saying ...'. Beautiful.

He stood by a group clustered around a fish pond; they ignored him until he spoke.

'Use Abelard,' he said, and at once the android nearest him cast the medieval thinker's ideas on the subject into the pool of speculation.

A quiet voice spoke out of the air an inch away from Philip's ear. 'A call for you in the viewing chamber, sir.' His face split into a grin.

'I wonder who it could be?' he said.

To his surprise, it wasn't who he expected. It should have been Miranda. The laser field should have had a full size image of his twin sister, reproducing her fury perfectly, radiating it out at him. She should have been screaming and stamping her feet.

But the figure in the viewing chamber was another woman. She was good looking and of indeterminate age, though she must have been ancient. She dressed with a casual sense of power.

'Madam Administrator,' Philip said humbly. 'Good day.'

Madam Zhao looked the matriarch and as usual Philip felt all his intellectual arrogance flow out of him.

'You really cannot be trusted, can you, Philip?'

'Madam Zhao, I-'

'If you must spoil your sister's hobbies, could you at least have the decency not to do it in front of her friends?'

'She didn't invite me to the party,' Philip said with a smirk.

'Just as well.'

'I know. I'd have gone as a doughnut and told everyone I was a torus.'

'I was there, Philip, in my own guise. My people cancelled your forcefield lens, the image of Mars was back where it should have been, and everyone knew that another silly prank by Philip Devere had gone awry. It was you who ended up with egg on your face, Philip-' Philip's face hardened and his eyes narrowed, and Zhao smiled '-and that is easily avoided, you know.'

'Oh, Madam!' Philip snapped. 'You know as well as I do that this astrology lark will go the same way as the last one. Remember the Tongues Lexicon?'

(Miranda had interviewed people suffering from religious ecstasies from all over the solar system. She had invited them to her house, noted down the noises that came from their mouths and fed them into her computers for analysis. One of Philip's androids had been planted in her study group and had been her favourite subject until she realised that it was simply repeating everything she said backwards in Esperanto. The lexicon project had lasted a month.)

'You do make self-fulfilling prophecies, Philip,' Zhao said. 'And it's true that even without your encouragement, she loses interest quickly. But in the meantime ... well, Philip, believe it or not, Miranda is currently ahead of you in our favours. As well as the starcharts, a spin-off of her astrology work has been a revolution in our social engineering paradigms. And they are working.'

Philip gaped, struck dumb. 'But-'

'While you, Philip, are still struggling with the problem of faster than light travel, no? Maybe being a die-hard empiricist isn't the be all and end all.'

Philip shouted angrily. 'I'm getting there! I'm talking about the laws of physics, not just people, and they're a damn sight harder to crack! The probes have all come back safely, haven't they?'

'True. With all organic lifeforms on board dead, and substantial evidence from the computers that the probes actually travelled back in time on the outward journey through hyperspace. Not very practical, Philip.'

'I try,' Philip muttered.

'And if you want to keep receiving your research subsidies from the Corporation, keep trying.' Zhao dismissed the business with a flick of the wrist. 'Now, to business. Your most recent set of equations actually appear to be working quite nicely.'

'Oh, good.'

'The Philosophical Computer really is a very clever piece of work.'

Philip actually smiled, with a touch of pride. 'Isn't it?'

'You had promised to let us have one of your androids as a pilot for the next probe ...'

'It's all ready, Madam Administrator. You can have it whenever you want.'

'Very good. We will open our teleport channel to you for point five seconds at 1800 Beijing time, precisely.'

'Eighteen hundred Beijing. Right-o.' Philip's confidence was growing. Even if Zhao did look down on him, purely figuratively, she still had to acknowledge that his androids were the best and that she needed them. Surely that justified all the Corporation's time and effort.

'Now, Philip, a word before I go.'

'Madam Administrator?'

