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Let me confess to you at once that if I had not, on the spur of the moment, picked up my pen and scribbled a note to George Smiley inviting him to address my passing-out class on the closing evening of their entry course – and had Smiley not, against all my expectations, consented – I would not be making so free to you with my heart.

At the most, I would be offering you the sort of laundered reminiscence with which, if I am honest, I was a bit too inclined to regale my students: feats of secret chivalry, of the dramatic, the resourceful and the brave. And always, of course, the useful. I would be enthralling you with memories of night drops into the Caucasus, hazardous crossings by fast boat, beach landings, winking shore lights, clandestine radio messages that ceased in mid-transmission. Of silent heroes of the Cold War who, having made their contribution, modestly went to earth in the society they had protected. Of defectors-in-place snatched in the nick of time from the jaws of the opposition.

And to a point, yes, that is the life we lived. In our day we did those things, and some even ended well. We had good men in bad countries who risked their lives for us. And usually they were believed, and sometimes their intelligence was wisely used. I hope so, for the greatest spy on earth is worth nothing when it isn't.

And for the lighter note, over a second whisky in the Probationers' Mess, I would have picked out for them the occasion when a three-man reception team from the Circus, operating inside East Germany, and gallantly led by myself, lay freezing on a ridge in the Harz Mountains, praying for the flutter of an unmarked plane with its engines cut, and the blessed black parachute floating in its wake. And what did we find when our prayer was answered and we had slithered down an icefield to claim our treasure? Stones, I would tell my wide-eyed students. Chunks of honest Argyll granite. The despatchers at our Scottish airbase had sent us the training canister by mistake.

That tale, at least, found a certain echo, even if some of my other offerings tended to lose their audience halfway through.

I suspect that my impulse to write to Smiley had been brewing in me longer than I realised. The idea was conceived during one of my regular visits to Personnel to discuss the progress of my students. Dropping in on the Senior Officers' Bar for a sandwich and a beer, I had bumped into Peter Guillam. Peter had played Watson to George's Sherlock Holmes in the long search for the Circus traitor, who turned out to be our Head of Operations, Bill Haydon. Peter had not heard from George for – oh, a year now, more. George had bought this cottage in North Cornwall somewhere, he said, and was indulging his dislike of the telephone. He had some kind of sinecure at Exeter University, and was allowed to use their library. Sadly I pictured the rest: George the lonely hermit on an empty landscape, taking his solitary walks and thinking his thoughts. George slipping up to Exeter for a little human warmth in his old age while he waited to take his place in the spies' Valhalla.

And Ann, his wife? I asked Peter, lowering my voice as one

does when Ann's name comes up – for it was an open secret, and a painful one, that Bill Haydon had counted among Ann's many lovers.

Ann was Ann, said Peter, with a Gallic shrug. She had bits of family with grand houses on the Helford Estuary. Sometimes she stayed with them, sometimes she stayed with George.

I asked for Smiley's address. 'Don't tell him I gave it you,' said Peter as I wrote it down. With George, there had always been that certain kind of guilt about passing on his whereabouts – I still don't quite know why.

Three weeks later Toby Esterhase came down to Sarratt to give us his celebrated talk on the arts of clandestine surveillance on unfriendly soil. And of course he stayed for lunch, which was greatly enhanced for him by the presence of our first three girls. After a battle lasting as long as I had been at Sarratt, Personnel had finally decided that girls were all right after all.

And I heard myself trailing Smiley's name.

There have been times when I would not have entertained Toby in the woodshed, and others when I thanked my Maker I had him on my side. But with the years, I am pleased to notice, one settles to people.

'Oh look here, my God, Ned!' Toby cried in his incurably Hungarian English, smoothing back his carefully pomaded mane of silver hair. 'You mean you haven't heard?'

'Heard what?' I asked patiently.

'My dear fellow, George is chairing the Fishing Rights Committee. Don't they tell you anything down here in the sticks? I think I better take this up with the Chief actually, one to one. A word in his ear at the Club.'

'Perhaps you'd tell me first what the Fishing Rights Committee is,' I suggested.

‘Ned, you know what? I think I get nervous. Maybe they took you off the list.’

‘Maybe they did at that,’ I said.

He told me anyway, as I knew he would, and I duly acted astonished, which gave him an even greater sense of his importance. And there is a part of me that remains astonished to this day. The Fishing Rights Committee, Toby explained for the benefit of the unblest, was an informal working party made up of officers from Moscow Centre and the Circus. Its job, said Toby – who I really believe had lost any capacity to be surprised – was to identify intelligence targets of interest to both services and thrash out a system of sharing. ‘The idea actually, Ned, was to target the world’s trouble spots,’ he said with an air of maddening superiority – ‘I think they fix first the Middle East. Don’t quote me, Ned, okay?’

‘And you’re telling me Smiley *chairs* this committee?’ I asked incredulously when I had attempted to digest this.

‘Well, maybe not much longer, Ned – Anno Domini and so forth. But the Russians were so frightfully keen to meet him, we brought him in to snip the tape. Give the old fellow a treat, I say. Stroke him a bit. Bunch of fivers in an envelope.’

I didn’t know which to marvel at the more: the notion of Toby Esterhase tripping to the altar with Moscow Centre, or of George Smiley presiding over the marriage. A few days later, with Personnel’s permission, I wrote to the Cornish address Guillam had given me, adding diffidently that if George loathed public speaking half as much as I did, he should on no account accept. I had been a bit in the dumps till then, but when his prim little card arrived by return declaring him delighted, I felt a probationer myself, and just as nervous.

Two weeks after that, wearing a brand-new country suit

for the occasion, I was standing at the barrier at Paddington Station, watching the elderly trains disgorge their middle-aged commuters. I don't think I had ever been quite so aware of Smiley's anonymity. Wherever I looked, I seemed to see versions of him: tubby, bespectacled gentlemen of a certain seniority, and every one of them with George's air of being slightly late for something he would rather not be doing. Then suddenly we had shaken hands and he was sitting beside me in the back of a Head Office Rover, stockier than I remembered him, and white-haired, it was true, but of a vigour and good humour I had not seen in him since his wife had her fatal fling with Haydon.

