



I had scarcely settled at my desk one morning when I was summoned to the Chief's office. Cigarette smoke swirled upwards from an ashtray by his left hand. I often wondered if he should bow to the inevitable and ask the Ministry of Works to paint his ceiling Nicotine Yellow. Farrow & Ball probably had the exact shade. Then they would need to repaint only once a decade and everyone's life would be simpler.

Needless to say, I had never put this thought into words.

The Chief pushed a sheaf of papers across to me and asked that I read them. Their story was an old one, yet no less troubling for that. A Russian military attaché, Major-General Vassili Zhukov, had walked into the Istanbul consulate with a suitcase filled with third rate material and asked for political asylum. Zhukov said as an afterthought that the Soviets had two spies high up in the Foreign Office and one embedded at senior level in MI6. Now, that was a surprise before the day's first cup of tea had been drunk. The Chief, to my relief, thought the whole tale ludicrous. It was so evidently the kind of thin deception the KGB would come up with that he was ready to dismiss it out of hand. Naturally, due process had to be observed before that could happen – one never strays far from the paper trail in the secret service – and that was where I came in.

I was pleased to oblige, I said. So it was that I cancelled my appointments for the next two days, locked my office door and settled down to absorb the documents that Major-General Zhukov had provided. Goods on approval, as it were, with payment to be authorised only if the product proved to be of the highest quality.

The reading turned out to be dull and voluminous. It revealed little beyond petty jealousies in the Soviet embassy, gripes about the food and a preoccupation that the KGB's surveillance team had developed with the wife of the American consul in the city. Any 'insights' offered were of the wild and baseless variety. I could make better up myself. In fact, I often had.

By a stroke of fortune, Zhukov insisted that the Russians had broken various British cyphers and that it was therefore impossible for his case to be discussed by telegram. To humour him, the Chief agreed that liaison with Istanbul should be in person, through trusted messengers carrying messages by airplane. That added days to any communication between London and the consulate. Days that would allow me to perform a series of intricate manoeuvres.

But what am I thinking, gabbling on about work before we have been properly introduced. That just won't do. If it is any consolation, my employers don't really know who I am either. So here goes, a sketch of your host in a few easy strokes.

I grew up on the streets of Punjab, where I was vagabond and proud. My parents were less enthused about my lifestyle than I was. They complained that English was fast becoming a second language to me, so ready was I to chitter-chatter in Hindustani. For my part, I was happy to disown a mother tongue whose primary functions appeared to be noting who was up at the Chandigarh District Bar and down in the wrong person's bed. Neither piece of information interested me.

Returned to home shores, I became a fan of Arsenal FC and passionately devoted to Surrey County Cricket Club. They remain my great loves, though I don't see either often now. My interest is maintained by reading *The Times* daily, from cover to cover. Outside the sport pages, its crossword remains as good as ever. The journalism less so.

Socially, I belong the Garrick Club and the Gargoyle Club, and could never decide which I like the more. A man needs both silk and sawdust in his life, after all, and who am I to judge one better than the other?

Flags and band music do nothing for me. My heart is not stirred by them. I am not uplifted. My loyalty, such as it is, attaches to humankind. I think of myself as a patriot of everywhere. Those zealots who would lay down their lives for a damp island on the fringes of civilisation are welcome to do so, of course. They just shouldn't expect me to join them.

Of religion, I have none. My grandmother once told me the parable of Christ curing the leper. A miracle beyond doubt, she said. I asked her why Christ didn't heal *every* leper. Surely they all deserved to be saved? She shot me a look that a

well-brought-up person ought not give to a six year old boy. But I knew a win when I saw one. Philosophically, I have more hinterland. You might even call me a Benthamite. I favour whatever will bring good to the greatest number of people. After that, my mind turns to the next glass of Ballantine's whisky.

I am a simple soul, as you will learn.

The sun, however, is not yet above the yardarm and Comrade Zhukov is in a spot. To return to the here and now...

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTER

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