

If Looks Could Kill

It had been a quiet Spring, and I was bored. London wasn't boring, just those walks through Saint James Park, up to the Palace, down through Green Park and back to the flat. I found it strange that Tillotson hadn't called me in; surely there was something going on that required my particular skills? I knew better than to contact him; until he wanted me his number was routed to a polite female voice that informed me that the number was no longer in service. I knew better, of course.

I was sitting on a park bench, watching a decrepit old person of indeterminate gender feeding pigeons. Some were eating the feed out of his mouth. It would have been a disgusting sight if I hadn't seen so many others designed to turn anyone's stomach, a mutilated body dumped in an alley in Sidi Barrani as a warning when I got too close to a terrorist cell. Sidi Barrani was the last place anyone would look for a serious base, but perhaps that was the point. It's a nothing town, occasional home to Bedouins who'd rather be in the desert, really.

Nothing came of Sidi Barrani, because I got pulled out for another emergency, this time to dig a fat politician out of a honey trap. It was lucky I knew the operator, an amateur, one of those disgraced third sons of a famous family who got sent away to foreign soil. 'Remission men' they used to call them, but this chap had found a nice little niche in Monaco. Westminster really ought to do a better job; they should open these idiots' eyes to the simplicity of this particular scam. Or maybe that was the point; perhaps Fat Boy was too much of a political liability and this was an easy way to do damage control.

"I say, old boy, drop in and have a snort at the Orchid Bar; here give this card to Luigi, he's a real pal."

And 'Luigi' certainly would play the part, a couple of free drinks, the second with a few drops of a certain herbal tonic from Spain, and, voila! the photographs. Fat Boy would never see the cameras, just the bed and the lovely legs.

I shifted impatiently. The wreck in the soiled old raincoat put down the paper bag containing the pigeon feed.

"Tillotson wants to see you."

The voice would have done a decent Public School proud. Nice camouflage, I thought, and they had planted him expertly. I had broken a rule out of boredom; never follow the same route twice. They would have marked that bench just at the end of a mooch around Green Park on the way back to the flat.

Tillotson was his usual self, remote, expressionless, like a lizard in the sun.

I was at alert four; not pumping adrenalin, but sensing something big. Tillotson would have been crestfallen if he knew he'd given the game away. He only steepled his fingers when the briefing was about something far higher than Routine. There was something else that I couldn't put a name to; almost a show of concern for me. That should have put me more on guard at the time; only later did I understand the reason for his tiny worry frown.

Reading faces had come naturally to me. The instructors had been impressed; I told them they should recruit more Montessori students because we were educated visually. I still draw pictures, more like maps, really, to unravel some of the problems I've been sent to solve.

"Thing is, Hare, I'm sending you out on something different. Can't make sense of it myself."

He paused. For all our abrasive relationship, I didn't question his intelligence, so his admission was astonishing.

"Here, you'd better read this."

He passed over a decoded message. The protocol was clear; it had come from Ambassador Varian personally. His exasperation showed through. If I read between the lines, he had a full-scale revolt by his staff and could offer no explanation. He was rapidly becoming trapped in his own Residence, isolated even. It was an astonishing claim from such a senior government appointee. "Bit of a wild one, this, Hare," Tillotson said crisply, "Yugo job actually. Strange things going on in the Balkans, Hare, watch out for the gypsies."

I arrived in Belgrade using a diplomatic passport and wearing my issue raincoat. It had a foldable flat tweed cap in the pocket, the sort you'd see on someone sitting on a shooting stick at a Point to Point, hoping the horse would perform and rescue him from his creditors.

A car was waiting. It had a miniature flag staff mounted on one wing, but no flag. So the Ambassador had sent his own car, had he? The chauffeur spoke good English even if his choice of words was a bit strange. So, he was a locally-employed member of the Embassy. My alert state went up a notch.

"His Excellency has given me special instructions, sir, I am to take you on a devious route to an edifice. You are to enter the frontmost door and direct yourself out of the rearmost door. Another car there will be stationed."

Interesting cut-out, I thought. But Tillotson's warnings, both actual and unspoken, had prepared me. I'd only done Belgrade once before, so whatever route we took was all the same to me.

Might almost have been Paris, I thought, all it needed was a few Citroens rushing around on their special suspension and I'd feel right at home. We pulled up outside a six storey building with a few trees outside. Bit upscale, I thought, as I got out.

They teach you that the danger with cut-outs is that the object is out of sight for several seconds; it wouldn't work otherwise. As the 'frontmost' door closed behind me, I took off the raincoat, reversed it and slipped it back on. If anyone had been watching at the airport, the fawn raincoat was now navy blue. I pulled out the cap and put it on; it covered my light brown hair admirably. There would be dustbins somewhere at the back of the building, I thought. I dropped my shoulders into a 'civvy slouch' as they called it, 'not the way an officer bears himself, sir', the instructor had said. I couldn't imagine him slouching; but that was the point, a parade ground stance stands out a mile and gives the game away to a trained observer.

I adopted a slight limp and walked out of the 'rearmost' door into the delivery yard, immediately turning sideways, facing the wall. The dustbins were right there; I lifted a lid and pretended to put something in. It gave me time to scan the yard. There was an arched stagecoach entrance to the yard itself, which held three cars and a delivery van. Only one had the engine running. I pointed myself at the archway and limped towards it. As soon as I was covered by the other cars, I slid round the wall to the back of the car with its engine ticking over.

When you travel on a diplomatic passport, you get cleared through airports far more quickly than the hoi polloi, but this makes you too easy to spot. So you use that by presenting whatever vision of yourself you find most useful. Of course, you could get away carrying a gun, but that was forbidden.

"No need for that, sir, here, feel this".

I'd felt the muzzle of a gun in my neck. I'd only just managed to stop the immediate action. The instructor handed over a fountain pen. The cap was designed to reverse; the hollow end, the one that normally protects the nib, was about the size of a small calibre pistol. I remember grinning at the instructor; he didn't appear to be amused.

I felt in my left inside pocket for the pen and prepared it. Then I opened the driver's door violently and stuck the pen into the driver's neck. It was only then that I realised the driver was a young woman.

"Where are you taking me?" I demanded. She was shivering now.

"To the Residence," she managed. Her English was impeccable; she didn't seem too scared. It should have been a tiny alert.

"Move over."

She didn't move, so I jabbed her with the gun.

I got behind the wheel. It was an older model Mercedes, about right for this job, I thought.

"Tell me the way."

She did as she was told and before long we arrived at a gate with the Coat of Arms. The gate opened and we crunched over some gravel. A door opened. Sir Evelyn rushed out solicitously. I had never before had such a greeting from a Senior Ambassador. A grudging acknowledgement across a cocktail party floor, maybe.

So it was that serious.

He shepherded me into the Residence. Neither of us looked back at the driver, which was another mistake, as I would find out.

"Good of you to come, my boy," he said in that refined accent that never brought the best out of me. At least he hadn't said, "Old Boy". He probably reserved that for more senior people.

"We have a meeting planned immediately, Head of Security, Deputy and a couple of attachés. Did they brief you in London?"

His speech was too fast and too clipped, sure signs of stress. I nodded.

"Make any sense of it?"

I shook my head as we went into the meeting.

There were the usual platitudes and handshakes. Everything seemed normal, I thought, except for the sense of complete bemusement.

Sir Evelyn sat down and said, "Wemyss, please."

Wemyss was the Head of Security, an elegant ex-Life Guards Officer, very well connected; their place in Shropshire had been in the family since just after those naughty Normans sneaked across the channel. Or so the file said. He certainly looked the part.

"Gentlemen," he began professionally, "This briefing is classified Secret." He smiled lopsidedly. "Actually, it's rather weird." I liked him for that.

He went on to show maps of the area and explain that the Yugos had made a botch of their relationship with the Roma. He called them 'gyppos' which I suppose was acceptable in that room and in that Residence. I knew he knew better and was trying to send a message.

"Thing is, we've got tarred with the same brush. Nobody can see where the Roma got that idea, but there it is. Now they're out for revenge."

He stopped and coughed, pulling a large handkerchief out of his sleeve. His suit was beautifully cut, the buttons on the sleeve would have button holes.

“The Roma are a mysterious people,” he went on. His demeanour had changed slightly; he was now uncomfortable, although he did a good job disguising it. But I was trained to spot these tiny shifts of pace and intonation.

“If I tell you that they cast spells, please suspend judgement.”

He went on to outline the history of the Roma, more details than had come my way before.

“Indian origin, North West area, so they say, migrated west through rather fierce discrimination.”

I thought about the Nazi purge; what was it, a million Roma in the camps, thousands gassed.

“They’re confidence tricksters, circus artists, and fortune tellers, so forth. Self educated if you can call it that, many illiterate. Every other social group looks down on them, even Slobovians.”