'Well, well, Ned. How do you like being a schoolmaster?'

'How do you like retirement?' I countered, with a laugh. 'I'll be joining you soon!'

Oh, he loved retirement, he assured me. Couldn't get enough of it, he said wryly; I should have no fears of it at all. A little tutoring here, Ned, the odd paper to deliver there; walks, he'd even acquired a dog.

'I hear they hauled you back to sit on some extraordinary committee,' I said. 'Conspiring with the Bear, they say, against the Thief of Baghdad.'

George does not gossip, but I saw his smile broaden. 'Do they now? And your source would be Toby, no doubt,' he said, and beamed contentedly upon the dismal subtopian landscape while he launched into a diversionary story about two old ladies in his village who hated each other. One owned an antique shop, the other was very rich. But as the Rover continued its progress through once-rural Hertfordshire, I found myself thinking less about the ladies of George's village than about George himself. I was thinking that this was a Smiley

reborn, who told stories about old ladies, sat on committees with Russian spies and gazed on the overt world with the relish of someone who has just come out of hospital.

That evening, squeezed into an elderly dinner jacket, the same man sat at my side at Sarratt high table, peering benignly round him at the polished plate candlesticks and old group photographs going back to God knows when. And at the fit, expectant faces of his young audience as they waited on the master's word.

'Ladies and gentlemen, Mr George Smiley,' I announced severely as I rose to introduce him. 'A legend of the Service. Thank you.'

'Oh, I don't think I'm a legend at all,' Smiley protested as he clambered to his feet. 'I think I'm just a rather fat old man wedged between the pudding and the port.'

Then the legend began talking, and I realised that I had never heard Smiley address a social gathering before. I had assumed it was a thing he would be congenitally bad at, like forcing his opinions on people, or referring to a joe by his real name. So the sovereign way in which he addressed us surprised me before I had begun to fathom the content. I heard his first few sentences and I watched my students' faces – not always so obliging – lift and relax and light to him as they gave him first their attention, then their trust and finally their support. And I thought, with an inner smile of belated recognition: yes, yes, of course, this was George's other nature. This was the actor who had always lain hidden in him, the secret Pied Piper. This was the man Ann Smiley had loved and Bill Haydon had deceived and the rest of us had loyally followed, to the mystification of outsiders.

There is a wise tradition at Sarratt that our dinner speeches

are not recorded and no notes are taken, and that no official reference may afterwards be made to what was said. The guest of honour enjoyed what Smiley in his Germanic way called 'the fool's freedom', though I can think of few people less qualified for the privilege. But I am nothing if not a professional, trained to listen and remember, and you must understand also that Smiley had not spoken many words before I realised – as my students were not slow to notice – that he was speaking straight into my heretical heart. I refer to that other, less obedient person who is also inside me and whom, if I am honest, I had refused to acknowledge since I had embarked on this final lap of my career – to the secret questioner who had been my uncomfortable companion even before a reluctant joe of mine called Barley Blair had stepped across the crumbling Iron Curtain and, for reasons of love, and some sort of honour, had calmly kept on walking, to the incredulity of the Fifth Floor.

The better the restaurant, we say of Personnel, the worse the news. 'It's time you handed on your wisdom to the new boys, Ned,' he had told me over a suspiciously good lunch at the Connaught. 'And to the new girls,' he added, with a loathsome smirk. 'They'll be letting them into the Church next, I suppose.' He returned to happier ground. 'You know the tricks. You've kicked around. You've had an impressive last lap running Secretariat. Time to put it all to advantage. We think you should take over the Nursery and pass the torch to tomorrow's spies.'

He had used a rather similar set of sporting metaphors, if I remembered rightly, when in the wake of Barley Blair's defection he had removed me from my post as Head of the Russia House and consigned me to that knacker's yard, the Interrogators' Pool.

He ordered up two more glasses of Armagnac. 'How's your Mabel, by the way?' he continued, as if he had just remembered her. 'Somebody told me she'd got her handicap down to twelve – ten, by God! Well. I trust you'll keep her away from me! So what do you say? Sarratt in the week, home to Tunbridge Wells at weekends, sounds to me like the triumphant crowning of a career. What do you say?'

So what *do* you say? You say what others have said before you. Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach. And what they teach is what they can't do any more, because either the body or the spirit or both have lost their singleness of purpose; because they have seen too much and suppressed too much and compromised too much, and in the end tasted too little. So they take to rekindling their old dreams in new minds, and warming themselves against the fires of the young.

And that brings me back to the opening bars of Smiley's speech that night, for suddenly his words were reaching out and grasping me. I had invited him because he was a legend of the past. Yet to the delight of all of us, he was turning out to be the iconoclastic prophet of the future.

I'll not bother you with the finer points of Smiley's introductory tour of the globe. He gave them the Middle East, which was obviously on his mind, and he explored the limits of colonial power in supposedly post-colonialist times. He gave them the Third World and the Fourth World and posited a Fifth World, and pondered aloud whether human despair and poverty were the serious concern of any wealthy nation. He seemed pretty confident they weren't. He scoffed at the idea that spying was a dying profession now that the Cold War had ended: with each new nation that came out of the ice, he said, with each new alignment, each rediscovery of

old identities and passions, with each erosion of the old status quo, the spies would be working round the clock. He spoke, I discovered afterwards, for twice the customary length, but I didn't hear a chair creak or a glass clink – not even when they dragged him to the library and sat him in the throne of honour before the fire for more of the same, more heresy, more subversion. My children, hardened cases all of them, in love with George! I didn't hear a sound beyond the confident flow of Smiley's voice and the eager burst of laughter at some unexpected self-irony or confession of failure. You're only old once, I thought, as I listened with them, sharing their excitement.

He gave them case histories I had never heard, and which I was certain nobody in Head Office had cleared in advance – certainly not our Legal Adviser Palfrey, who in response to the openness of our former enemies had been battering down and double-locking every useless secret he could lay his obedient hands on.