Zhao actually took a step forward and raised a finger in warning. 'Our hopes for you and your sister were not in vain, Philip. Between you, you have given us the teleport, and that alone repaid our investment in your services. But we've put a lot more into you since then, and again we want a return. We hoped you would get us safely past light speed, get us out of the solar system. We are so close!' Zhao held up thumb and forefinger a fraction of an inch apart, to illustrate her point. 'So close. But to get there, you and your sister must work together. Together you are the best, and this childish bickering must stop. Once you've got us to the stars we will ask no more of you. You will be funded for the rest of your lives, with no expectation of return-' Philip's heart pounded '-and you will be able to pursue your hobbies all you want.'

Once you have got us to the stars. And if that means being nice to your sister, the Corporation considers that an acceptable sacrifice.'

Philip nodded quickly. 'Oh, absolutely, yes. Quite agree.'

Zhao smiled. 'It may interest you to know, Philip, that you are apparently a typical Cancer male. You are ready to disparage anyone and everybody, you crave affection but you don't dare let anyone come close enough to give it. So Miranda says.'

Philip's face was turning red and he felt a volcano pushing up inside him.

'Ciao, Philip,' Zhao said before it erupted, and vanished.

* * *

The advent of the teleport had obviated the tiresome need for accommodating guests overnight. By dawn, Miranda's mansion was empty.

Philip's apology was waiting for her when she woke, shortly before noon. It was relayed to her by her Household.

'Philip Devere apologises to his sister for spoiling her party last night by sending Mars on an unexpected journey, and hopes she won't hold it against him. Just to make up, she can come and audit his engrams any time she wishes.'

'Idiot,' she sniffed.

The androids had tidied up the grounds while she slept, returning them to their immaculate splendour. She took a brief walk in them, then ordered a light meal to be made ready for her in the observatory. It was waiting for her when she arrived. She would absorb herself in her hobby to show that she could rise above these little setbacks, as Madam Zhao had advised; that would show Philip.

She sat down at her calculating desk and on a suspicious whim called up satellite shots of the night sky from all around the world. Everything was where it should be. Good.

Though Philip would have spat blood at the suggestion, Miranda's approach was methodical and well-reasoned. All the information she needed was in the databanks somewhere; built up over the centuries, datum by datum. It needed the flexibility and intuition of a human mind to piece it together again and to make sense of it. She tackled the problem with the love and precision of an artist.

She pictured the galaxy as a shape in her mind. Each star was a node, a point held in suspension in the matrix of gravity. She took a sphere of a thousand light years' diameter with the Sun at the centre and built up a map of the overlapping gravitational fields, assigning them different colours according to their different strengths and what she perceived as the twists and bends that lay in them.

It took hours to finish; she was utterly lost in the creation of something beautiful and her meal went untouched.

* * *

Philip summoned the Philosophical Computer. The androids clustered on the lawn and he walked among them, thinking as he moved. It was his preferred way of delivering instructions; he felt like a general briefing his troops.

‘The program,’ he said, ‘is to deliver a psychological outline of my sister Miranda Devere. You will find the Corporation’s databases hold basic psychological profiles and you may use them for data. What I want is a reason why she persists in these . . . these . . . these ludicrous activities, these insults to the intelligence, these embarrassments to me as her brother, who has given his life to empiricism-’ His voice had been rising and he choked. He swallowed and breathed slowly to calm himself down. ‘I want a method whereby she can be discouraged from her inane beliefs in the supernatural and yet continue to deliver worthwhile research to the Zhao Cow and her cronies. Use Freud, use Jung, use anyone on the permitted index of psychological thinkers. Commence now.’

And in the meantime ... well, if it meant so much to Zhao, and if the potential rewards were so great, maybe he really should do something to be nice to Miranda. Maybe he could talk her out of the nonsense and they really could work together.

But if not ... well, the Philosophical Computer would always provide a fall-back plan.

* * *

Miranda noticed the passage of time with surprise, then looked back at the gorgeous, multi-hued swirl of colour hovering over her desk. She studied the holographic image from different angles. It really was quite spectacular. She made a note to incorporate it into her designs the next time she redecorated.

Her Household spoke into her ear. ‘Your brother asks permission to visit you.’

‘Philip? Are you sure?’

‘He says that he wishes to make peace.’