There was a joke there, somewhere.

He cleared his throat.

“There are many myths about them, none scientifically verified. They do cast spells, do it for money, but that’s not unusual in primitive societies. There’s a persistent claim that they communicate over long distances, bush telegraph sort of thing.”

He stopped and looked at the Ambassador.

“Go on, man, this is an emergency.”

Wemyss nodded, now less than enthusiastic.

“You’ll be familiar, Mr Hare with the required social rounds we have to pretend to enjoy.”

I liked him even more.

“Thing is, new faces appear frequently, soviet bloc particularly. About four months ago, a rather dishy female couple turned up. We didn’t know them and no one claimed them. Bit slack, actually.” He’d acknowledged a security lapse, another variant on the honey trap. Show a lusty man a beautiful girl and concessions are made. I’d fallen for it myself; Tillotson had a habit of reminding me when he felt the need to regain the upper hand.

“Straight away we noticed that an attaché was walking around like a zombie. We actually used that term. We sent him to the Medic who confirmed that he was in ‘an altered state’. Anybody could see that,” he snorted. “After that, one by one our staff began to fall away from their duties, Eyes a bit glazed, that’s all, denied any problems. Thing is,” he glanced at the Ambassador again, “we’re down below operational level, can’t get any work out of them, can’t point to anything wrong, can’t persuade London to replace them.” He turned to the Ambassador and stiffened slightly in a form of salute.

“Something to do with these girls, Hare,” said Sir Evelyn. “Whatever it is, they appear to have cast a spell on my staff.”

There was a silence that went on for too long.

“Tell me,” I said lightly, “Anybody noticed anything like a change from right- to left-handedness?”

Sir Evelyn began to explode, but Wemyss quickly interjected.

“Doc remarked on that, only a couple of them, no, three actually.”

They all looked at me.

“What,” started Sir Evelyn.

I held up my hand, “Just gathering facts, sir, no conclusions yet.”

It had come out with that authority that Tillotson was always warning me about; it had infuriated several over-promoted and insecure officials. There were too many of them all over the Empire, well those parts that I had been sent to. As far as I was concerned, the British Empire must have been headed for a fall for decades. Suez was only the obvious marker.

Sir Evelyn wasn’t one of the insecure.

“Quite right, Hare; what do you suggest we do next?”

It was gracious and made my abruptness seem even ruder. Time for some lubrication, I thought.

“Carry on as usual, Ambassador, please.”

“As usual? You mean we should do the rounds? Czecko do tonight, isn’t there?”

One of the attachés agreed.

“I need to see these girls, sir, will they be there?” I asked.

There was some shuffling of papers.

“Indeed, sir,” this from the attaché.

I was shown my room and prepared myself for the reception. I’d lost count of these events, they were the required form all over the diplomatic circuit, like Parisian French. I got by on a rather pedestrian version. My instructress had grown tired of me.

“Mon Dieu, monsieur, avec esprit, si’l vous plait.”

She meant I was resisting the incorporation of French emphasis. I knew what she meant, and, when I was in the proper environment, I could fake it. But, well, make concessions to those frogs? Never!

I went down to meet the Ambassador; I had been invited to go in his car to the Czechoslovak Embassy. In the lobby, I saw a rather pretty, tall girl, beautiful figure, stylish dress in the English tradition, from somewhere in Knightsbridge and not Harrods. She seemed familiar.

“Good Evening,” I said with my best smile.

She looked away.

“I hope you didn’t bring your gun,” she said, without looking at me.

The ground opened up at my feet. She was the driver of the cut-out car.

“I do apologise,” I said, sincerely, “Automatic response, I’m afraid.”

She turned, with a smile.

“It’s alright, Wemyss had briefed me. I’m not supposed to be used like that, but we’re a bit short-handed.”

She put out her hand. “Veronica Varian,” she said.

I shook it and gave her my name.

“Oh, I know all about you, Mr. Hare,” she said. I hoped not.

It took a little longer than it should, but I made the connection. She was the Ambassador’s daughter.

We entered the Reception together, well, in strict protocol order, of course, I was with Wemyss. Sir Evelyn and Veronica started the routine rounds together. So Veronica was carrying on the duties of an Ambassador’s wife. I had read the file on Sir Evelyn; wife mentioned; no details. It was a loose end that I would have probed had there been time.

The British insistence on the perfection of timing meant that the room was about half full.

Probably exactly half full, if I knew anything. So I went into my scan mode.

It’s possible to move round a large room without anybody noticing, and certainly without the irritation of having to make all the right conversational ploys. I had no idea how diplomats got through their careers having to be on stage with the same old rounds, same old people.

The ‘idle sidle’ technique involves the use of one’s shoulders as a form of wedge, first to make progress and then to shield your face from the crowd. If anybody were to make an issue of it, I

was just looking at the pictures. In fact, the Czechos had good taste; nothing of museum quality but decent stuff, a bit stark for anyone brought up on Constable and thatched cottages with hollyhocks, but interesting all the same.

Reception rooms have this feature; they have at least two mirrors. They make the room look bigger and provide the opportunity for the women to surreptitiously check their make-up and grooming. It wasn't unknown for men to do the same.

For me, they provided the opportunity to scan the room indirectly. As I went through the process, I noticed Wemyss glance at my reflection and smile, immediately looking away. I was more concerned to find Veronica looking rather too pointedly at my reflection. If she kept this up, I'd lose my advantage. There was a continual buzz at the double doors as people arrived. I was pretending to look at an art nouveau picture of a girl waking up in a forest setting, when I sensed someone next to me. It was Wemyss.

"Alphonse Mucha, something to do with Spring, I think. They're here."

He slid away. I looked discretely into my mirror. Sure enough, two tall girls were starting to ease down the reception line. They were too far away to get any reading; I'd have to wait until they circulated, probably several minutes from now. I turned back to the Mucha painting, only to notice an earthy perfume that I knew well. It was Shalimar, and was used by all the nice girls at home. Victoria had used it once; out of character that night in more ways than one. It had all worked out for the best.

But this time it was Veronica.

"An art critic, now, Mr. Hare?"

"It's a Mucha, nice, isn't it?"

"What is it about?" she asked. It was just a touch too innocent, too naive. What was she, thirty perhaps, no wedding ring and with that accent, probably Cheltenham, she would know about art. But it was fun, and I had a few minutes to spare.

"Innocent young woman awakened from a trance in the forest by the sound of Spring arriving."

She turned her eyes on me. For the first time I saw admiration, there. Behind it was something else; for the life of me, I couldn't determine what it was, but it ramped up my alert state.

"How do you know this?" she demanded in that rather autocratic voice.

"I read a bit, when I'm not assaulting fair maidens."

She turned her eyes on me again; I hadn't noticed before but her head didn't move, just her eyes. I looked away, pretending interest in the Mucha. I felt just a little light headed, although I had hardly sipped my gin and tonic, the rather large one made with Tanqueray gin that Wemyss had brought me with a wink. He'd read my file.

Veronica moved her position so she could face me again. A primitive instinct, something too deep to rationalise, made me look over at Wemyss.

"Sorry, Veronica, duty calls."

And I set off away from her under as much control as I could muster.

As I sidled next to Wemyss, I was developing a bit of anxiety about myself. It might have been normal for a 'wet op', but here in the stuffy Central European pomposity of the Embassy, it was out of place.

"Get me out of here," I said, sotto voce.

He looked stunned and was about to say something like, "Sorry, old boy, social rounds, you know?"

I spat out the code word for the day. He blinked.

“Come with me.”

We slid sideways through that same old, same old crowd and through the formal emergency exit. All Embassies had them these days, what with bombs tucked into Hermes bags.

“What’s up?”

“Something wrong, Wemyss, I’m getting the wrong signals from Veronica.”

“Ah,” he said.

He knew something about her, something that he’d not passed on. He was in a delicate position, I could tell. But I liked him, so while I would normally have rushed the issue, I just raised an eyebrow.

He decided.

“I must clear this with the old man, wait here.”

I was alone in the corridor that ran immediately from the emergency door. It looked sterile, but I was now at the point when the adrenalin rush starts to cloud judgement. We were trained to give it a value; alert six; this was what the instructors would suggest.

There was another doorway about ten feet away. I moved down and looked at the frame. Perfect; it was in the old-fashioned, heavily ornate style. I backed against the door. Any casual glance wouldn’t see me. I heard footsteps and braced back into the doorway.

The emergency door opened and Veronica stepped in. As she started down the corridor, I heard a voice. “Wrong way, darling, the loo’s this way.”

Veronica’s eyes blazed a violent green for a second; then she was gone.

Wemyss appeared almost immediately. I kept Veronica’s reconnaissance to myself.

