

Dial M for middleware

Dirty work down on the Pharm.

David Hall

I was in a lab again — the first time since I gave up trying to get a PhD in biochemistry and joined the police force. This one at PHunnyPharm had gleaming, state-of-the-art equipment. Did you ever use a fraction collector years ago? Big clunky thing that you left running overnight filled with battered old test tubes? You came in the next morning to discover that it had flung precisely the tubes of interest onto the floor. This lab's machine had a neat continuous spiral of plastic tubes, all still working away. The floor was a real mess, though. Even in my day we drew the line at dead bodies.

Judy, the technician who'd found him, told me that he was the company's star researcher, Plantagenet Benfield. He'd been battered to death sometime between midnight and three in the morning, according to the pathologist.

PHunnyPharm's proprietor, Simon Clark, was taking his time to arrive, so I talked to Richard in Security. He was obviously glad of the chance to show off his gee-whiz electronic gadgets.

The roar of a sports car heralded Clark's arrival. I had liked Benfield better. He hadn't looked so smug — dead.

"Simon, did Benfield often work at night?"

"He shouldn't have done. All alone. Health and safety issues. But he was very dedicated. Soldiering away on his own."

"Do you know what he was working on?"

"It'll be in his notebooks."

Twice he had felt the need to assure me that Benfield had been working alone. I went back to Judy so she could talk me through the equipment she'd set up for him. The extract went in here; a set of columns fractionated it into its component parts here; which were sent as a stream to that lovely fraction collector, there. Samples of the fractions were taken, sent round and round in tubes, and came out there.

"What happens here?"

"The samples are bioassayed for psychedelia. All of this is under computer control through a middleware system that allows different units to talk to each other. Plantagenet used it to program a series of tests on selected fractions. For instance, if the machine finds a frac-

tion containing a psychedelic, it then can also have it assayed for, say, blood-vessel constriction — some psychedelics act against cluster headaches — by this box, or for something else by that box. If it found anything interesting it would call his mobile."

"For a chat?"

"Plantagenet had different ringtones for calls from different parts of the set-up. A call from the bioassay made it play *The Yellow Rose of Texas*. Details would be in a text."

"Do you know why Benfield was working late last night?"

"He wasn't planning to."

The scene-of-crime officer had given me Benfield's mobile. I looked up his last incoming call. Midnight. I showed the number to Judy.

"Does this mean anything to you?"

"It's the middleware direct line."

"The system called him in then. What exactly had he been working on?"

"The same as other people here. Magic

mushrooms — they have a research licence. I think Plantagenet was looking for psychedelics in some of the company's extracts. It had upset Simon."

Clark had implied that he didn't know what Benfield had been working on.

"Upset him how?"

"Our patented extracts are psychedelic-free, so they're legal. If Plantagenet had found psychedelics in them, it would have been death — commercial death. An invalid patent."

Time to talk to the boss again.

"So what do you think happened last night, Simon?"

"We hold a lot of psychedelic drugs here. Benfield was disturbed by an intruder. Bam! No great mystery, I think. Unfortunately the intruder must have taken the hard disk. There are no CCTV records for last night."

Dee dum dee dee dee dum dee

"Is that your mobile, Simon?"

"Excuse the tune. Someone's idea of a joke." He put the phone quickly to his ear. "OK. Sorry, but you know..."

I pulled the phone straight from his hand — there was a text message, but silence at the other end.

"I do know *The Yellow Rose of Texas*. I think Benfield's equipment has just tried to call him — but it also called you. That happened last night, didn't it? Benfield's analyser found something and called him. You'd been suspicious, and got his equipment to call you as well. You came in..."

"You can't prove that!"

"Because you're not on film? You ought to take more interest in your own security systems. Your fence has microphones all over it. I have compared the sound of a car engine it recorded last night, with that of your car engine from this morning. They're the same."

"You couldn't have done all that since you got here."

I waved my mobile at him. "The police use middleware too. You're nicked."

A good morning's work. Especially as I was now the only one who knew which of their compounds was a potential headache cure. Clark should have read that last text. ■

David Hall used to be a biochemist, but got a life, and then a wife, great niece of a celebrated mystery writer, who would have relished all of today's possibilities. He is aware that nostalgia isn't what it used to be.

