

Book the First

Major Volkov wishes to defect

Broadway Buildings, London

September 1945

I had scarcely settled at my desk that morning when I was summoned to the Chief's office. Cigarette smoke swirled upwards from the ashtray by his left hand. The hand itself was resting on a sheaf of papers tied together with green tape.

'Burgoyne-Jones is dead,' he said as I sat down.

C was not a person for needless chatter.

I raised an eyebrow.

'How?' I said.

'High velocity bullet to the back of the head, delivered while he fished on the Stour.'

This was no surprise to me, as I was the one who had pulled the trigger.

'Unfortunate,' I said. 'We knew it was possible, of course.'

'We did,' C said, drawing on his cigarette. 'Whoever killed him clearly bought the idea that OBJ was Agent Damocles, rather than a decoy designed to flush out our enemy within.' His eyes flicked to the window and scanned the horse chestnut trees that rose above St James's Park. They were in full leaf, and heavy with conkers, in the last glorious flourish before autumn began to make itself felt. 'The deception worked better than expected, it seems. Still, no point fretting that now. Spilt milk, and all.'

It was more than spilt milk. I was the one who had bought the decoy story, believing that OBJ was one step away from exposing me. Instead of that, Agent Damocles was still at large and now had fresh leads to track down. Then there was the sizeable dent my ego had just taken. That matters more than you might think to those who live in the shadow realm.

'So, we respond how?' I said.

'I want you to take over from Oliver Burgoyne-Jones, continue his work.'

Now, this was a turn up. A conundrum, even. On a practical level, it was tedious. I was planning to head off to the country in a few hours and spend the

weekend with the commander of a heavy cruiser based in Portsmouth and the Head of Naval Cyphers, along with their delightful – if vacuous – wives. Now, there would be no gin and tonic and cha-cha-cha for me, not for weeks to come. It also opened up the possibility that I might have to arrange for my own assassination, which was a task that was not to be undertaken lightly.

‘Is this an order or a request?’ I said.

‘I think we both know the answer to that.’

I watched his cigarette smoke ascend to the yellowed ceiling.

‘Any reason you didn’t ask me to take the role on before?’ I said.

‘Shall we say that I didn’t want to put you in harm’s way?’

His eyes twinkled as he spoke.

‘And now you are happy to?’

‘Yes.’

‘What shall I do about the Volkov defection? That was priority number one when the day began. We still don’t know what his material may contain.’

‘Farm it out. Exercise your judgement.’

‘In that case, I know where I stand. And perhaps where I fall.’ Our eyes met for a second. ‘I should be delighted to pick up where OBJ left off.’

‘Good. Take this.’ He pushed the sheaf of papers across the desk toward me. ‘Our organisation is demonstrably compromised, as I have suspected since Potsdam, and the inside man has shown his hand. Find the mole. Eliminate him.’

Bench 517, St James's Park, London

When they come to write the book, let no-one say that I was not prepared to do the hard work. Two hundred pages of typescript read and digested, seventeen Players cigarettes smoked and more cups of tea consumed than I could keep count of, and still I was none the wiser as to how C had tricked me. Nor was I clear if giving me OBJ's brief was yet the latest trick playing out of his hand. The man's illness had got him working on the next level, that was for sure. He may have been physically wrecked, but mentally he was burning like a furnace. There were also no loose ends in the dossier that might lead me to the actual Agent Damocles. All I had was one big, beautiful work of fiction designed to snare the intruder in our midst ... who just happened to be me.

Well, two can play at that game.

I was going to do a little fishing of my own, starting with the owner of the shoes I could see advancing down the dusty path to join me now.

Carlton House Terrace, London

From my window, I could see the Athenaeum Club, a statue of Edward VII on horseback and the Crimean War memorial, all arranged around Waterloo Place. Three rather varied commemorations of service to the nation. My own contribution was different again, and made the fourth corner of a square.

Yes, we patriots come in all shapes and sizes.