He dwelt on their future role as agent-runners and, applying it to the altered world, vested in it the traditional Service image of mentor, shepherd, parent and befriender, as prop and marriage counsellor, as pardoner, entertainer and protector; as the man or woman who has the gift of treating the outrageous premise as an everyday affair, and so becomes his agent's partner in illusion. None of that had changed, he said. None of it ever would. He paraphrased Burns: 'A spy's a spy for all that.'

But no sooner had he lulled them with this sweet notion than he warned them of the death of their own natures that could result from the manipulation of their fellow men, and the truncation of their natural feeling.

'By being all things to all spies, one does rather run the

risk of becoming nothing to oneself,' he confessed sadly. 'Please don't ever imagine you'll be unscathed by the methods you use. The end may justify the means – if it wasn't supposed to, I dare say you wouldn't be here. But there's a price to pay, and the price does tend to be oneself. Easy to sell one's soul at your age. Harder later.'

He mixed the deadly serious with the deadly frivolous and made the difference small. Between whiles he seemed to be asking the questions I had been asking of myself for most of my working life, but had never managed to express, such as: 'Did it do any good?' And 'What did it do to me?' And 'What will become of us now?' Sometimes his questions were answers: George, we used to say, never asked unless he knew.

He made us laugh, he made us feel and, by means of his inordinate deference, he shocked us with his contrasts. Better still, he put our prejudices at risk. He got rid of the acceptance in me and revived the slumbering rebel that my exile to Sarratt had silenced. George Smiley, out of a clear sky, had renewed my search and confused me wonderfully.

Frightened people never learn, I have read. If that is so, they certainly have no right to teach. I'm not a frightened man – or no more frightened than any other man who has looked at death and knows it is for him. All the same, experience and a little pain had made me a mite too wary of the truth, even towards myself. George Smiley put that right. George was more than a mentor to me, more than a friend. Though not always present, he presided over my life. There were times when I thought of him as some kind of father to replace the one I never knew. George's visit to Sarratt gave back the dangerous edge to my memory. And now that I have the leisure to remember, that's what I mean to do for you, so that you can share my voyage and ask yourself the same questions.

‘There are some people,’ Smiley declared comfortably, favouring with his merry smile the pretty girl from Trinity Oxford whom I had thoughtfully placed across the table from him, ‘who, when their past is threatened, get frightened of losing everything they thought they had, and perhaps everything they thought they were as well. Now I don’t feel that one bit. The purpose of *my* life was to end the time I lived in. So if my past were still around today, you could say I’d failed. But it’s not around. We won. Not that the victory matters a damn. And perhaps we didn’t win anyway. Perhaps they just lost. Or perhaps, without the bonds of ideological conflict to restrain us any more, our troubles are just beginning. Never mind. What matters is that a long war is over. What matters is the hope.’

Removing his spectacles from his ears, he fumbled distractedly with his shirt front, looking for I could not imagine what, until I realised that it was the fat end of the necktie on which he was accustomed to polish his lenses. But an awkwardly assembled black bow tie provides no such conveniences, so he used the silk handkerchief from his pocket instead.

‘If I regret anything at all, it’s the way we wasted our time and skills. All the false alleys, and bogus friends, the misapplication of our energies. All the delusions we had about who we were.’ He replaced his spectacles and, as I fancied, turned

his smile upon myself. And suddenly I felt like one of my own students. It was the sixties again. I was a fledgling spy, and George Smiley – tolerant, patient, clever George – was observing my first attempts at flight.

We were fine fellows in those days, and the days seemed longer. Probably no finer than my students today, but our patriotic vision was less clouded. By the end of my new-entry course I was ready to save the world if I had to spy on it from end to end. We were ten in my intake and after a couple of years of training – at the Sarratt Nursery, in the glens of Argyll and battle camps of Wiltshire – we waited for our first operational postings like thoroughbreds pining for the chase.

We too in our way had come to maturity at a great moment in history, even if it was the reverse of this one. Stagnation and hostility stared at us from every corner of the globe. The Red Peril was everywhere, not least on our own sacred hearth. The Berlin Wall had been up two years and by the looks of it would stay up for another two hundred. The Middle East was a volcano, just as it is now, except that in those days Nasser was our chosen British hate object, not least because he was giving Arabs back their dignity and playing hookey with the Russians into the bargain. In Cyprus, Africa and South-East Asia the lesser breeds without the law were rising against their old colonial masters. And if we few brave British occasionally felt our power diminished by this – well, there was always Cousin America to cut us back into the world's game.

As secret heroes in the making, therefore, we had everything we needed: a righteous cause, an evil enemy, an indulgent ally, a seething world, women to cheer us, but only from the touchline, and best of all the Great Tradition to inherit, for the Circus in those days was still basking in its wartime glory.

Almost all our leading men had earned their spurs by spying on the Germans. All of them, when questioned at our earnest, off-the-record seminars, agreed that when it came to protecting mankind against its own excesses, World Communism was an even darker menace than the Hun.

'You gentlemen have inherited a dangerous planet,' Jack Arthur Lumley, our fabled Head of Training, liked to tell us. 'And if you want my personal opinion, you're bloody lucky.'

Oh, we wanted his opinion all right! Jack Arthur was a derring-do man. He had spent three years dropping in and out of Nazi-occupied Europe as if he were a regular house-guest. He had blown up bridges single-handed. He had been caught and escaped and caught again, no one knew how many times. He had killed men with his bare fingers, losing a couple in the fray, and when the Cold War came along to replace the hot one, Jack hardly noticed the difference. At the age of fifty-five he could still shoot you a grin on a man-sized target with a 9-millimetre Browning at twenty paces, pick your door lock with a paper clip, booby-trap a lavatory chain in thirty seconds or pin you helpless to the gym-mat in one throw. Jack Arthur had despatched us by parachute from Stirling bombers and landed us in rubber boats on Cornish beaches and drunk us under the table on mess nights. If Jack Arthur said it was a dangerous planet, we believed him to the hilt!