“Dobro; let’s go,” he said crisply, and we walked calmly down the corridor and out to the car park. An Alfa Romeo Giulia was parked conveniently. We went away at speed and finished up at an apartment complex somewhere in a distant part of Belgrade. It had an engraved name on the glass doors – Beau Rivage. It was the same everywhere; put a French name on a building and you could charge more rent.

He shepherded me through a lobby, exchanging a few words in Slovene with the porter. We went up in a classic open-caged lift that Wemyss operated himself. Right at home here, I thought, a bit unusual for someone of his diplomatic status to live in such luxury. The apartment was surprisingly elegant. It dawned on me far too slowly that Wemyss was independently wealthy; of course he was, coming from his family, Eton and the Household Brigade, it all fitted together. I had a momentary frown wondering why he’d be happy as Chief of Security, but let it go.

“Sit down, please, Hare. Drink?”

I shook my head; I felt as if I’d already had too many, but I’d only half finished that gin and tonic. There was some clinking and he returned with a glass of something.

“Look, here’s the thing. You’re from the right place, I checked, of course. All the right boxes ticked, but we do have a situation here. I feel a bit marooned, actually.”

He took a deep breath.

“Veronica turned up about a month ago, said she was the Ambassador’s daughter. No record of her. She insisted on meeting the Ambassador alone. It took me several conflabs to get Sir Evelyn to agree. When she came out, she spoke to me like a debutante’s mother, you know, tried to put me in my place, all that.” He grimaced and took a swig.

“The Ambassador won’t hear a word against her, tight as a clam, what did he say, ‘private matter, Wemyss, private matter’. Of course, nothing I could do officially, Ambassador has rather too much clout, what?”

A slip on his part, I thought, dropping into the upper class manner of speaking while he was cultivating a plain man style. I still liked him, though.

“What concerns me, Hare, is that the old man has it in his mind that the situation has been created by these two Czecko girls. He never thought that way before Veronica turned up. She seems to have a lot of power. Thing is, I can’t run any checks on her, you understand.”

I nodded. My head was beginning to clear.

When I get into situations like this, they all start out as what a CIA chap once called a ‘rat’s nest’. I discovered that struggling for a solution too early is pointless; eventually pieces will fit and, well, treading water isn’t a bad thing to do sometimes.

“Look here, Hare, you have communications clearance; I can’t help at the moment. Use your London people, run a deep check on Veronica, there’s something there we need to know.”

I yawned, couldn’t control it.

“Sorry, old chap,” he said, “You’ll be tired; I’ll run you back to your place.”

I shouldn’t have been that tired; I remained on alert six.

The next day, I took a taxi to the Residence and reported to Wemyss. He had already got out a signal pad and a code book. I raised a mental eyebrow. What even Wemyss wouldn’t know is how often an agent is compromised by sending a signal that is coded from a known source document. There is a mandatory procedure whenever in doubt; send a garbage message in the proffered code with the prefix ‘This is Sailboat’. The reply will provide a clean one-time code by letter transposition. Simple but effective.

We went up to the comms room and Wemyss switched things on.

“Got to do everything myself,” he muttered, “Damn operator’s completely gaga.”

So I sent two lines of the nonsense poem Jabberwocky. It was a favourite of mine and the Code Officer would know it was from me. To a decoder it would look like a double code, since ‘Jabberwock’ was obviously a disguise, as was ‘Bandersnatch’.

The first reply arrived quickly; it wouldn’t have made any sense to a monitor. I used the one time code to ask the appropriate questions. The second reply came quickly and when I decoded it, it was a shock. Talk about a ‘Hands Off’ signal; I could imagine Tillotson in someone’s office getting a few choice words of guidance. I grinned.

So now, I thought, we were back to square one. There had been no further reports of staff at the Embassy going absent in spirit, as it were. Nevertheless, the problem remained; in effect Her Majesty’s Envoy was out of business, well almost. Wemyss seemed unaffected, so at least that was secure. What now? One of our training exercises that had sounded like double-dutch at the time, long-haired chap talking about neural processing, ‘clear the mind, step mentally aside, let the sub-conscious do the work’, he’d said. The annoying part was that it actually worked, a bit like reaction shooting, don’t aim, let the brain position your arm autonomously. That worked too. I went down to the refreshment room – nothing as mundane as a canteen. It was empty except for the locally employed servant, so I had a cup of rather good coffee, such a pleasure after that awful stuff they foisted on you at home. Civil Service canteens often served something made from essence of chicory. I sighed at the slowness of our recovery from the War effort. Settle for second best, construct cheap clapboard buildings that wouldn’t last five years, and so on. I was studying the bottom of my cup wondering whether I should indulge in just one more, when the door opened and in came Veronica. She marched straight to my table, shot a glance at the servant

and sent a command in a language for which I had too little grasp, Serbo-Croat, definitely; beyond a few words, I was illiterate. She sat down.

“Mr. Hare, it appears that you know who I am and why I’m here. There must have been something amiss with the briefings, back there.”

She tossed her head in the direction of London. Her hair swung in a way that screamed ‘professional coiffure’.

“My superior was not amused by your signal. Nor was I.”

Her tone had migrated towards that assumption of divine rights that always raised my hackles. I was processing both her accent and her syllabic emphases. I could hear Cheltenham, of course, but, unless I was mistaken, there was some of that polish that would mean a finishing school, Chateau Mont-Choisi, perhaps. Switzerland wasn’t far from here, not as the crow flies, anyway. I wouldn’t mind seeing Veronica in a skiing outfit, I thought, with sudden alarm; she was presenting me with a challenge and that always brought out the worst, but it wasn’t normally accompanied by physical attraction.

I hadn’t responded to her accusation, because, really it was a compliment. She and her ‘superior’ were annoyed that she had precipitated a direct demand for a background check; I’d bet she was supposed to avoid that.

I did a quick inventory. Veronica had been used by the Embassy to fill in as a cut-out driver. Strange even in an emergency, I realised. Had I foiled a diversion to get me out of the way? What did I know about her? Only what Wemyss had told me, and I’d had to drag it out of him. He was a nice chap, thoughtful too, getting me that gin and tonic to my exact specifications. I stopped in mid-thought. It was after a couple of distracted sips that I had begun to feel less than competent. I’d put it down to an attempt at hypnosis or mind modification by Veronica. I threw my mind back to the Reception Room. Wait a minute, if Wemyss had delved that deeply into my profile, what else did he know? Everything that was there, of course. But he wouldn’t know about the really hush-hush stuff, because that wouldn’t even be on the records that were available to mere Embassy staff, no matter what level they were. Except Ambassadors, I supposed.

A cold chill arrived from nowhere.

Not the Ambassador, not His Excellency, surely?

Veronica was looking at me with disdain.

“Try and keep your mind on the job at hand, Hare,” she said abruptly.

I’d had enough.

“Miss Varian, this isn’t the hockey field at Cheltenham, so don’t try and order me around.”

I had turned my special cold-eyed look on her. You have to train for this; you have actually to think about doing her serious damage. Her eyes opened wide; then she wavered.

“I’m sorry, it’s a bad habit of mine.”

She took a breath.

“I assume we are both here for the same issue?” she muttered.

Always capitalise immediately on an opponent’s weakness.

“I have no idea to whom you report,” I snapped, imposing strict grammar.

She looked at me with a new, more demure focus. I could certainly live with that.

She looked around; the servant was nowhere to be seen.

“You’d have to walk down King Charles Street.”

It was my turn to blink. She had indicated that she was from the Foreign Office. Anyone listening in would have to have very special knowledge to understand.

So the FO was that concerned, was it?

The situation reminded me of the story about the Minotaur's labyrinth and the importance of the thread, without which Theseus would not have found his way back. I recalled it was a woman who gave Theseus the thread. Tillotson would be chewing the upholstery if he knew what was going on in my head. But that's the thing; allow the brain its freedom and accept the resultant imagery. A name surfaced; Ariadne, that was it, she with the ball of thread, the only way out of the maze.

I realised that I had been silent again and, perhaps, my gaze had suddenly become fixed on Veronica.

"Tell me what you know about this situation."

I managed to get a bit of the command voice into the request.

She bridled once more.

"And don't bully *me*, Mr.Hare," she said, although it was in a rather softer tone. "You don't know my chain of command or what I can do here."

This was true.

"Unless we work together, Veronica, we're going to go round in circles. You must know something; a lot more than me. All I know is some rubbish about gypsy spells on Embassy staff."

She got up and walked around. It was a pretty sight. I had a flash of her walking delicately with a book on her head; what was the term? Department, that was it; all the nice girls had to do it. And a few not so nice, I recalled, some of them made terrible wives, only tolerated under Noblesse Oblige.

"My superior would have a fit if he ever finds out I revealed this," she muttered, "If I tell you, we must have an explanation that doesn't involve me."

"Oh," I said, gallantly, "I'll take the blame, used to it, actually, always on the hot seat when I get back, but, well, I survive."