I know people, for instance, who would think nothing of laying down their lives for a damp island on the fringes of civilisation and go out with a smile on their face. More fool them, if you ask me. Others reach a higher plane of existence whilst singing *Land of Hope and Glory*. Elgar was a genius in his way, but that libretto should come with a health warning. And I once met a man who hit a stranger in a bar for saying that Dunkirk was a retreat by a bunch of defeated curs who weren't willing to stand and fight the Hun. I mean, what can you do with a fellow who behaves like that?

Myself, I love England, plain and simple.

It is the greatest nation to ever exist, containing the purest, most noble vision of humanity that anyone has yet conceived. Rome wasn't even close, with its patrician privilege and self-perpetuating class of effete despots. And the Revolution across the Atlantic is simply a nervous breakdown waiting to happen.

The problem I have is England's plus one, namely the Empire that has attached to our nation state. That is a cancer that eats at the soul of the world, the closest thing to evil in the Mediaeval sense of the word that we have. It puts men into chains and crushes hope so that they would never think that a better future might exist. At least the war has stirred up some of the sleeping giants, dragging them slowly out of their slumbers. More voice to Nehru, Gandhi and friends, says I.

Some might feel that my view is skewed. I admit that my life differs from the average man of my class and background. I grew up in the Punjab, vagabond on the streets and proud. It was perhaps the best education I could have, honing ingenuity and cunning in equal measure, and knocking off every rough edge I

had. My parents were less enthused by my lifestyle than I was. Their complaints were numerous and frequent. For one, English was fast becoming a second language for me, so ready was I to chitter-chatter in Hindustani. The state of my clothes was a disgrace. And I positively encouraged the servants to speak to me as if they were my equal. On my side, I was happy to disown their hypocrisy and cant, and to shun 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 held the slightest interest for me.

True, my two great passions were of a conventional bent – Arsenal FC and Surrey County Cricket Club. What could I say? They were my tribe, I their spear carrier.

As to faith, 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 saving? 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. Since that day, I have rejected the idea that there is a religious dimension to Englishness. We are heathens and should embrace our pagan nature.

So yes, my patriotism is a personal thing. And singular, I grant you. I like to think that as the decades pass, others will come to share my perspective.

Right now, the fact remains that the sun never sets on the Empire and I could walk from my office here to Cape Town without ever leaving its land. And who gains from that octopus-sprawl across the globe? A few panjandrums in the Foreign Office perhaps, or commodity traders with a penchant for copper or groundnuts. The average citizen of planet Earth? Not in the slightest.

Someone needs to take it in hand and shatter the whole carapace from the inside out, bringing liberty to our species.

And here I am, sword in hand, ready to slay the great Leviathan of our times. A patriot of most beautiful England ... *unbound*.

The Plume of Feathers pub, Hampshire

I have retreated to a cosy burrow where I can get matters straight in my head. At present, I am the sole occupant of the lounge bar of the Plume of Feathers pub. Me, and a half-drunk pint of Strong's Bitter that is on the table before me. In the kitchen, a steak and kidney pie is cooking, with mashed potatoes, wilted cabbage and gravy ready to join it. I am curled up in a well-padded armchair, cigarette in hand, and an unseasonably early, yet very welcome, fire burns in the hearth.

Thus far I have made a list of what needs to be done. It occupies less than a sheet of foolscap and it is on the table beside my beer. If I were a candidate standing for election, it would be my prospectus. But I don't think that anyone who matters would cast their vote in my box based on it. I am comfortable with that, as I am more interested in brute outcome than democratic due process. Life is not a popularity contest.

C's dossier, consumed and digested, now strikes me as bearing a closer resemblance to a game of Happy Families than to a piece of serious intelligence work. There are four suspects in it – the Cynic, the Ideologue, the Survivor and the Bureaucrat, as he calls them. A small enough deck for Damocles to shuffle. I myself am the Ideologue. That the Chief has handed me a report identifying four suspected traitors and that I am one of them underlines quite how we are jousting with each other. From his perspective, he might simply be focusing the mind of his white knight, as a spur to action. And then again are the other possibilities.

Having said that, what else could he do?

There is a mole. One of us is guilty. And only the four of us have the opportunity, motivation and access to perform the role. I just happen to be one of them.

Our unhappy family is definitely unhappy in its own special way.