But it made the waiting all the harder. If I hadn't had Ben Arno Cavendish to share it with, it would have been harder still. There are only so many attachments you can serve around Head Office before your enthusiasm turns to gall.

Ben and I had been born under the same star. We were the same age, the same schooling, the same build, and within an inch of the same height. Trust the Circus to throw us together – we told each other excitedly; they probably knew it all along!

We both had foreign mothers, though his was dead – the Arno came from his German side – and were both, perhaps by way of compensation, determinedly of the English extrovert classes – athletic, hedonistic, public-school, male, born to administer if not to rule. Though, as I look at the group photographs of our year, I see that Ben made a rather better job of the part than I did, for he possessed an air of maturity that in those days eluded me – he had the widow's peak and the confirmed jaw, a man superior to his youthfulness.

Which, for all I knew, was why Ben got the coveted Berlin job instead of me, running flesh-and-blood agents inside East Germany, while I was once more put on standby.

'We're lending you to the watchers for a couple of weeks, young Ned,' said Personnel, with an avuncular complacency I was beginning to resent. 'Be good experience for you, and they can do with a spare pair of hands. Plenty of cloak-and-dagger stuff. You like that.'

Anything for a change, I thought, putting a brave face on it. For the past month I had bent my ingenuity to sabotaging the World Peace Conference in – let's say – Belgrade, from a dark desk on the Third Floor. Under the instruction of a slow-spoken superior who lunched for hours on end in the Senior Officers' Bar, I had enthusiastically re-routed delegates' trains, blocked their hotel plumbing and made anonymous bomb threats to their conference hall. For the month before that, I had crouched bravely in a stinking cellar next to the Egyptian Embassy at six every morning, waiting for a venal charlady to bring me, in exchange for a five-pound note, the contents of the Ambassadorial waste paper basket from the previous day. By such modest standards, a couple of weeks riding around with the world's best watchers sounded like a free holiday.

'They're assigning you to Operation Fat Boy,' Personnel

said, and gave me the address of a safe house off Green Street in the West End. I heard the sound of ping-pong as I walked in, and a cracked gramophone record playing Gracie Fields. My heart sank, and once again I sent a prayer of envy to Ben Cavendish and his heroic agents in Berlin, the spy's eternal city. Monty Arbuck, our section leader, briefed us the same evening.

Let me apologise for myself in advance. I knew very little of other ranks in those days. I was of the officer caste – literally, for I had served with the Royal Navy – and found it perfectly natural that I had been born into the upper end of the social system. The Circus is nothing if not a little mirror of the England it protects, so it seemed equally right to me that our watchers and allied trades, such as burglars and eavesdroppers, should be drawn from the artisan community. You cannot follow a man for long in a bowler hat. A honed BBC voice is no passport to unobtrusiveness once you are outside London's golden mile, least of all if you are posing as a street hawker or a window cleaner or a post-office engineer. So you should see me, at best, as a callow young midshipman seated among his more experienced and less privileged shipmates. And you should see Monty not as he was, but as I saw him that evening, as a taut-minded gamekeeper with a chip on his shoulder. We were ten, including Monty: three teams of three, therefore, with a woman to each so that we could cover ladies' lavatories. That was the principle. And Monty our controller.

'Good evening, College,' he said, placing himself before a blackboard and talking straight to me. 'Always nice to have a touch of quality to raise the tone, I say.'

Laughter all round, loudest from myself, a good sport to his men.

‘Target for tomorrow, College, is His Right Royal Sovereign Highness Fat Boy, otherwise known as—’

Turning to the blackboard, Monty helped himself to a piece of chalk and laboriously scratched up a long Arab name.

‘And the nature of our mission, College, is PR,’ he resumed. ‘I trust you know what PR is, do you? I have no doubt they teach you that at the spies’ Eton?’

‘Public Relations,’ I said, surprised to occasion so much merriment. For alas it turned out that in the watchers’ vernacular the initials stood for Protect and Report, and that our task for tomorrow, and for as long as our royal visitor chose to remain our charge, was to ensure that no harm came to him, and to report to Head Office on his activities, whether social or commercial.

‘College, you’re with Paul and Nancy,’ Monty told me, when he had provided us with the rest of our operational intelligence. ‘You’ll be number three in the section, College, and you’ll kindly do *exactly* as you are told, irregardless.’

But here I prefer to give you the background to Fat Boy’s case not in Monty’s words but in my own, and with the benefit of twenty-five years of hindsight. Even today, I can blush to think who I thought I was, and how I must have appeared to the likes of Monty, Paul and Nancy.

Understand first that licensed arms dealers in Britain regard themselves as some kind of rough-edged élite – did then, do now – and that they enjoy quite disproportionate privileges at the hands of the police, the bureaucracy and the intelligence services. For reasons I have never understood, their grisly trade puts them in a relationship of confidence with these bodies. Perhaps it’s the illusion of reality they impart, of guns as the earthy truth of life and death. Perhaps, in the

tethered minds of our officials, their wares suggest the same authority that is exerted by those who use them. I don't know. But I've seen enough of the street side of life in the years between to know that more men are in love with war than ever get a chance to fight one, and that more guns are bought to satisfy this love than for a pardonable purpose.

Understand also that Fat Boy was a most valued customer of this industry. And that our task of Protecting and Reporting was only one small part of a far larger undertaking; namely, the care and cultivation of a so-called friendly Arab state. By which was meant, and is meant to this day, currying favour, suborning and flattering its princelings with our English ways, wheedling favourable concessions in order to satisfy our oil addiction – and, along the way, selling enough British weaponry to keep the Satanic mills of Birmingham turning day and night. Which may have accounted for Monty's rooted distaste for our task. I like to think so anyway. Old watchers are famous for their moralising – and with reason. First they watch, later they think. Monty had reached the thinking stage.