"The FO has an internal investigation unit, it has to, of course, there are too many opportunities for improper benefit that come the way of people overseas."

I wondered at her choice of phrase; 'improper benefit' sounded a bit too much like moral outrage. But perhaps she'd seen too much of it around the world. Diplomats were only human and some would yield to temptation, the law of statistics made that clear. Together with the depravity of human nature, I thought. I'd seen too much of that. Coming from high ranking Brits it was somehow less acceptable than from Wogs and Dagos.

Veronica had learned to accept my processing time. She looked at me before continuing.

"We received an anonymous tip that Sir Evelyn had acquired an exclusive property as a reward for giving a passport to a person on one of our black lists. It was very convincing; signatures, photographs, the lot. Open and shut case, normally, except, well, too many FO people wouldn't, couldn't believe it. So they sent me."

She had provided the thread, but would never know it.

"Place in the Beau Rivage?"

She jumped, her face changing colour. She looked gorgeous.

"How dare you?" she hissed, "You told me you were in the dark; it's true what they said about you, nothing you won't stoop to. Just a lower.."

She stopped in mid-sentence. If she'd put her hand over her mouth it wouldn't have been any clearer that she realised she had said too much.

I grinned at her.

"Look, I do this for a living, dirty stuff, abductions, blackmail, you name it. So I look for connections. I just found one."

"What do you mean? Did I give you the connection?"

"Not really, I was already thinking about it. Sometimes, the pieces just form a logical fit."

"Tell me." The authoritarian tone was back.

"No, it'd be too dangerous for you. The perpetrator is too deep into this. He'll kill if he has to."

She sat down slowly.

"Jonathan," she said, "I'm sorry. The FO is full of people who look down on anyone with no pedigree. They don't know about you, only what's on the file; which says you're from a working class family, single mother, raised in a Railway town with no redeeming features. What they haven't understood is your 'arrangement' with Victoria."

She had put a knowing emphasis on the word 'arrangement'.

She waited, but I said nothing.

"She's a Cheltenham gal, graduated a year after me. Penny Ashworth-Jones told me about you and Victoria."

I noticed that Veronica didn't refer to Penny as the Duchess of Taunton. It never failed to amaze me how these people were all connected; they could pick up a telephone and pull in information that we stooges would have to work our rear-ends off to obtain. A faint warning bell was ringing, but it was too far away, then.

And if Penny and Veronica were on speaking terms, it told me a lot about Veronica. She couldn't be a 'wet' operative, simply someone with the skills required to persuade Sir Evelyn to confess and retire quietly. This was how the FO dealt with such situations; I bet they had ready a sheaf of press releases in which the phrase 'due to ill health' would appear rather frequently. Veronica obviously hadn't persuaded Sir Evelyn yet.

One of the classes that we all had to choose from during training was called 'logical analysis'. I'd chosen it out of boredom really, the words 'Boolean Algebra' suggesting mathematics. I had heard of it, of course; it was somewhere outside the fringes of my own interests. The lecturer, as always anonymous, was hopeless; he stood with his back to the class, spoke to the blackboard and scribbled on it at the same time. I'd bet he had degrees after his name that wouldn't fit on a standard letterhead. About all I got out of it was that every concept was either true or false and that, sometimes, thinking that something was false was easier and better than thinking it was true. There was something called 'fallibility', and a name, what was it, Karl Popper, that was it. The idea of logic couldn't fail to appeal to a mathematician, which is where I was headed before the Service wrapped its tentacles around me. I looked back on my time at Oxford and the extent of the recruitment effort they went through. Victoria had said, eventually, that they had seduced me; which was a bit ripe, really, coming from her.

I went back to my room, passing the office with the name Wemyss on it. He wasn't there. His girl sniffed that he was indisposed and wouldn't be in today. The implication was clear; he took more than a few days off.

I got out a scribbling pad and started the logic diagram. It always resembles a map of the Underground, except that at every station there are two choices, true or false. Works a treat, but

sometimes gives you an answer you really don't like. I stared at the end of the final series of falsehoods.

I should have seen it earlier. There's a reason for the expression 'blindingly obvious'; part of the psyche blocks rational thought whenever one allows sentiment to creep in.

I wasn't sure how they had engineered it. All the information I'd received out here in Belgrade had been as good as usual, which was the point, I suppose. The only message from home had that warning to keep my hands off Veronica. I dug out the response to my 'Sailboat' message; I remember laughing to myself about Tillotson's discomfort. Then it hit me. Where was the 'Personal to Sailboat' signal from Tillotson? He would never have let the FO warning go without reprimanding me. Perhaps those who were behind this didn't know about our strange relationship. How would you describe it? Half respect, half animosity, perhaps. But the fact that it wasn't there spoke volumes. I checked the routing on the signal. It had come direct from the FO.

Diplomatic signals are necessarily processed through layers of security, but, as with all procedures, an expert will know the inner weaknesses. So they'd doctored Veronica's FO file by pre-positioning the reply to any query. Periodic audits of such files are getting less common; too labour-intensive they said, a code for 'can't afford it'. So it was a calculated risk, one I might have taken myself.

A logic diagram won't tell you anything about motive. What was the motive? There had to be more to this, and, I suspected, the answer was not to be found in official channels. I decided to use the public system, send a telegram to Victoria, ask her the key questions.

Victoria and I had developed an arrangement, as Veronica had said; few understood why she hadn't married into aristocracy and had settled for keeping a home for me. She had accepted my tongue-in-cheek story that I was a Knight who went to War and had responded by saying that she would keep the Castle ready for my return. After that, nothing I could say or do had altered her decision. She was independently wealthy, tucked away in a country estate lying under the north-facing brow of the Berkshire Downs.

I put on my issue raincoat and went out 'for some fresh air'. We had been trained to look for a particular travel agency that had offices world-wide, and where it would be possible to 'twist the manager's arm' to send a private telegram. It always meant having ready cash in the local currency, but the Service considered it the price of doing business.

I sent her a reply-paid message that read:

'Met Sir Evelyn Varian and daughter Veronica, remembers Penny. Also nice chap Wemyss. Home soon. QNe4!'

The sign off was our special code in chess protocol and meant Queen's Knight, which was me, 'e4' meant 'need background on four named individuals' and '!' meant urgent. To anyone knowing chess it was simply a surprise move in a game we were playing.

I went back to the Residence; I hadn't detected a tail on either trip.

Back in my room, I ran over what I knew. Sir Evelyn appeared to be in control, Wemyss was charming and friendly, Veronica, however, caused me some concern. Just underneath her finishing school polish was an air of desperation that I couldn't resolve; it left me with a low-level alert about her. I struggled with it for a while, and then put it on one side.

The next day I slid out for another walk, using the four-point technique. It's a simple box, to be truthful. Go a hundred yards, turn right, another hundred yards, turn right and so on until you're back where you started. Any tail will get flushed out, generally after two turns. It needs a four man team to keep up surveillance. There was no-one on to me, I was sure, well, as sure as one can be in a foreign location.

I picked up Victoria's reply and strolled into the Park off Queen Alexandria Boulevard. I wandered aimlessly around. If there was a tail it was a good one. I sat down and opened the telegram. It read:

21 Qe1 Qe8
22 0-0 0-0
23 Ke8Ch! Qa1

I smiled; Victoria had given her verification code for being at home. Since no one knew where we were in our game, the moves would mean nothing, but to me it meant that Sir Evelyn's wife was out of the picture. The next item confirmed my suspicion; there was nothing known about Veronica, which was impossible if she'd been at Cheltenham as she'd led me to believe. The next move meant that Penny had no idea about Veronica either. It was the final move that had me stumped. Eventually I worked it out. Wemyss was on the edge, but he'd somehow got control over Sir Evelyn. According to the rules of Chess, Wemyss could only have created check as a result of moving his King, so whatever the control was, Wemyss had somehow 'moved' Sir Evelyn. I would have to tread carefully.

Victoria had signed off with her usual code; she was well.

I'd put the telegram in my pocket and walked out of the Park when it hit me. Victoria had memorized the protocol for describing the moves but she didn't play chess. The code about Wemyss was too complicated for her. What else could it mean? That Wemyss was at the end of his run and that I should check and urgently at that.

End of his run might mean that his family wasn't wealthy and secure in a grand estate. Perhaps, like so many of these families they were completely broke, saddled with a massive home that simply couldn't be maintained, and was too neglected to sell. Many of these once grand homes had been bulldozed; the National Trust simply couldn't take them all under its wing. It was a national tragedy, some thought. I wasn't one of them; those families had had their day and the world had moved on. I'd have to check with Tillotson. This time I'd have to make sure he got the signal.