To the list of suspects, I have added a fifth character. I considered labelling him the True Believer, but that is two words where the others are merely one. The Witness is too passive. So I have alighted on the Acolyte. The person who knows the orthodox truth and supports it, come what may. Yes, the Acolyte,

Agent Damocles, who is currently on my trail and measuring me for a seven by three foot hole in the ground.

My pursuer, and my quarry too.

Educational Exchange Section,
Embassy of the United States of America,
24 Grosvenor Square,
London, W1

Friday, 7 September 1945

Dear Kim,

I enjoyed our conversation this morning. I always learn something when we talk.

As to your request, and from an official perspective, my hands are tied. The protocol is clear. If your organisation wishes information about the person you referred to as the Survivor, the request has to come from your Chief and from no-one else, not even you.

That said, I happened to pass by our signal intelligence team when I got back. The town of Miskolc came up in conversation.

Your other question caught me off guard. I have now reflected on it, and I am prepared to say this. No-one has been making enquiries that have drawn our attention, professionally speaking. What follows may not be what you are looking for, but I pass it on anyway. One person in your house who would normally spend his time on Rilke has developed an interest in Gotterdammerung. That is thin, I know. But if you are looking for something unusual, I would start there.

Since I am writing, I will share some, non-attributable and candid, observations, one friend to another. President Truman is not convinced that your Chief understands the scale of problems that exist within your organisation, nor whether the Chief is the right man to resolve them. This has been raised informally by Secretary of State Byrnes with Foreign Secretary Bevin. The United States view is that there are

merits to a change being made, and for it happen soon.

I should also say that our strategic thinking has developed since the Little Boy and Fat Man bombs were dropped on Japan. Congress is minded to prohibit the sharing of atom bomb technology with any nation, Great Britain included. That is different to what your Government expects, and may feel was agreed in our joint work on the Manhattan Project. But it is opinion that is fast hardening into policy in Washington. I trust that you will steer this message to those who should know of it, with the source of the insight withheld, of course. It is imperative that H.M. Government understands that we are now in uncharted waters and that prior assumptions may not hold.

Quidquid est, mutabile est, as Seneca once said.

Yours sincerely, and in friendship,

Frank L. MacKenzie

The Plume of Feathers

Graham arrived late last night. He has the garret room at the end of the corridor which looks out on the village duck pond. It is, he has been at pains to point out, a rather pleasant culture shock for someone who spent much of the past four years sleeping in a tin-roofed shack in Sierra Leone. My heart bleeds for him. I have an idea what his 'shack' was like, with an orderly bringing pink gin at sundown and the consul inviting him for roast lunch on Sundays. But I can see the return of pre-war living working its magic on him.

At breakfast, he told me about his latest project, based on his time in Africa. It is a novel about man's faith and conscience under moral pressure, he went on. Ironically, not a million miles from my own dilemma.

'Aren't all your books about that?' I asked, spreading marmalade on a slice of toast.

'Perhaps. By the same token, you could say that all of Balzac is about greed and status, and Dickens about poverty and the child unmoored in a cruel world. We all have our proclivities.'

'Can I tell you about mine?'

He paused, egg and toast on the end of his fork midway to his mouth, and looked me over. After a moment, his eyebrows raised fractionally and the food completed its journey.

'In a jam, are you?' he said once the mouthful had been despatched.

'You could say that.'

'What does C think about your jam?'

'C is the *source* of my jam.' That prompted a small inclination of the head from Graham. I proceeded to relate the week's events with a candour that surprised even me. 'So, what do you think?' I asked.

'I don't have the slightest idea what to think.' He gazed at me curiously. 'In your heart, you believe you're right?'

'I do.'

'Then are you asking whether I am going to phone a report of this

conversation through to Broadway Buildings the minute I leave here?’

‘Partly, yes.’

‘No. I would rather have blood on my hands than betray a friend.’

‘You and I both.’ Our conversation had an oddly chess-like quality to it. ‘What about *my country, right or wrong?*’

‘It’s a nice phrase if you want to end your life dangling on barbed wire in Flanders fields. We could ask those who’ve followed it, only the dead don’t talk that much. No, most of us have more modest expectations of life.’