As to Fat Boy, his credentials for this treatment were impeccable. He was the wastrel brother of the ruler of an oil-rich sheikdom. He was capricious, and prone to forget what he had bought before. And he arrived as billed, in the ruler's Boeing jet, at a military airport near London specially cleared for him, to have himself a little fun and do a little shopping – which we understood would include such fripperies as a couple of armoured Rolls-Royces for himself, half the trinkets at Cartier's for his women friends around the globe, a hundred or so of our not quite latest ground-to-air missile launchers, and a squadron or two of our not quite latest combat fighters for his royal brother. Not forgetting a succulent British government contract for spares, services and

training which would keep the Royal Air Force and the arms manufacturers in clover for years to come. – Oh, and oil. We would have oil to burn. Naturally.

His retinue, apart from private secretaries, astrologers, flatterers, nannies, children and two tutors, comprised a personal doctor and three bodyguards.

Lastly there was Fat Boy's wife, and her codename is irrelevant because from Day One Monty's watchers dubbed her 'the Panda' on account of the dark circles round her eyes when she was unveiled, and her wistful and solitary deportment, which gave the air of an endangered species. Fat Boy had a string of wives, but the Panda, though the oldest, was the most favoured, and perhaps the most tolerant of her husband's pleasures around town, for he liked nightclubs and he liked to gamble – tastes for which my fellow watchers cordially loathed him before he arrived, since it was known of him that he seldom went to bed before six in the morning, and never without losing about twenty times their combined annual salaries.

The party had rooms at a grand West End hotel, on two floors linked by a specially installed lift. Fat Boy, like many forty-year-old voluptuaries, was worried about his heart. He was also worried about microphones, and liked to use the lift as his safe room. So the Circus listeners had thoughtfully provided a microphone in the lift for him as well, which was where they reckoned to pick up their tidbits about the latest palace intrigues, or any unforeseen threat to Fat Boy's military shopping list.

And everything was running smoothly until Day Three, when one small unknown Arab man in a black overcoat with velvet collars appeared silently on our horizon. Or more

accurately, in the ladies' lingerie department of a great Knightsbridge department store, where the Panda and her attendants were picking their way through a stack of frilly white undergarments spread over the glass counter. For the Panda also had her spies. And word had reached her that, on the day before, the Fat Boy himself had brooded fondly over the same articles, and even ordered a few dozen to be sent to an address in Paris where a favoured lady friend constantly awaited him in subsidised luxury.

Day Three, I repeat, and the morale of our three-strong unit under strain. Paul was Paul Skordeno, an inward man with a pocked complexion and a talent for ferocious invective. Nancy told me he was under a cloud, but wouldn't say what for.

'He *hit* a girl, Ned,' she said, but I think now that she meant more than merely hit.

Nancy herself was all of five feet tall and in appearance a kind of licensed bag-lady. For her standard, as she called it, she wore lisle stockings and sensible rubber-soled walking shoes, which she seldom changed. What more she needed – scarves, raincoats, woollen hats of different colours – she took in a plastic carrier.

On surveillance duty our section worked eight-hour shifts always in the same formation, Nancy and Paul playing forward, young Ned trailing along behind as sweep. When I asked Skordeno whether we could vary the formation, he told me to get used to what I'd got. On our first day we had followed Fat Boy to Sandhurst, where a lunch had been organised in his honour. The three of us ate egg-and-chips in a café close to the main gates while Skordeno railed first against the Arabs, then against the Western exploitation of them, then

to my distress against the Fifth Floor, whom he described as Fascist golfers.

‘You a Freemason, College?’

I assured him I was not.

‘Well, you’d best hurry up and join then, hadn’t you? Haven’t you noticed the saucy way Personnel shakes your hand? You’ll never get to Berlin if you’re not a Mason, College.’

Day Two had been spent hanging around Mount Street while Fat Boy had himself measured for a pair of Purdy shot-guns, first precariously brandishing a try-gun round the premises, then throwing a tantrum when he discovered he would have to wait two years before they were ready. Paul ordered me twice into the shop while this scene was unfolding, and seemed pleased when I told him the staff were becoming suspicious of my frivolous enquiries.

‘I’d have thought it was your kind of place,’ he said, with his skull-like grin. ‘Huntin’, shootin’ and fishin’ – they like that on the Fifth Floor, College.’

The same night had found us sitting three up in a van outside a shuttered whorehouse in South Audley Street, and Head Office in a state of near panic. Fat Boy had only been holed up there two hours when he had telephoned the hotel and ordered his personal doctor to attend immediately. His heart! we thought in alarm. Should we go in? While Head Office dithered, we entertained visions of our quarry dead of a heart attack in the arms of some over-conscientious whore before he had signed the cheque for his obsolete fighter planes. It was not till four o’clock that the listeners laid our fears to rest. Fat Boy had been afflicted by a spell of impotence, they explained, and his doctor had been summoned to inject an aphrodisiac into the royal rump. We returned home at five, Skordeno drunk with anger, but all of us consoled by

the knowledge that Fat Boy was due in Luton at midday to attend a grand demonstration of the nearly latest British tank, and we could count on a day's rest. But our relief was premature.

'The Panda wants to buy herself some pretties,' Monty announced to us benignly on our arrival in Green Street. 'Your lot's on. Sorry about that, College.'

Which brings us to the lingerie department of the great Knightsbridge store, and to my moment of glory. Ben, I was thinking; Ben, I would trade one day of yours for five of mine. Then suddenly I wasn't thinking of Ben any more and I had ceased to envy him. I had drawn back into the privacy of a doorway and was speaking into the mouthpiece of the cumbersome radio set, which in those days was the best there was. I had selected the channel which gave me a direct line to base. It was the one Skordeno had told me not to use.

'The Panda's got a monkey on her back,' I informed Monty in my calmest voice, using the approved watchers' jargon to describe a mysterious follower. 'Five five, black curly hair, heavy moustache, aged forty, black overcoat, rubber-soled black shoes, Arab appearance. He was at the airport when Fat Boy's plane came in. I remember him. It's the same man.'