When I went up to Oxford, it had been as the Galdraith Scholar. My mentor, Lord Galdraith, had a Lady friend, well, more than that, I was sure, although no one would have dared to comment. Lord Galdraith had introduced her as Lady Watchfield, but I discovered that that was the least of her entitlements. She was one of the most powerful women in the land, one who had helped me on several occasions, although I never knew at the time and only found out long after the event when a file came my way by mistake. Lady Watchfield had the sort of powerful connections that legends are made of; I had long ago realised that she was on first name terms with the Head of Service. So I went back to the Travel Bureau and negotiated another telegram. I sent it to her address in Eaton Square, asking for her opinion on Wemyss family; I added Veronica at the last moment.

The next day I got the reply. It confirmed that the Wemyss family was destitute; Wemyss had inherited after the early death of his father, only to discover that there was nothing left. His father had mortgaged everything and the banks were sending the usual letters. Time had simply run out for the Wemyss family; it had taken nine hundred years since the Normans landed at Hastings. The second part of Lady Watchfield's message was about Veronica and left me with another cold chill. Nothing was known about her, under that name, in the Foreign Office. I had a momentary vision of some very senior FO Under Secretary having a screaming fit; he'd probably slopped his afternoon tea into his saucer. A demand from the Lady simply had to have a more definitive answer. But there it was; profoundest apologies, Ma'am, and all that.

But the Lady's resources extended well beyond the flaccid pomposity of the Foreign Office. Veronica fitted the description of a woman who had been pillaging the fortunes of wealthy families for some time. The confusing aspect was that the families were so traumatised that they never brought forward any evidence; nevertheless, word had got out, and the young woman was high on the list of several agencies that would never be found in the government telephone directory, but could be engaged on an as and when required basis by MI5 or MI6. I knew about this happy arrangement, of course, every democracy had to deal with the darker side of life and sometimes a clandestine op was the only way. Amazingly flexible ways of moving people out of the country had been devised, sometimes to jurisdictions that could be persuaded to turn a blind eye to the misdeeds of those being transported.

Lady Watchfield had added a question for me. It was in her unmistakable language.

"Do you not know of Sir Evelyn's family connections?"

I kicked myself. Of course, Varian, the bankers and financiers, world-wide influence, not as wealthy as the Rothschilds, some said, but hardly with their backs to the wall. A picture began to form in my mind.

I didn't like what I saw.

Every now and again, I use a privilege, of which, as Tillotson would put it, one must be extremely wary. I have a piece of magician's stage equipment, a fine leather visiting-card case with a false bottom. My friend Harry had slid it under my hand one day with a wink. I expect he'd 'borrowed' it from one of his contacts in Dockland. I never knew what Harry would give me next. We'd had several adventures 'under the radar' so I suspected he knew what I did; I'd learned not to ask him where he got anything because he'd always just shrug. Many of these items had turned out to be useful supplements in my trade.

The case was good enough to fool any customs inspection; another temptation that Tillotson would get on his high horse about. Inside the case were two cards giving me peculiar authority; the UK one was potent enough to scare any of the mid-level staff of any Embassy in the world. The other was issued by the then President of the United States of America; I had only used it once before, in Las Vegas during that operation several years ago.

I went down to the lower floors and found the Administrative Officer. He tried mightily to shepherd me into the First Secretary's office, but sank back into his chair when I showed him the card. He knew that if he refused he'd better get packed for the next plane. I left with a handwritten account of the dates Wemyss was officially away in the UK. He was trying to get me out of his office when I asked him to call for the girl who acted as secretary to Wemyss, the one with adenoids. She was scared, but quickly understood the situation. Wemyss had been indisposed a number of times, 'but only ever for one day, honestly'. The officer gave me an

incendiary look and gave her the official warning about disclosing what she had told us. She left almost in tears.

With Wemyss away, I decided to use embassy privileges and got rid of the comms technician. I did the routing myself and wired Tillotson. I sent him the dates when Wemyss was on home leave and asked for a trace connecting the dates to when those families had been swindled. It would give Tillotson a chance to impose himself on the more clandestine sections. We all knew they were there, but had little to do with them on a regular basis. I wondered briefly whether Tillotson had enough clout; I shrugged, wishing I was a fly on the wall.

When the answer came it was couched in terms that, while congratulatory, made it clear that it had been at considerable personal cost. I smiled.

Wemyss had been in England briefly at each of the swindles. Tillotson opined that surely he was just a courier, personal for the Ambassador, probably. Anyway, he sent me a warning; the people who had provided the information expected a quid pro quo, which meant I'd better tie up the loose ends to their satisfaction. I sighed; why was it always me that got the 'black' end of the stick.

I went back to my room; as I opened the door a thought struck me – what was Wemyss doing on his unofficial days off? I grabbed my coat and left the Residence at a pace that I hoped wouldn't attract attention. I walked round a couple of corners and found a taxi. It dropped me several blocks from the Beau Rivage.

I checked the intercom listing; the name Wemyss was there, but not Sir Evelyn's. It didn't prove anything. I pressed the button next to Wemyss and stepped well back. A voice answered. It was Veronica. I said nothing. After a pause, she said, 'Damn kids again, Wemyss, you should do something.' I didn't, this time, hear any Cheltenham accent, let alone Swiss finishing school. I couldn't hear the reply, but somewhere in that flat I heard a door slam. I went across the street into the shadow of a plane tree. Wemyss came out of the door, which crashed shut behind him. We're warned about the temper; 'just no good, sir, always leads you into trouble'. Easy for him to say, I'd thought at the time. But here was Wemyss; he was almost running, his face a mask of anger. He was easy to follow, of course. He went into the old quarter, turning off the Kneza Mihaila. There was a corner shop that looked like a tobacconists. I knew that these places in all big cities carry stuff that only the proprietor knows about, accommodation addresses being the least nefarious.

Wemyss came out of the shop almost at a run, holding his jacket shut across his chest. It alerted me that he had something illicit in his inside pocket. The instructors had shown films of suspects all doing the same. This behaviour was, they said, almost impossible to train out of agents, and mere civilians would follow the same pattern every time. As usual, the instructors were right; their exactitude got irritating after a while.

I didn't need to follow Wemyss; he would go back to the flat, and I would get to him when the time was ripe. I felt in my jacket lining to make sure the money was there, dinars provided by the Currency Section; I hoped they weren't forged, too much instability meant a lot of forgeries.

I went into the shop and used what little local patois I could scrape together. Mind you, the sight of the 1000 dinar note under my palm was really all the language I needed.

The proprietor shrugged and came back with a blue glass bottle with a small cork in the top. He tried to caution me, eventually in sign language, which started with his fingers just apart, indicating a tiny amount, followed by lots of eye rolling and a rotating motion with his head.

Then he opened his fingers a bit wider. He threw up his hands in a gesture of defeat and used his arm to indicate a fall. He then wagged his index finger at me and opened his fingers a bit wider and grinned. He grabbed himself round the neck and stuck out his tongue. The message was clear; death was a possible outcome. I passed over the 1000 Dinars; heaven knows what the accountants would make of that expense claim, I thought, savouring a repeat of the pantomime for Tillotson's benefit.

So Wemyss and Veronica were a team, were they? Something didn't sit right; and this time it was nothing to do with Wemyss's charm. The plot was too professional; too many technical links had to be in place for it to work. I cast my mind back to the logic diagram. Something was missing from it, but I couldn't see what it was.

Somewhere in the labyrinthine workings of those minds that ran our country, well, the clandestine parts of it anyway, someone had hatched a plot that, if I was right, would have required the highest level of political approval. And the FO must have been complicit at least. I'd have to watch my step, it was entirely possible that I was being set up as the scapegoat, some scandal that would change the balance of power, persuade the Yugos to change their allegiances perhaps?

I was feeling the sort of mild panic we were warned about; 'Quite normal, sir, but focus on remedial action.' It had got me out of all sorts of difficulties, not all of them my fault. This time, though, the only remedial was to get outside the present situation; it was a trap of some sort. I got out a map of Belgrade and found the US Consulate.

One of the privileges that has come my way is the special card issued by President Eisenhower after I got Cameron, the daughter of the US Ambassador to the Court of Saint James, out of the Consulate where she had been kidnapped and kept prisoner. I treasured that card and kept it secret from my people. I suspect that, if they'd found out, they would have tried to get it revoked, since it would have been too big a compromise for the top level of the British government. I decided to use it today and face the consequences later.

When I got to the Kneza Milosa, I did the usual counter-surveillance stroll. If they were there, they were too good for me. I walked nonchalantly into the American Embassy and approached the reception desk. I got the usual bureaucratic cold shoulder until I asked for the Minister-Counsellor. Only someone familiar with the US Foreign Service structure would know to ask for this person.

After a prolonged delay, a marine appeared and escorted me rather officiously into the Embassy proper. I didn't mind; this was the usual way that strangers were treated. I was shown into a bare office and sat down. Might as well get ready, I thought, and pulled out my visiting card case and eased out the card with that very special signature.

