

C H A P T E R 1

The Call to Stockholm



*Crick will need a Nobel Prize which, rumour has it,
he will one day get for his helices. . .*

We now await the Nobel Prize and Royal Medal.

Now for the Nobel Prize!¹

One October night in 1962, the Cambridge police received a call about a disturbance at one of those tall town houses² toward the end of Portugal Place, a little backwater off of Bridge Street and close to St. John's College. Elsewhere, the houses are more modest, and the numerous bikes left on the sidewalk betrayed their role as student accommodation. The name "Portugal" refers to the precious cargoes of port and sherry that in former times arrived on barges and were destined to be consumed by the College Fellows at High Table. Even in 1962, this area of town supported a mixed population of "town and gown." Nearby were a pawn shop and a second-hand clothes shop, the former once patronized by Francis and Odile Crick in time of need. Normally, it was a peaceful part of town, apart, that is, from the annual Fifth of November festivities, when fireworks and bonfires celebrate the capture of Guy Fawkes in 1603 as he prepared to blow up the Houses of Parliament.

It was 18 October, however, and there was no peace on Portugal Place. Mrs. Bessicovitch's dogs at No. 21 had become agitated at the sound of exploding fireworks raining down on the street below. Figures silhouetted against the night sky on the roof of No. 19 were clearly to blame. Clinging to the chimney pots, they were lighting firecrackers and throwing them down to the street. Inside, a lively party was in full swing.³ A policeman was sent to investigate. As he reached the front door, he might have noticed a metal helix that was painted yellow,

attached to the wall above him. If he did, its significance was not obvious to him. Knocking loudly to make his presence felt above the noise within, he was greeted by a tall debonair man with a slight stoop, lively blue eyes, sandy hair, and his dress a touch flamboyant. A friend described him as “a lambent troll of a man.”⁴

With the politeness that befits a gentleman, the owner apologized, explaining that he had not been aware of the activity on the roof, this being a big party crammed into many small rooms on five levels. Odile and assistants were hard at work in the kitchen and dining room in the basement or running up and down one or other of the two flights of steep stairs, carrying the refreshments needed to sustain the guests on the many floors. Bottles of champagne were much in evidence, and everyone was having a good time—so much so that when Dr. James Watson put through a trans-Atlantic call to Crick, the latter had later to apologize that he “was incoherent, but there was so much noise,” he explained, “I could hardly hear what you said.”⁵

The host assured the policeman that the fireworks would stop at once. Then, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye and smile on his face, he asked “Do you know what we are celebrating?” “No,” came the answer. “Then you can read about it in the papers tomorrow. But why don’t you come in and have a drink?” The officer graciously accepted and, politely taking off his helmet, enjoyed a drink before quietly leaving. The problem had been dealt with. When diplomacy and charm were needed, both the host and the officer could provide it.

Readers of the *Cambridge Evening News* the next day (Friday) found the heading *Nobel Theory was Discussed in “Pub.”* The pub was The Eagle, on Bene’t Street. The Cambridge scientist thus honored was Dr. Francis Crick and his address was given as “The Golden Helix,”⁶ 19–20 Portugal Place. That Thursday, he had learned that he was to share the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine with the young American biologist Dr. James Watson and the New Zealand–born biophysicist Dr. Maurice Wilkins. Their award was for their 1953 discovery of the molecular structure of deoxyribonucleic acid or DNA and, in Crick’s case, also for his contributions toward the elucidation of the chemical code in which our genes are written—the genetic code.

By the time the telegram arrived from Stockholm at Crick’s office on Thursday, the shops were about to close, for it was early closing day in the town. Fortunately, in the Medical Research Council’s (MRC) Laboratory of Molecular Biology (LMB) where Crick worked, the resourceful lab steward Mike Fuller was at hand.⁷ He raced round the pubs and pleaded with the Colleges to part with some of their bubbly. Meanwhile, Odile immediately placed an urgent order with Matthews, the

wine merchant. Ice was a problem that she solved by visiting the fishmongers who hammered large blocks of ice into pieces for her.

Among the many guests was the Caltech biochemist Hildegard Lamfrom.⁸ Always keen to have a lively party, she brought with her a generous supply of fireworks, including rockets. As the party progressed, guests began to congregate on the little roof garden where Hugh Huxley, as legend has it, deftly held each lighted rocket in his hands until the moment was right to release it skyward. Although he failed to score a direct hit on the St. John's College chapel roof, one rocket did land in the College courtyard. Then, four braves scrambled up to the roof, carrying a supply of fireworks that they proceeded to light and throw to the street. Among the four was Les Smith. He stuffed some fireworks into his trouser pocket and, when they caught fire he burned his hand removing them. Fortunately, his lab chief, the Nobel laureate Fred Sanger, was at hand to take him to Addenbrooke's Hospital.

Memorable as was this party, the reason for the party was a bigger event: the award of the Nobel Prize to Crick, James Watson, and Maurice Wilkins. One writer⁹ put into words his thoughts as he fantasized about receiving the prize. He could, he wrote,

hear the *crinkle* of the envelope as I open the telegram from Stockholm. I can *smell* the leather and velvet scent of the blue box in which the Nobel medal lies . . . I think hard and long of those who are the real thing, whose names will last in the household of the mind . . . I imagine myself in their skin of glory—because that is what it is, a skin in which their lives have changed and become luminous.¹⁰

When a week later John Steinbeck turned on his television at his home in Sag Harbor, Long Island, he was seeking news of the Cuban missile crisis, but discovered that he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature. "What was his reaction?" asked a *The New York Times* reporter. "Disbelief," he replied. "Then what happened?" "I had a cup of coffee."¹¹ No fantasizing here! Did Crick have any idea that he might receive the award? True, Jim Watson had the goal of winning the prize way back in the 50s during his days as a postdoc. He was not surprised. But Crick had been totally unaware of Watson's secret ambition and had not been planning his life with his compass bearing set on a Nobel Prize. Indeed, it was not until 1956, he recalled, that it occurred to him that their discovery of the structure of DNA was Nobel Prize-worthy, due to a casual remark by another scientist.¹² True, the Nobel award would have been a great surprise in 1955. But it was not unexpected 7 years later, especially considering he had been consulted by Sir Lawrence Bragg about the matter in 1960 and by Jacques Monod in 1961.¹³

Interviewed on the day of the telegram from the Rector of the Karolinska Institute, Crick was in an expansive mood. He told the reporter from the *Cambridge Evening News* that “the crucial part of this work was done in two months” and that “most of the early work for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine was discussed with Dr. James Watson . . . in a Cambridge public house . . . I wouldn’t say this was hard work.” He confessed, “It was mainly theorizing, there were no long hours of laboratory work—nothing dramatic.”¹⁴ Alongside this column, the *Cambridge Evening News* inserted a box entitled “Doctor’s Hobby.” Taken from *Who’s Who*, it reads

Dr. Crick is 46. He was educated at Mill Hill School, University College, London, and Caius College Cambridge. He has been married twice and has a son by his first wife, and two daughters by his second wife.

His recreation is listed in “Who’s Who” as conversation, especially with pretty women.¹⁵

It was later that he acquired a new hobby—gardening—“to the astonishment,” he confessed, “of all my friends.”¹⁶