'Stay on him,' came Monty's laconic reply. 'Paul and Nancy stick with the Panda, you stick with the monkey. Which floor?'

'One.'

'Stay on him wherever he goes, keep talking to me.'

'He could be carrying,' I said as my eyes again fixed surreptitiously on the subject of my call.

'You mean he's pregnant?'

I didn't think that very funny.

Let me see the scene precisely, for it was more complicated than you may suppose. Our trio was not alone in following

the Panda's retinue on its snail-paced shopping expedition. Wealthy Arab princesses do not arrive unannounced at great Knightsbridge stores. In addition to a pair of floorwalkers in black jackets and striped trousers, two very obvious house detectives had placed themselves at either archway with their feet apart and their hands curled at their sides, ready at any moment to grapple with whirling dervishes. As if that were not enough, Scotland Yard had that morning taken upon itself to provide its own brand of protection in the form of an iron-faced man in a belted raincoat who insisted on placing himself beside the Panda and glowering at anyone who came near. And finally, you must see Paul and Nancy in their Sunday best, their backs turned to everyone while they affected to study trays of *négligés*, and watched our quarry in the mirrors.

And all of this again, you understand, set in the hushed and scented privacy of the harem; in a world of flimsy undergarments, deep-pile carpets and languorous half-naked dummies – not to mention those kindly grey-haired lady attendants in black *crêpe* who, at a certain age, are deemed to have achieved a sufficiently unthreatening demeanour to preside over shrines of female intimacy.

Other men, I noticed, preferred not to enter the lingerie department at all, or hurried through it with averted gaze. My instinct would have been the same, had it not been for my recognition of this melancholy little man with his black moustache and passionate brown eyes, who unswervingly trailed the Panda's retinue at fifteen paces. If Monty had not appointed me sweep, I might not have seen him at all – or not then. But it was quickly clear that both he and I, by virtue of our different trades, were obliged to keep the same distance

from our target – I with nonchalance, he with a kind of intense and mystical dependence. For his gaze never wavered from her. Even when he was unsighted by a pillar or a customer, he still contrived to crane his dark head this way or that until he had locked her once more in his zealous and – I was now convinced – fanatical gaze.

I had first sensed this fervour in him when I had spotted him in the arrivals hall at the airport, pressing himself on tip-toe against the long window as he wriggled to get a better view of the royal couple's approach. I had made nothing so special of him then. I was subjecting everyone to the same critical examination. He had seemed to be just another of the gaggle of diplomats, retainers and hangers-on who formed the royal welcome party. Nevertheless his intensity had struck a chord in me: So this is the Middle East, I had mused as I watched him squeeze his hollowed face against the glass. These are the heathen passions my Service must contain if we are to drive our cars and heat our houses and sell our weaponry in peace.

The monkey had taken a couple of steps forward and was peering at a cabinet of ribbons. His gait – exactly like that of his namesake – was wide but stealthy; he seemed to move entirely from the knees, in conspiratorial strides. I selected a display of garters next to him and peered into it while I again furtively examined him for tell-tale bulges round the waist and armpits. His black overcoat was of the classic gunman's shape: voluminous and without a belt, the kind of coat that covers effortlessly a long-barrelled pistol fitted with a suppressor, or a semi-automatic slung beneath the arm.

I studied his hands, my own nervously prickling. His left hung loosely at his side, but his right, which looked the stronger,

kept travelling towards his chest and withholding, as if he were preparing himself to pluck up courage for the final act.

A right-handed cross-draw, I thought; most likely to the armpit. Our weapons trainers had taught us all the combinations.

And his eyes – those dark, slow-burning, soulful zealot’s eyes – even in profile they seemed fixed upon the afterlife. Had he sworn vengeance on her? On her household? Had fanatical mullahs promised him a place in heaven if he did the deed? My knowledge of Islam was scant, and what there was of it was drawn from a couple of background lectures and the novels of P. C. Wren. Yet it was enough to warn me that I was in the presence of a desperate fanatic who counted his own life cheap.

As to myself, alas, I was unarmed. It was a sore point with me. Watchers would never dream of carrying weapons on normal duty, but covert protection work is a different type of watching, and Paul Skordeno had been allocated a sidearm from Monty’s safe.

‘One’s enough, College,’ Monty had told me, with his old man’s smile. ‘We don’t want you starting World War Three, now do we?’

All that was left to me, therefore, as I rose and softly followed him again, was to select in advance one of the blows we had been taught to master in our silent-killing classes. Should I count on attacking him from behind – with a rabbit punch? – with a double simultaneous blow over the ears? Either method could kill him instantly, whereas a live man can still be questioned. Then would I do better breaking his right arm first, hoping to take him with his own weapon? Yet if I let him draw, might I myself not go down in a hail of bullets from the several bodyguards around the room?

She had seen him!

The Panda had looked straight into the eyes of the monkey, and the monkey had returned her stare!

Had she recognised him? I was certain she had. But had she recognised his purpose? And was she, perhaps, in some strange turn of Oriental fatalism, preparing herself for death? The lurid possibilities went racing through my mind as I continued to observe their mysterious exchange. Their eyes met, the Panda froze in mid-gesture. Her jewelled, crabby little hands, plundering the clothing on the counter, kept still – and then, as if to his command, slipped passively to her sides. After which she stood motionless, without will, without even the strength to detach herself from his penetrating stare.

At last, with a forlorn and strangely humble air, she turned away from him, murmured something to her lady companions and, holding out her hand to the counter, released whatever frilly thing she was still clutching in it. She was wearing brown that day – if she had been a man, I would be tempted to say a Franciscan habit – with wide sleeves longer than her arms, and a brown headband bound tightly across her brow.

I saw her sigh, then slowly and, I was sure, resignedly, she led her entourage towards the archway. After her went her personal bodyguard; after him the Scotland Yard policeman. Then came the ladies of her train, followed by the floorwalkers. And finally came Paul and Nancy, who, with a show of indecision, had torn themselves away from their study of the *négligés* and were sauntering like any shoppers in the party's wake. Paul, who had surely overheard my conversations with Monty, vouchsafed me not the smallest glance. Nancy, who prided herself on her amateur dramatics, was pretending to pick a marital dispute with him. I tried to see whether Paul

had unbuttoned his jacket, for he too favoured the cross-draw. But his broad back was turned away from me.