The door opened and a tall, rather handsome man about my age came in.

"Mr. Hare, please tell me the reason for this intrusion."

A good start, I thought.

"Perhaps you would like to look at this," I said, sliding the card across the table.

The Minister turned noticeably paler.

He was unable to speak for a few seconds.

"Sorry, Mr. Hare, we do have to be careful here, it sure is a sensitive spot these days, all sorts of people up to no good. My name is Holbein, Tom Holbein."

We shook hands.

I could hear something familiar in his speech, rather like Cameron's father, an Anglophile and Rhodes Scholar. I kept this to myself.

"Look," I said, "I'm in an awkward position. I need your help and advice. What I have to say is sensitive, you understand."

I got out the other card, the one that let people know that I had certain powers that came with my job; it only works in British organisations, but he'd recognise what it meant.

He looked at it.

The thing I like about Americans is that they don't try and fill empty silences. He gave me back the card and said, "Tell me what you want."

"I'm in a jam," I said, "I think my people have their wires crossed. Too much is going on that smells like a high level operation, something my gut tells me might involve your people.

Something to do with the Soviet bloc and the Yugoslav non-alignment stance."

By this time he was on his feet, his eyebrows raised.

"Mr. Hare, this is a matter for the Ambassador personally. You must please wait here while I brief him. May I show him your card?"

I agreed.

If I was right, there would be a flurry of signals sent 'Flash. and a worried CIA Duty Officer at Langley, frantically waking up senior staff and calling them in. The trouble with world-wide Embassies is that someone has to deal with emergencies that arrive at all hours of the day. I'd had to deal with them on occasions in London; I'd caused my fair share of them, too.

Holbein returned looking pale.

"I am to ask you to accompany me to the Ambassador's office."

I looked at him. Something had changed; I heard a new respect for me, not that there had been anything untoward, just a meeting of equals, perhaps. But now I had been elevated, well, certainly in his eyes.

The Ambassador was all business; this meant that he was a career diplomat, not one of those cronies appointed to pay off some political debt. He got the introductions over swiftly. He smoothly excused Holbein, who left; but only after mastering the annoyance on his face.

"Mr. Hare, welcome. I have received confirmation from Washington. Good job you've got friends at Langley, your endorsement was exceptional. Holbein tells me you're officially part of your own government's apparatus."

"Yes, Ambassador," I said. I'd learned, eventually, that flies are caught with sugar, not vinegar.

"If your remit permits, Ambassador, I'd like to ask for some confirmation of a theory that explains some rather strange behaviour here."

I knew that he would have already got that clearance; I wouldn't be in his office, otherwise.

"Tell me."

"If I'm right, sir, there is an orchestrated attack on the integrity of our Envoy here. I hope I'm wrong, but the only explanation I can come up with is that he has trodden on somebody's toes, perhaps muddied the waters of the non-alignment posture of the Yugoslavs?"

There was a prolonged silence. I managed to sit quietly.

"Were you briefed on the importance of Yugoslavia today?" the Ambassador asked.

I recalled Tillotson's distracted warning. He was as uncomfortable as I'd ever seen him.

"Look, Hare, you're going into a very sensitive area, Tito's got a balance going, he keeps the ethnic stresses under control and has established some sort of rapport with Moscow. Stalin could

have squashed him, I suppose, but that would have ignited the Balkans, and you know what that would do, drag the Soviets into another guerilla war. Sort of stalemate, if you like.”

He paused and scratched his head.

“Yugo’s an important place now, halfway house between East and West, easy entry from here. Americans very keen to keep it that way, Hare, they see it as a buffer.”

He paused again.

“Look, this is my view only, don’t ever repeat it, I’ll deny it.” He went on to explain graphically what he would do to me if I spilled the beans.

The gist of it was that the FO was more than nervous; Tito was such a womanizer, no lady was safe, and, given the hot-blooded nature of the locals, he was inviting an assassination. If that happened, the six quarrelsome parts of Tito’s little empire would then split the country apart.

“What worries me, Hare, is that there’s too much hanging on stability in the region, too much benefit to the West, too big an embarrassment to the East. Something has changed, just recently. FO has gone very quiet. And now there’s this new situation in the Embassy. My thumbs are pricking.”

It was probably the oddest moment in all our strange interviews. Tillotson quoting Macbeth? How did it go? "By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes."

It was that serious was it?

The Ambassador was observing me as I processed Tillotson’s briefing.

“Yes, sir, something’s not right here; I wish I knew what it is. Games are being played.”

It had dropped from my lips before I realised I’d given more away than I’d intended.

The Ambassador sat back with a grin.

“Langley was right about you, Mr. Hare, good at seeing past the obvious, they told me. Rather a compliment coming from them.”

“Yes, sir, but I’m still in the dark. I suspect there’s one piece of information that I need if I’m to get to the bottom of whatever is going on.”

He got up and walked around the office, past the two flags; they were mounted on rather ornate poles, first, of course, the Stars and Stripes and then the State Department Flag. He stood looking out of the window.

“If you didn’t come with such high level credentials, Mr. Hare, I couldn’t possibly tell you what I know. But, well, if you’re good enough for President Eisenhower, you’re more than good enough for me. Can I give you a hint rather than spell it out? *Cherchez la femme*, Mr. Hare, and *la femme* this time is Lady Varian.”

I left the American Embassy with my head buzzing, trying to assimilate what I had just heard. Sir Evelyn’s wife was the missing link in my logic diagram. But what could it mean? Why would it get the FO in an uproar?

The myths, or so I had called them, about Josip Broz Tito had drifted around the canteens and club lounges for years now, but I’d had no firsthand knowledge and had largely discounted them. Apparently, Tito, while portrayed as a benevolent and gifted Dictator, had a dark side. What had Tillotson said? No woman was safe. But hardly a diplomat’s wife, surely? I stopped, wondering where my brain had been. Put these strings together and, well, a rather romantic picture came into focus, like something out of a Ruritanian romance. The problem with being someone like Tito, someone coming from a lower class upbringing is that if he got involved with a woman like

Lady Varian, he'd discover that not all women were country peasant girls ripe for the plucking. And, of course, if the Lady discovered things about Tito, the sort of things that might emerge during pillow talk, it would change the situation very much for the worst. But what to do? First, I supposed with a sense of doom, was find the Lady.

I went back to the Residence and located the Administrative Officer. He looked like a frightened rabbit. I knew why. He'd tested the waters as far as I was concerned. Even then he was white-faced when he wrote down the date that Lady Varian had left Belgrade.

"Funny thing, Mr. Hare," he muttered, "Lady Varian changed her travel documents; took a train ticket to Trieste, of all places."

The fact that he'd told me meant that one of his colleagues, probably in London, had confirmed just what I could do to him.

Now, what did I know about the City-State of Trieste? I knew it was located at the top of the Adriatic and so was a gateway between Europe and the Communists. Yugoslavia had somehow manipulated the interests of both East and West to create for itself the status of a Non-Aligned Nation and this had added to the importance of Trieste because of its immediate frontier with Yugoslavia. I knew that the city was well populated with intelligence agents, all charged with finding any threats to either East or West; some of them worked for whoever paid the most. We had a few 'locally employed' ourselves. I bet the Americans did too.

Trieste was really an Italian city, now under Italian control. I knew nothing about its infrastructure, who knew who, as it were. But I did know someone who could find out. So I sent another telegram to Lady Watchfield. I told her that a lady well known to the Varian's might be living in Trieste and that I would love to meet her. I hoped Lady Watchfield would understand.

I received a strange reply, one that I had to sit down to understand. Lady Watchfield provided an address in Trieste and the name of the present incumbent, Contessa Maria Montefalcone. It was the next sentence that stopped me in my tracks.

Lady Watchfield had written 'You will know her as Maria Passaglietti. Be careful, Jonathan.' Count Passaglietti had stood by me years ago when I was rudely dispatched from an assignment to the Hawkesmoore family. He had exchanged a Bearer Bond that I had seized during the raid on the Grey Gang's headquarters. There was nothing I could do about it; the gang had been rounded up and the Count had seemed more than keen to write me out a cheque for a thousand pounds in return for the Bond. It was many years before I understood why he did that; at the time, it seemed simply a generous gesture. The Count's sister had appeared briefly at Mountbeck, the Hawkesmoore estate, and I suppose I had been smitten. She was so exotically beautiful and, what was the word? Empathetic, I suppose. Whatever it was, she had spun my head for a while, until I realised that she was so far above my station in life that I'd better stop fantasizing. Of course, I thought, she would have married and it would have been to nobility. Still, Maria remained the most beautiful woman I had ever met.

These thoughts came to an abrupt end. How did Lady Watchfield know about me and the Count? Was there no end to her connections? I sighed, thinking that even if she had always been more than friendly, she kept much of her life from me; just as well, I realised. In my profession, it would have been dangerous for her if I knew too much; it's not unknown for agents to be tortured for their knowledge and connections.

