



I had scarcely settled at my desk one morning when I was summoned to the Chief's office. Cigarette smoke swirled upwards from the ashtray by his left hand.

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 turn up 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 digest the documents that Major-General Zhukov had supplied. Goods on approval, as it were, with payment only to be authorised if the product proved to be of 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 there 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 conducted 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 some intricate manoeuvres.

But here I am, gabbling on about my work and we haven't been introduced yet. How vulgar. Whatever must you think? So here goes, a sketch of your host in a few easy strokes.

I grew up in the Punjab, vagabond on the streets and proud. It was perhaps the best education a young fellow could have, honing ingenuity and cunning in equal measure. My parents were less enthused about my lifestyle than I was. They complained that English was fast becoming a second language, 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. I had no interest in either piece of information.

Returned to home shores, I progressed through Westminster School to Trinity College, Cambridge. Along the way, I became a fan of Arsenal FC and passionately devoted to Surrey County Cricket Club. They remain my two great loves, though I rarely see either play these days. I keep in touch by reading *The Times* daily. Sport aside, its crossword remains as good as ever. The journalism less so.

My clubs are varied. I am in the Secret Intelligence Service, or MI6 as the newspapers like to call it, the most exclusive and desirable club in the land. I also belong to the Athenaeum and to the Gargoyle Club, and have never been able to decide which of them I prefer. Man needs both silk and sawdust for a healthy existence, after all, and who can say which matters more?

Flags and marching bands leave me cold. I have always thought the Union Jack to be an ill-judged experiment in visual design, surrendering the virtues of the crosses of St George and St Andrew to conjure an indeterminate mess that only a committee could like. My loyalties attach to humankind. I am, bluntly, 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. Just don't expect me to join them.

Religion does not move me either. 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.

Game, set and match.

The philosophical realm interests me more. You might, I suppose, call me a Benthamite. Whatever brings good to the greatest number of people works for me. But my strongest conviction is a simple one. No institution is responsible for more suffering and hardship than the British Empire. The sun never sets on it, and justice never rises. My life's goal is to loosen the stranglehold it has on the oppressed and the poor, and for happiness to blossom in their place. If I say so myself, I am making rather a good job of doing so.

The world set to rights, my mind naturally turns to a glass of whisky, a trawl through polite gossip and the pressing question of where to dine tonight. The sun, however, is not yet above the yardarm and Comrade Zhukov is in a spot.

To come back to the here and now...

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTER

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