‘All right, College, show me,’ said Monty brightly into my left ear, appearing beside me as if by magic. How long had he been there? I had no idea. It was past midday and our time for standing down, but this was no moment to change the guard. The monkey was not five yards from us, stepping lightly but determinedly after the Panda.

‘We can take him at the stairs,’ I murmured.

‘Speak louder,’ Monty advised me, in the same unabashed voice. ‘Speak normally, no one listens to you. Mutter, mutter out of the corner of your mouth, they think you’ve come to rob the till.’

Since we were on the first floor, the Panda’s party was sure to take the lift, whether they went up or down. Beside the lift stood a pair of swing doors opening on to what in those days was a stone emergency staircase, rather dank and insanitary, with linoleum treads. My plan, which I outlined to Monty in staccato sentences as we followed the monkey towards the archway, was simplicity itself. As the party approached the lift, Monty and I would close on him from either side, grab an arm each and sweep him into the staircase. We would subdue him with a blow to the groin, remove his weapon, then spirit him to Green Street where we would invite him to make a voluntary statement. In training exercises we had done such things a dozen times – once, to our embarrassment, to an innocent bank clerk who was hurrying home to his wife and family, and whom we had mistaken for a member of the training staff.

But if Monty heard me, to my frustration he gave no sign of having done so. He was watching the floorwalkers clear a

path through the crowd to the lift so that the Panda's party could ride in privacy. And he was smiling like any casual commoner who stumbles on a glimpse of royalty.

'She's going down,' he declared with satisfaction. 'Pound to a penny it's the costume jewellery she's after. You'd think the Gulfies wouldn't bother with the artificial stuff, but they can't get enough of it; they think it's got to be a bargain. Come on, son. This is fun. Let's go and take a look.'

I like to think that even in my perplexity I recognised the excellence of Monty's tradecraft. The Panda's exotic entourage, mostly in Arab dress, was arousing lively curiosity among the shoppers. Monty was just another punter, enjoying the spectacle. And yes, he was right again, their destination was the costume jewellery department, as the monkey also had divined, for as we emerged from our lift the monkey scampered ahead of the party to take up a favoured place alongside the glittering displays, his left shoulder nearest to the wall, exactly as required of a right-handed gunman who draws across his chest.

Yet, far from choosing a strategic position from which to return fire, Monty merely wandered after him, and, having placed himself next to him, beckoned me to join them, and in such a way that I had no alternative but to leave Monty, not the monkey, at the centre of our trio.

'This is why I always come to Knightsbridge, son,' Monty was explaining, loudly enough for half the floor to hear. 'You never know who you're going to meet. I brought your mother last time – *you* remember – we'd gone to the Harrods Food Hall. I thought: "*Hullo*, I know you, you're Rex Harrison." I could have held out my hand and touched him but I didn't. It's the crossroads of the world, Knightsbridge is, don't you

agree, sir?’ – lifting his hat to the monkey, who smiled wanly in return. ‘Now I wonder where this lot would be from. Arabs, by the look of them, with the wealth of Solomon at their fingertips. And they don’t even pay taxes, I dare say. Not royalty, well, they wouldn’t have to. There isn’t a royal household in the world pays taxes to itself, it wouldn’t be logical. See the big policeman there, son? He’ll be Special Branch, you can tell by his stupid scowl.’

The Panda’s party meanwhile was distributing itself among the illuminated glass counters while the Panda, in barely concealed agitation, was requiring that the trays be taken out for her inspection. And soon, as in the lingerie department, she was picking out one object after another, turning it critically under the inspection light, then setting it down and taking up another. And yet again, as she continued to appraise and relinquish each piece in turn, I saw her worried gaze slip towards us, first to the monkey, then to myself, as if she had seen in me her one hope of protection.

Yet Monty, when I glanced at him for confirmation, was still smiling.

‘That’s exactly what happened in the lingerie department,’ I whispered, forgetting his instruction to speak normally.

But Monty continued his noisy monologue. ‘But underneath, son – I always say this – underneath, royals or not, they’re the same as what we are, through and through. We’re all born naked, we’re all on our way to the grave. Your wealth is your health, better to be rich in friends than money, I say. We’ve all got the same appetites, the same little weaknesses and naughty ways.’ And on he ran, as if in deliberate contrast to my extreme alertness.

She had ordered up more trays. The counter was covered with sumptuous paste tiaras, bracelets and rings. Selecting a

three-string necklace of imitation rubies, she held it to her throat, then took up a hand mirror to admire herself.

And was it my imagination? It was not! She was using the mirror to observe the monkey and ourselves! First one dark eye, then the other fixed upon us; then the two of them together, warning us, imploring us, before she set the mirror down again and turned her back to us, and swept as if in anger along the edge of the glass counter, where a fresh display awaited her.

At the same moment, the monkey took a step forward and I saw his hand rise to the opening of his overcoat. Throwing caution aside, I too stepped forward, my right arm drawn back, the fingers of my right hand flexed, palm parallel to the ground in the approved Sarratt manner. I had decided on an elbow to the heart, followed by a side-of-hand to the upper lip, to the point where the nose cartilage joins the top half of the jaw. A complicated network of nerves has its meeting point here, and a well-aimed blow can immobilise the victim for some while. The monkey was opening his mouth and breathing in. I anticipated a cry to Allah, or perhaps the screamed slogan of some fundamentalist sect – though I am no longer sure how much we knew or cared in those days about fundamentalist Arabs. I at once determined to scream myself, not only in order to confuse him, but because a deep breath would put more oxygen into my bloodstream and so increase my striking power. I was actually drawing this breath when I felt Monty's hand lock like an iron ring round my wrist and, with unpredicted power, immobilise me as he drew me back to him.