And then I read the last sentence again. What did she mean? It was the first time she had shown any concern over me. I knew she had mentored me for years, but I had assumed that it was to further her own interests, but now I wondered, just for a second, whether she felt more for me than that. Of course, I realised, she might mean that Maria might present a problem; I couldn't see what that could be. I should have been more sensitive.

I left a note for Wemyss, allowing him to think I'd been called away for a briefing. I went through those motions, taking a flight to Venice. From there I took a train to Trieste. I indulged myself with a taxi and arrived at a rather inauspicious building. As the taxi drove away, the driver leaned out of his window and sent that most Italian of gestures my way, a kiss blown with the fingers and thumb of one hand, opening theatrically. It meant that something was beautiful, sexy, outrageous, or all three. So, he knew about the occupant, did he? I grinned at the street theatre that was life in Italy.

The building did not send the sort of signals that I was expecting. I had naturally assumed that Maria would have had the pick of the Italian nobility and would live in some sort of palace. But, I thought, what had the War done to her new family? If it was anything like other European families, perhaps they had been thoroughly destroyed and this was all there was left.

Nothing for it, I thought, so I went through the rather gloomy doorway and into the typical Italian entrance. What greeted me there was a huge surprise. A corridor of flowers stretched away to a bower, beyond which was a garden, surrounded by huge sandstone walls. Italianate statues and carvings were everywhere.

There was a cough just to my left where a manservant stood holding a silver tray. I slid my card onto it, and he moved silently away. As far as I could tell, he hadn't looked directly at me; but I bet he'd remember everything about me. My card wasn't what others in my position might have carried. I had received some very special training which opened my eyes to the importance of an exactly prepared visiting card. Even Lady Watchfield had been impressed the first time that I half jokingly presented it to her. Fancy that, I'd thought at the time, so much importance attached to a small piece of cardboard.

The man returned, and bowed gracefully, gesturing with a movement of his hand to follow him. The Italians have a love affair with the open air and have devised something that they call a 'loggia', a room open to the outside, with a roof that acts as a sunshade. I couldn't imagine it being very practical in England, what with our maritime climate. I was shown to the loggia, and there was Maria.

Between a man and a woman it sometimes happens that there is an attraction that defies any logic, any social protocols, or any other influence. Perhaps only they are conscious of it. I had recalled how I felt when I met Maria all those years ago, almost dizzy with the force of my attraction to her. The strange thing was that she had conveyed to me, even then, that she understood. Whether she felt anything for me, I couldn't tell, but she certainly responded to me in a way that reinforced the attraction.

And today was the same. She was, as was I, older and wiser, but the sense of warmth was still there, her smile as she rose and extended her hand was enough to make me feel seventeen again. "Ah, Signor Hare, I am delighted that you would come all this way to see me."

There was nothing artificial about it; she did indeed seem glad to see me. We sat down; I was more than aware of the gracefulness with which she arranged herself in the wicker chair, upholstered with floral cushions.

"Contessa," I started, but she held up her hand.

“Maria, please,” she said with a full smile. It was as if she had spoken a blessing on me. “I have come to ask for your advice; it’s a matter of international gravity. I believe Lady Watchfield will vouch for me. I must find a British lady, a Lady Varian. Perhaps she is here in Trieste?”

There was a prolonged silence. I was trained to watch the breathing. It wasn’t hard to take, her beautiful body showing just the smallest sign of stress. So, I thought, she knows and is wondering whether to tell me. I waited.

“Lady Varian is the wife of your Ambassador to Yugoslavia.”

It was a statement, not a question. I held my peace.

“She is younger than the Ambassador.”

I saw no need to respond.

“Some might find her attractive, I believe. Perhaps she has caught the eye of someone important?”

I smiled hoping that was sufficient.

“Tell me what you will do if you find her?”

Her tone had changed; it reminded me that she was a woman with power and influence.

“I must discover what the circumstances are and make a report.”

She closed her eyes.

“You have a relationship with Victoria de Quincy, I believe. It is not one of marriage.”

Once again, I was taken aback; I hadn’t realised that Lady Watchfield would have used that information when she contacted Maria; I had never understood how Lady Watchfield managed to be so well informed, but I began to suspect that it was a female mystery, a sort of barter system. Lady Watchfield would use whatever levers she had at her disposal. Maria smiled.

“Sometimes, Jonathan, people get into relationships that simply happen. Others are more to do with duty, or family expectations. Sometimes a woman will decide to throw all care to the wind, what do you say, ‘kick up her heels’?”

I nodded; I’d seen enough of those shenanigans in Whitehall. There was a term for it – Parliamentary Incest. Many of those liaisons were hushed up for political reasons.

“So, Jonathan, perhaps the Lady does not wish to be found. Perhaps she has found happiness in her new relationship?”

It was such a subtle hint. My relationship with Victoria was our business; Lady Varian’s was her own.

I smiled. “If only it was that simple, Maria, but Lady Varian knows very well that an inappropriate relationship carries serious consequences.”

It was her turn to smile.

Before she could respond, I said, a little more forcefully, “There’s a Cold War on, Maria, and this may be seen by the powers on both sides as too big a risk. They will not allow the present balance to be undermined.”

I suppose I had slipped into that authoritarian voice again, because Maria’s eyebrows were now raised. The smile had gone.

There was a silence.

“Do you speak for these ‘powers’, Jonathan?”

I could hear the surprise. She, of course, might still see me as a spotty youth mooning over her at Mountbeck. It would take her a while to realise that I had some power myself. Delegated power from my government admittedly, not the sort of octopus-like influence that Lady Watchfield, and perhaps Maria herself might wield.

“Maria, all I am empowered to do is to explain the predicament to Lady Varian and to persuade her to break off her relationship. If I fail -,”

I shrugged, leaving something in the air. I hoped Maria would understand the darker implications.

“I think we should have afternoon tea, don’t you, Jonathan?” she said, ringing a small Queen Anne bell.

The servant appeared silently. He couldn’t have been more than three paces away, hidden by a carefully positioned screen. I knew why the screen was there and why he was in that position. Someone had explained the Latin temperament to me, once. A husband might have numerous affairs, even keep a mistress, but woe betides any man who compromised his wife.

Maria ordered tea.

“Jonathan, I must make some arrangements, please excuse me.”

Tea arrived and the servant slid deftly out of sight; Maria reappeared.

“I have arranged for you to speak with your Lady,” she said with a strange emphasis on the word ‘Lady’.

I sensed that for reasons far beyond me, Lady Varian was not held in the highest esteem in Maria’s circle.

We had tea. A tension had crept into our conversation and I was aware, eventually, that Maria was watching me with heavier eyes than before.

She put down her cup.

“Jonathan, you remember our meeting at Mountbeck, I know. You felt an attraction for me, yes?”

It would have been rude to not respond.

“Of course I did, Maria, you were the most beautiful woman I had ever met.”

I knew something was wrong immediately. Her eyebrows were raised as she allowed a pause to develop. Just in time I realised.

“And you are more beautiful now than then,” I said.

She laughed.

“You were so young, so, what should I say, ‘ingenuo’?”

“Naive? Of course I was, but I was young then; I knew nothing about woman, certainly women like you.”

“And now, Jonathan? Now you know all about us?”

There was something else running behind her speech, another communication. I recognised it just in time to run a diversion.

“And the Count, Montefalcone, a romantic name, is it not?”

It was immediately clear that my diversion was unwelcome. She didn’t reply, but got up and walked elegantly to a window.

“You should leave now, Jonathan. There is a card at the door that explains where you may find Lady Varian.”

I left that mysterious house, wondering whether I would ever understand women, well, women like Maria. It had been the same with Victoria, I had misunderstood her for so long and had she not forced the issue, I might never have known how much she meant to me. As I thought about it, I recalled one of Lady Watchfield’s inquisitions in which she had, I realised now, been prodding me in Victoria’s direction. The only excuse I had then was my focus on my degree and its importance to my future. I hadn’t recognised that, whatever its value, a degree can’t substitute

for knowledge of other, more practical pursuits. And I had certainly had my share of those, some of them actually incorporated into my training, even if I hadn't realised it at the time.

As I walked away, Lady Watchfield's strange afterthought came back to me. I knew nothing about Lady Varian, but a picture was forming dimly. She was younger than Sir Evelyn, Maria had said. Wait, how had she said the word 'Lady'? I stopped. Of course, Maria was warning me about her, a warning that carried, inevitably, sexual overtones. Could it be that Lady Varian was a gold digger, capturing the heart and hand of Sir Evelyn, and yet carrying on affairs elsewhere? It would fit what I knew.

But it was all second hand stuff. They warn you about that.

