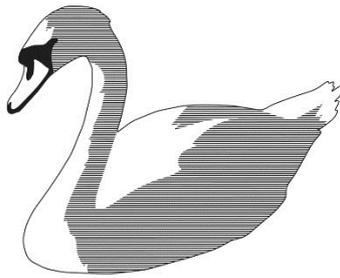


**The Silver Archive #1B**  
**SAPPHIRE & STEEL**  
**Assignments Three and Four**



**By Cody Schell**

THE SILVER ARCHIVE

SAPPHIRE AND STEEL - ASSIGNMENTS THREE AND FOUR

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## ***Excerpt from Chapter Five***

From the window of a flat at the top of a tower block, a stranger watches the goings on of the world below, while food mysteriously ages as though passing too quickly through time. Meanwhile, three colleagues with unusual powers attempt to uncover a threat to everyone's safety.

This is a television story by Peter Hammond, but it's not *Assignment Three* of **Sapphire & Steel**.

In 1971, Hammond made his breakthrough in scripting for children's genre drama, with the three part serial *Joker* for Thames' **Ace of Wands**. An ITV series viewed by many as just another attempt by commercial television to mimic the success of the BBC's **Doctor Who**, **Ace of Wands** starred Michael MacKenzie as Tarot, a stage magician who also had certain occult powers. Together with a changing cast of assistants, Tarot investigated often supernatural goings on in London and its surrounding areas to mixed success. *Joker* apparently concerns itself with the activities of a troupe of travelling entertainers and berserk children<sup>1</sup> and was sufficiently successful that Hammond was invited back for the following season, for which he penned the three part *The Meddlers*.

*The Meddlers* tells the story of a London marketplace plagued by a mysterious group of wandering musicians, and the investigations by Tarot and his two friends into a series of inexplicable fires and other unusual events in the area, caused, it is rumoured, by an ancient curse. Food in the market rots overnight while the gang of minstrels, led by the menacing figure of Mockers, terrorise the stall holders, in an attempt to drive them from the market.

Of most interest in relation to **Sapphire & Steel**, however, is the property developer, Mr. Dove, who stands in his top floor (and curiously empty) office, surveying the marketplace below him through a telescope. Clearly, this is not the same sort of story as *Assignment Three*, nor is Mr. Dove a historian from the future, or anything like, but the structure is similar and it is entirely possible that the writer, remembering this earlier, well received set-up chose to make use of it again in his third **Sapphire & Steel** script.<sup>2</sup>

*Assignment Three* is a change in direction for the series, after the more folky horror of *Assignments One* and *Two*. A far more science fictional tale than its predecessors, it takes a despairing look at Man's effect on the environment. Not only does future Mankind hold dominion over nature, animals, and the planet Earth itself, they have also begun to manipulate time and, having eradicated all animal life, now risk destroying all human life too.

As with most **Sapphire & Steel** stories, the real interest lies not in the mechanics of the plot itself, but in everything else: the easily over-looked and often almost tangential detail. In simple terms, the serial involves Sapphire, Steel and Silver wandering about an abandoned flat for several episodes, a run of disappearing and returning cast members, and a couple of resolutions essentially plucked from the air. But to concentrate on the bare bones in **Sapphire & Steel** is to miss the point, rather.

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<sup>1</sup> The whole serial was wiped by Thames soon after transmission and no longer exists.

<sup>2</sup> Another possible inspiration for this pair of observers might be the various figures in Brian Aldiss' controversial novel *Report on Probability A*, which caused more than a ripple of debate in the science fiction community on publication in 1967 (in *New Worlds* magazine, no. 171) and 1968 (in novel format from Faber and Faber). Described as both 'perhaps his most brilliant work to date' (in the *New Worlds* introduction) and as 'sheer self-indulgence' (Joanna Russ, 'Books', *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, July 1970, p.45), it begins with three observers watching a suburban couple via the naked eye, a telescope and a periscope respectively, before spiralling out into a series of never-ending nested observers, each watching the iteration before them.

### ***'It's some kind of future'*<sup>3</sup>**

In *Assignment Three*, the future world of 1,500 years to come is a case in point. The society itself is never seen or even described, and on the surface there seems to be little discussion of it at all, and yet there is enough there for a reasonable picture of its composition to be teased out.

In a general sense, people from the future seem to be prone to a form of willing self-delusion, preferring where possible to remain unaware of anything negative. Eldred, the male future traveller encountered by the time agents, follows instructions from his superiors, but is apparently capable of little else, including curiosity. He consoles himself with empty platitudes that everything will be fine because the idea that they won't be is almost literally unthinkable to him. He (and his wife, Rothwyn) fear the outside natural world and seal themselves away from it. He is physically cowardly, technically inept, and obsessed with social convention, seemingly caring more about the propriety of looking into the bedroom of the family in the Rural capsule than the fact that he has been told that they are all dead. Each of these facts can be combined with others to build a reasonably detailed picture of the year 3480.

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<sup>3</sup> Sapphire, *Assignment Three*.