'Now don't do that, son, this gentleman was before you,' he said in a matter-of-fact voice. 'He's got a little confidential business to transact, haven't you, sir?'

He had indeed. And Monty's grasp did not release me until I had observed the nature of it. The monkey was speaking. Not to the Panda, not to her retinue, but to the two floor-walkers in striped trousers who were inclining their heads to listen to him, at first condescendingly, then with startled interest as their gaze switched to the Panda.

'Alas, gentlemen, Her Royal Highness prefers to make her purchases informally, you see,' he was saying. 'Without the inconvenience of a wrapping or an invoice, let us put it that way. It is her time of life. Three and four years ago, she was a most expert bargainer, you know. Oh yes. She would negotiate a most competitive discount for everything she wished to buy. But today, at her time of life, she is taking matters most literally into her own hands, you see. Or should I say into her sleeve, oh dear? I am therefore charged by His Royal Highness to make a most bountiful settlement for all such informal purchases, on the very clear understanding that no breath of publicity reaches the public ear, gentlemen, whether in the written or the spoken word, if you understand me.'

Then from his pocket he drew not, alas, a deadly Walther automatic, not a Heckler & Koch sub-machine gun, not even one of our beloved standard Browning 9-millimetres, but a tooled Moroccan leather wallet stuffed with his master's bank-notes in a variety of denominations.

'I counted, I believe, three fine rings, sir, one in artificial emerald, two in paste diamond, also a fine artificial ruby necklace, gentlemen, three strings. It is the wish of His Royal Highness that our settlement should take generous account of any inconvenience suffered by your most excellent staff, you see. Also commission to your good selves, on the understanding already stated regarding publicity.'

Monty's grip on me had at last relaxed, and as we walked

towards the hall I dared to glance at him, and saw to my relief that his expression, though thoughtful, was surprisingly gentle.

‘That’s the trouble in our job, Ned,’ he explained contentedly, using my Christian name for the first time. ‘Life’s looking one way, we’re looking the other. I like an honest-to-God enemy myself sometimes, I don’t mind admitting. Take a lot of finding, though, don’t they? Too many nice blokes about.’

‘Now do please remember,’ Smiley piously exhorted his young audience, in much the tone he might have selected if he had been asking them to put their offerings in the collection box as they were leaving, ‘that the privately educated Englishman – and Englishwoman, if you will allow me – is the greatest dissembler on earth.’ He waited for the laughter to subside. ‘Was, is now and ever shall be for as long as our disgraceful school system remains intact. Nobody will charm you so glibly, disguise his feelings from you better, cover his tracks more skilfully or find it harder to confess to you that he’s been a damned fool. Nobody acts braver when he’s frightened stiff, or happier when he’s miserable; nobody can flatter you better when he hates you than your extrovert Englishman or woman of the supposedly privileged classes. He can have a Force Twelve nervous breakdown while he stands next to you in the bus queue, and you may be his best friend, but you’ll never be the wiser. Which is why some of our best officers turn out to be our worst. And our worst, our best. And why the most difficult agent you will ever have to run is yourself.’

In his own mind, I had no doubt, Smiley was talking about the greatest deceiver of us all, Bill Haydon. But for me, he

was talking about Ben – and yes, though it's harder to admit, about the young Ned, and perhaps the old one too.

It was the afternoon of the day I had failed to immolate the Panda's bodyguard. Tired and dispirited, I arrived at my flat in Battersea to find the door on the latch and two men in grey suits sifting through the papers in my desk.

They barely looked at me as I burst in. The nearer of them was Personnel and the second an owlish, ageless, tubby man in circular spectacles who eyed me with a sort of baleful commiseration.

'When did you last hear from your friend Cavendish?' said Personnel, scarcely glancing at me before returning to my papers.

'He is your friend, isn't he?' said the owlish man unhappily while I struggled to collect myself. 'Ben? Arno? Which do you call him?'

'Yes. He is. Ben is. What is this?'

'So when did you last hear from him?' Personnel repeated, shoving aside a pile of letters from my girlfriend of the time. 'Does he ring you? How do you keep in touch?'

'I had a postcard from him a week ago. Why?'

'Where is it?'

'I don't know. I destroyed it. If it isn't in the desk. Will you kindly tell me what's going on?'

'Destroyed it?'

'Threw it away.'

'*Destroy* sounds deliberate, doesn't it? What did it look like?' Personnel said, pulling out another drawer. 'Stay where you are.'

'It had a picture of a girl on one side and a couple of lines

from Ben on the other. What does it matter what it had on it? Please get out of here.'

'Saying?'

'Nothing. It said, this is my latest acquisition. "Dear Ned, this is my new catch, so glad you're not here. Love, Ben." Now get out!'

'What did he mean by that?' – pulling out another drawer.

'Glad I wouldn't cut him out with the girl, I suppose. It was a joke.'

'Do you usually cut him out with his women?'

'We've no women in common. We never have had.'

'What *do* you have in common?'

'Friendship,' I said angrily. 'What the hell are you looking for actually? I think you'd better leave at once. Both of you.'

'I can't find it,' Personnel complained to his fat companion as he tossed aside another wad of my private letters. 'No postcard of any kind. You're not lying, are you, Ned?'

The owlsh man had not taken his eyes off me. He continued to regard me with a wretched empathy, as if to say it comes to all of us and there's nothing we can do. 'How was the postcard *delivered*, Ned?' he asked. His voice, like his demeanour, was tentative and regretful.

'By post, how else?' I replied rudely.

'The open mail, you mean?' the owlsh man suggested sadly. 'Not by Service bag, for instance?'

'By Forces mail,' I replied. 'Field Post Office. Posted Berlin with a British stamp on it. Delivered by the local postman.'

'Do you remember the Field Post Office *number*, by any chance, Ned?' the owlsh man enquired with enormous diffidence. 'On the postmark, I mean?'

'It was the ordinary Berlin number, I imagine,' I retorted, struggling to keep up my indignation in the face of someone