‘Gosh.’ Whatever new game of Philip’s this was, she would not be taken in. ‘Well ... yes, set the teleport to receive him,’ Miranda said graciously. ‘When he arrives, show him here. I’m too busy to go and meet him. Oh, and tell me if it’s only an android that looks like him.’

Her agoraphobic brother would have to walk across the wide-open grounds; that would show whether or not his desire to make peace was genuine. She doubted that it was. She was all the more surprised when Philip sidled through the door five minutes later.

‘Hello, Philip,’ she said in surprise.

‘Hello, Miranda,’ he said. She stood and came over to him slowly, holding out a hand. He took it and she gasped.

‘It really is you. Not an image.’ Real and solid, in his toga and pale skin that came from spending his life under artificial lighting in his bubble at the bottom of the sea.

‘It really is me,’ he agreed. He was looking nervously about him, not at all at ease. He nodded his head at the image above the table. ‘That’s pretty. What is it?’

‘It’s our bit of the galaxy.’ Miranda was even more taken aback by Philip being agreeable. ‘My hobby, remember?’ she added, with a hint of challenge.

‘Oh.’ Philip refrained from comment while she described what she had been doing.

‘If the starship’s flying through hyperspace it needs to know the exact shape of space ahead of it. Madam Zhao says my data is so much better than what she gets from her own computers.’

‘I see.’ Philip mused upon the image, then looked back at his sister. ‘Can we talk?’

Miranda shrugged and reclined on a couch. She indicated that Philip could do the same.

‘Thank you,’ he said, once he was settled. Miranda looked at him expectantly. ‘I don’t really know where to start,’ he said. ‘I’m not used to talking to other people. But . . . well, I’ve been talking to Madam Zhao too. They really, really want this starship thing to succeed ... and they’re relying on us! Everyone is! We’re the best, Miranda, you and me. We’re Deveres! Doesn’t that make you proud?’

‘It always has.’ She looked at her brother thoughtfully. ‘Why did you have to come here to tell me this, Philip?’

‘Well, I thought ...’ He smiled bashfully. ‘I thought that since we’re on a common track, and it really is for everyone’s good, I mean, they’ll give us life-long funding and all that ... well, we could bury the hatchet. We could cooperate.’

‘Oh, Philip! Like brother and sister should! Oh, that would be lovely!’

‘Well, um ... now that’s decided-’ Philip stood to leave.

‘Oh, don’t go!’ Miranda said, jumping up. She stood facing her brother, awkwardly. They would have to get used to each other’s presence, she decided, so she reached out and hugged him. After a long second she felt him returning the hug.

‘We should tell Madam Zhao,’ she said.

‘She’ll be pleased,’ Philip admitted. Miranda was taking her first proper look at him in the flesh since he was a pimply boy. For the first time, she saw that he was reasonably good-looking.

‘Will you stay in your bubble?’ she asked.

‘Yes, I suppose so. You know I don’t like open spaces or too much company.’ He looked at her shyly. ‘But . . . well, just to show this is for real, you can use the Philosophical Computer any time you want. Just ask.’

‘Oh, Philip!’ Miranda tightened her hug. ‘I’ll use it to work out a birth chart just for you.’

‘Eh?’ Philip broke out of her hug. She regarded him, puzzled and hurt.

‘Is something wrong?’

‘B-but, I thought ... I thought ...’ Philip stammered. ‘I thought I’d convinced you to forget that nonsense . . .’

‘What do you mean, nonsense?’ Miranda demanded. She felt her good humour evaporate.

‘Well, I mean, yes, the stars and the gravitational fields and all that – that’s a useful side product, I suppose. At least it’s scientific. But this destiny crap-’

‘Philip!’

‘-I mean, it’s all utter bullshit-’

‘That does it!’ Miranda yelled. ‘Get out of here, Philip Devere, and don’t come back!’

‘I actually thought I’d convinced you-’ Philip said.

‘*Out!*’ Miranda howled. Philip stormed out.

‘It was nice while it lasted,’ he muttered under his breath as he strode back to the mansion, the teleport chamber and the sanctuary of his home. ‘For all of thirty seconds. So much for the reasoned argument.’

