What was the chance in a million?

We are less credulous than we used to be.

In the nineteenth century, a novelist would bring his story to a conclusion by presenting his readers with a series of coincidences, most of them wildly improbable.

Readers happily accepted the fact that an obscure maidservant was really the hero's mother.

A long-lost brother, who was presumed dead, was really alive all the time and wickedly plotting to bring about the hero's downfall.

And so on.

Modern readers would find such naive solutions totally unacceptable.

Yet, in real life, circumstances do sometimes conspire to bring about coincidences which anyone, but a nineteenth-century novelist would find incredible.

When I was a boy, my grandfather told me how a German taxi driver, Franz Bussman, found a brother who was thought to have been killed twenty years before.

While on a walking tour with his wife, he stopped to talk to a workman.

After they had gone on, Mrs. Bussman commented on the workman's close resemblance to her husband and even suggested that he might be his brother.

Franz poured scorn on the idea, pointing out that his brother had been killed in action during the war.

Though Mrs. Bussman was fully acquainted with this story, she thought that there was a chance in a million that she might be right.

A few days later, she sent a boy to the workman to ask him if his name was Hans Bussman.

Needless to say, the man's name was Hans Bussman and he really was Franz's long-lost brother.

When the brothers were reunited, Hans explained how it was that he was still alive.

After having been wounded towards the end of the war, he had been sent to hospital and was separated from his unit.

The hospital had been bombed and Hans had made his way back into Western Germany on foot.

Meanwhile, his unit was lost and all records of him had been destroyed.

Hans returned to his family home, but the house had been bombed and no one in the neighbourhood knew what had become of the inhabitants.

Assuming that his family had been killed during an air raid, Hans settled down in a village fifty miles away, where he had remained ever since.

Hans had been wounded towards the end of the war, taken to hospital and separated from his unit.

When the hospital had been bombed, he had returned to West Germany on foot.

Meantime, his unit had been lost and all records of him destroyed.

He returned to the family home to find the house bombed.

Assuming all his family were dead, he settled in a village 50 miles away, where he had lived until he met Franz and his wife.

When the war finished, Franz Bussman did everything he could to get information about his brother Hans.

With no information, he reluctantly assumed his brother was dead and gave up the search.

With no family and having been unable to find his brother, Franz found it difficult to settle down.

Over the years, he moved from place to place and from job to job, never staying very long in one place.

When he met Anna ( now Mrs. Bussman), he was working as a waiter in a hotel.

He and Anna got married, and Franz settled down at last.

He moved from the dining room into the kitchen of the hotel and became a cook.

But this did not last very long.

He was talking to a friend one day, a taxi driver, who suggested that they should go into partnership.

So they did, and Franz became a taxi driver.

He and the friend drove taxis themselves, but they also soon owned four more taxis and employed four drivers.

He visited his hometown once to visit his old house, but it was a sad visit.

There was a large modern block of flats where his family house used to be.

And although he spoke to some of the apartment owners, no one remembered him or his family.

Now that he has finally found his brother Hans, he and Anna are planning to invite Hans to come and live near them and work as a taxi driver in the company.

We'd like you to accept this present from the class.

I agreed to go immediately.

After having been discovered, he gave himself up to the police.

After having been told the way, we found the place with no problem.

What would a modern reader find totally unacceptable in a novel today? Two brothers, each presuming the other long since dead, meeting again by chance.

When Mrs. Bussman suggested that the workman might be Franz's brother, Franz was so sure his brother was dead he did not take her seriously.

What did Hans Bussman do immediately after the war was over? He inquired after his family's whereabouts but found no trace of them.

A long-lost brother had not in fact died and had been wickedly plotting to bring about the hero's downfall.

He stopped in order to talk to a workman.

She sent a boy to ask the workman what he was called.

Meanwhile, his unit was lost and all records of him had been destroyed.

He found a brother who was thought to have been killed twenty years previously.