‘Quite so. In the end a human comes with human frailties.’ A thought I had never spoken before pushed itself into my mouth. ‘Tell me, if I ever ended up living in Moscow, would you come visit?’

‘Of course I would.’ A broad grin spread across his face. ‘I should like to see St Basil’s and Red Square again, all that grandeur and pomp under the greyest of skies. You arrange the visa and I will find a gullible newspaper Editor to stump up the fare.’

#

‘I think he’s got a dreary man called Smiley doing the investigation,’ I said.

‘George Smiley, the German literature don?’

I nodded.

‘The same.’

‘He’s hardly an obvious choice. I passed him on the stairs of Broadway Buildings last week and he looked straight past me. I couldn’t even tell you what his job is within the service.’

‘Perhaps that’s his virtue.’

‘I suppose it may be. Less *Sturm und Drang* and more *Hausverstand*.’ We were quiet a moment. ‘C does move in mysterious ways.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I wish he would stop doing that.’ Graham smiled. ‘I should have realised that Oliver Burgoyne-Jones didn’t have the heft to be Agent Damocles,’ I continued. ‘A good man, yes, with no instinct for where to sniff. A turner-over of stones, but of the wrong stones. I kept getting hints that questions were being asked in awkward places and allowed myself to think that OBJ had more *bottom* than I’d given him credit for.’

‘So now you know the truth.’

'I do. Some of it, anyway. It's a bit late for OBJ, after I've put him off the scent once and for good.'

Graham shrugged.

'It's a war,' he said. 'These things happen.'

'They do. I just can't help feeling that if I wasn't so dense in seeing what was in front of me, Burgoyne-Jones could have been very useful cover for months to come.'

We both sat in silence after that. Graham stirred his tea, blew on it and drank some. The landlady came in, jovial and bright, and tidied away our dishes.

'How would you sum up this Smiley chap?' Graham said when she had left the room.

'Everyone I know finds his wife Ann charming, but has no opinion about him,' I said. 'He's a small mouse of a man. The sort who is fascinated by *events*, but who scuttles into the wainscoting at the first sign of danger. But enough of Smiley. Let's talk about you. Have you thought more about coming to work for me in Section IX?'

Carlton House Terrace

The Survivor was in my office. He didn't know why I had called him here. He still came speedily enough, which pleased me.

'Toby,' I said. 'I have a job for you.'

'A spot of lamplighting?' he said brightly. 'Good. We've been spinning our wheels these months past.'

'No, actually it's outside your usual orbit.' I dug tobacco ash out of my pipe and emptied it into the ashtray. A pipe conveys more *substance* than a cigarette, I always think. 'There's a defector I need you to meet with.'

'Hardly my area of expertise.'

'That is true. But discretion is. And your Russian is flawless.' He nodded his head in agreement. 'Only C and I know this man exists, aside from the person he initially contacted and someone called Sir Maurice Peterson. With you, it becomes six. We'd like to keep it that way.'

'You can trust me.'

'In particular, the Americans must not learn about it.'

'Understood. Is he here?'

'Istanbul.'

The colour drained from Toby's face.

'You know that I can't get into an aeroplane?' he said.

'I'd been meaning to ask about that. How are you these days?'

'Physically, I am fine. My leg has healed. But physical wounds weren't the issue.'

'Go on.'

'There were eight of us on board. The plane didn't just crash. It burned as well. I was the only one who got out.' His eyes had turned away from me now. I could see that he was reliving the experience over again. 'I can still hear the screams,' he went on. 'Warrington took eleven minutes to die. I timed it on my watch as I lay on the grass.'

'I imagine that would make flying difficult.'

'Difficult doesn't begin to describe it.'

'Well, you're in luck. A fast destroyer leaves Southampton at six this evening. It's transferring to Naval HQ, Alexandria. It will detour and take you all the way. Eight days should do it, nine at a stretch.'

'And the defector will wait that long?'

'He'll have to, Toby.' I smiled winningly. 'You are the only man for the job.'

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Visit www.rodcookson.com to learn more.