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‘Let’s hear it, and it better be good,’ Philip said sullenly. He was slumped in a chair sipping a drink as the spokesandroid of the Philosophical Computer summarised its report on the assignment that Philip had set.

‘Miranda Devere approaches her hobbies with the commitment of an artisan,’ it said. ‘She desires that every task upon which she embarks will make a statement to the world. There is a possible correlation here with classical psychological theories relating to the lack of proper parenting and a desire to be taken seriously by those who are her peers, but who she perceives as her betters.’

‘Nothing wrong with her parenting,’ Philip muttered. Exactly the same process had produced him.

‘Miranda Devere can withstand criticism and opposition from others, but she has invariably abandoned her hobbies every time they have been sabotaged by you. This is because you do not just criticise but are careful to arrange something that clearly falsifies her theories. Witness your subversion of the Tongues Lexicon and the Reincarnation Programme.’

‘Oh, yeah.’ Philip grinned. ‘That was a good one.’ All that had taken was getting three friends (friends no longer) drunk, hypnotically implanting identical memories of former lives and then carefully, one by one, releasing them into Miranda’s social circle.

‘So,’ Philip said, ‘I arrange something that makes nonsense of her theories ... but since she knows it’s contrived by me, why doesn’t she just carry on again?’

‘We surmise that it is you she especially wishes to impress, albeit subconsciously,’ the android said. ‘Following the early death of your father, you are the family male, the leader, the father-substitute. It is knowing that you in particular are ridiculing her which makes her lose heart.’

‘Go on.’

‘We therefore recommend a reversion to your usual tactics. A deliberate spanner thrown into the works will cause her to abandon the project.’

‘Okay, that’s part one,’ Philip said, thinking of the implications. An astrological event that Miranda couldn’t possibly predict and which meant nothing ... wow! Not quite as easy to organise as fake memories. ‘Now, part two? No one must be able to prove anything about my involvement.’

‘An element of suspicion as to your involvement is inevitable-’

‘Of course.’

‘-but if you desire a lack of proof-’

* * *

No one expected the starship probe to blast suddenly out of the solar system. Without warning the stardrive came on: every particle on the ship changed to a tachyon analogue and the probe vanished from human purview.

Everyone assumed it was a malfunction and Philip felt deeply satisfied. If this worked, it would be worth the loss of the pilot android, worth the wrath of Madam Zhao, worth the loss of the Corporation’s trust ... worth everything.

Thanks to the Philosophical Computer, Philip knew more than anyone alive about the possibilities of playing with faster-than-light travel. Playing with time. It was a bug in his equations that had been giving the Corporation grief and which he had been trying to get rid of for ages. So why not use it? Though the probe took a year of its subjective time to travel through hyperspace towards its far-off destination, when it emerged into normal space in the vicinity of a planetless star it was several thousand years ago.

A beam of coherent radiation flared out from the probe – gamma rays, aimed into the heart of the star. Philip had hoped the scientists had got the theory right (no one had ever had a chance to prove or disprove it), and they had. The star’s supernova sequence was triggered and it erupted spectacularly. By the time the expanding cloud reached the probe’s orbit it had already jumped on to the next star on its precisely-timed itinerary.

The light rays started on their long journey to Earth.

* * *

Philip had told the Household to block all calls. It would be suspected, it would be in character, but no one would be able to prove that he had had anything to do with the

eruption of the entire Gemini constellation – a synchronised, multi-nova spectacle that would dominate the skies for months.

The Philosophical Computer was hacking its way towards a fusion of quantum theory and the philosophy of Bishop Berkeley when the one item of information that Philip had decreed should be allowed through arrived. Miranda Devere had abandoned her hobby.

‘That’s that nonsense out of the way, then,’ Philip said, highly pleased with himself, before turning back to the Philosophical Computer. Madam Zhao got her stargharts; Miranda ceased to disgrace the Devere name with her foolishness; he could chalk up another victory over irrationality.

Astrology indeed! No substitute for hard logic. For empiricism. For science.

And no way was he going to set the Philosophical Computer onto the question of why he felt just a little, teeny bit guilty.