"Concrete evidence, Mr. Hare, get the dirty bits on record, make a duplicate, send signals. Don't assume anything until all the pieces fit."

They had gone on, battering away at me in that stuffy room several floors beneath street level, and not a hundred yards from St. James Park. At the end of it, the instructor grinned.

"If this job disappears, Mr. Hare, you could make a living working for a top Legal firm. Let me know, I do have some contacts."

I bet he did.

I had a map of Trieste, one of those fuzzy things the department gave you as if it was a Nobel Prize. I sighed; what had the Great Britain of world-spanning Empire become?

Something from Shakespeare came to me.

"There is a tide in the affairs of man."

Yes, I thought, and of Nations; Britain's tide was receding. My time in America had opened my eyes to just how damaging the World War had been to England. As far as I could see we were worse than bankrupt because we owed massive debts to other countries, to America and Canada at least. There used to be a Debtors' Prison, where was it? Fleet Street where the Press had their home today. I sighed.

It was in this mood that I found a park, well, it was a Garden called 'Pontini'. I walked around aimlessly, recalling another instructor.

"Never look as if you're headed anywhere, sir, the watcher will get in front of you, catch you by surprise. They like to walk towards you casually, then attack."

I spotted a bench looking west towards the harbour and on a small hillock. I sat down. As far as I could see there was no one else in the Giardino. I thought about my next move. I had an address, so I consulted the map. Eventually I found the place called Castello di Miramare. It was huge and had its own grounds and was right on the sea. Not a place to drop in casually. What was Lady Varian doing there?

When you've been out in the field as long as me, you develop a sixth sense. I first heard about it when I was in the States. I was only supposed to be visiting Harvard University and giving a talk at a Seminar. But I found myself guarded by a man called Thurm, short for Thurman – he never liked to be called that, he said it sounded like his father, who was a travelling preacher in West Kentucky. But Thurm was an ace, a top flight CIA agent, promoted at a very young age and assigned to me personally. It would be days before I understood why I had been granted this special mentoring. We got on really well, and he'd told me that I should learn to listen to my instincts, which give you advance notice of danger. What had he said?

“Look at the animals in the zoo, Jonathan, they know an earthquake is coming before we do, we only know after it arrives. Some zookeepers have learned to read the monkeys, who go crazy, they say, they do the most remarkable stunts that they never do, normally.”

I had found out to my amazement, that it was true, and that humans could make themselves sensitive to their instincts too, another inexplicable gift we’ve been given.

Trieste was frequently mentioned during the War but it wasn’t part of my particular area, and I felt a bit marooned. But it appeared to be a normal maritime city, safe enough. If anyone was tailing me, they were good; I’d seen nothing in the Gardino to worry me. So why was I getting these vibrations? Something I had learned recently was nagging at me, some loose ends weren’t connecting. I shook myself and decided, as usual, to get on with it. So I walked away and into the city, looking for a Tourist Bureau. On the way, something told me to invest in a safety play. A plaza opened up, something to do with United Italy, about which I had a small laugh. I found a decent tailor’s shop and bought a felt hat with a feather in it, a bit Austrian, I thought, but I’d noticed men wearing them a few times as I strolled around.

Eventually I saw a sign; it read ‘Agenzia di informazione’, which even my pathetic Italian suggested might be the place. It was. I sidled around and left with a pamphlet on the Castello di Miramare. It had a Park open to the public, but the main building was under renovations. As I read the pamphlet, I discovered that there was also a small residence called the Castelletto. It had been built for the wife of the first owner, Maximillian; it looked a bit like a doll’s house, I thought. I decided to take a train from the nearby Main Station and arrived at the stop recommended by the Bureau.

The walk up to the Castle was just what I needed, fresh sea air and some brisk exercise. As I got closer, I began to get those vibrations again. No one was tailing me I could guarantee that; I’d done the hop off, hop on routine at an intermediate station. The Park was open, with a small ticket booth. I paid my entrance, and found a toilet with an attendant. I knew enough that I should pay. I gave him slightly more than the minimum but not too much. In the stall I reversed my raincoat and pulled my new hat from its bag. I looked at myself. A hat with a feather always carries the eye upwards, making you look taller and your face more pointed. Handsome brute, I thought with a grin. Well, that’s what Victoria sometimes called me, although at first I used to wonder whether she was talking to her horse.

The Park was really quite beautiful, but small, and I was soon approaching the main building. There was the usual builder’s scaffolding and barriers, but not much activity. So I walked casually around the castle, which wasn’t my interest. I had worked out by now that it was the Castelletto that would answer all my questions.

Then came a sign that said "ingresso vietato" and a chain across a gravel pathway. I slid across the entrance and got a glimpse of what looked like a small copy of the Castle.

I had seen a wheelbarrow, its inside caked with concrete. No one was using it, so I backtracked and acquired it. I took off my new hat and stuffed it in my pocket. Then I wheeled the wheelbarrow down the gravel pathway by the side of the Castelletto and towards the cliff edge. When I found a likely spot where I could see some of the front of the house, I stopped and began to pace around, looking at the ground.

I had only taken a few steps when I heard the sound that no trained person can mistake. A gun had been cocked to my immediate left.

We're trained on this; "Take it easy, sir, plenty of time, if they wanted you dead, you'd be a gonner already. Play along, wait your time."

I turned and slowly raised my hands. As predicted, the man walked round in front of me and spoke in rapid Italian. It had another accent in it.

I shrugged, trying my French, "Pardon, monsieur, je cherche la cable électrique." It sounded good. The man looked puzzled.

I looked at the gun; it was a Nagent, a relic of the Soviet Army, an officer's side-arm, really. I'd seen only one before and that was in a raid on a Soviet-satellite Embassy in London. The Russians had long destined it for the scrap heap. So why was this guard carrying one? He was not a Russian for sure; if he was, he wouldn't be seen dead with a Nagent.

So, why? I recalled that this was Trieste, a passageway between West and East, only viable because of Tito's iron grip. And Tito would have access under his non-aligned status. And, of course, the Soviets wouldn't send him the most modern gear.

I relaxed; this was probably one of Tito's men. Perfect, I thought.

The man stepped away, gesturing for me to move ahead of him; he prodded me towards a door in the side of the building. Perfect, I thought.

He pushed me to one side and opened the door. He was good; he knew his angles and spaces. It didn't matter because I wasn't going to attack him anyway. We went down a passageway and into a large room, a kitchen. There was a table with chairs. He tied me to a chair and, with a grin, looped a noose around my neck. He knew his stuff; anyone trying too hard to get free would strangle himself. I sat there, looking stupid. He left, swaggering out of the room, obviously pleased with himself. Ah, I thought, the beginning of overconfidence; it was a useful sign, but of no immediate interest to me.

I heard voices coming from somewhere far away. I couldn't hear any words, but the volume and pitch increased dramatically. I heard anger and fright, wondering what would happen next. A more senior person would appear; I was sure of that. A door opened behind me, and another person entered. I wasn't prepared for the perfume and it took me a second or two to realise that my plan might have succeeded rather too well.

"Who are you?" a female voice from behind me, speaking English, well, a variety of it.

My instructors had been rather impressed at my ear for the hugely disparate local accents that litter the aural environment in England. I don't know from whom I got that gift but I could usually locate a person's place of upbringing within a mile or two. The French have a word for a local form of language - 'patois' - which is better because it includes dialect and local phrases. The classic English patois is Cockney, which is a combination of strange vowel sounds and almost a code, which they call 'rhyming slang'. "Ear, les ava butchers", translates as 'Please allow me to look for myself.' Here, 'butchers' is rhyming slang meaning butcher's hook for the word 'look'. The range of slang terms is extensive and when spoken rapidly, is used by London street traders as an impenetrable language amongst themselves.

So when I heard the female voice, I could locate it to the Dockland area of London, Bow, Poplar, close enough. It was a harsh jarring voice. I bet she had bleached blonde hair.

"Pardon, Madame, je n'avais pas compris." I'd forced my mouth into those strange contortions required by my instructress. I threw in a Gallic shrug for good measure. If I had been wearing a beret, it would have been perfect.

Somewhere off camera, as it were, I heard more raised voices, one speaking English followed by some form of local attempt at it. I could make little sense of it. A door slammed and the Yugo man returned and grinned, twirling his finger near his temple and rolling his eyes. His opinion of the mental state of the woman was clear. He wandered about the kitchen and eventually made something in a large mug. He undid the cord round one arm and handed the mug to me. It was as near to tea as was possible in Italy, I suppose, but it was welcome. The signal to me was far more important; he had decided to humour me.

He stared at me and said a few words in his version of English, "Lady, she no like you, you bad man, she say." He looked quite proud of this attempt.

He cleared his throat. "I walk you to Lady now. You be nice." He waved his gun a bit.

Perfect, I thought as I got up. We went down a corridor and up some stairs. At the top, he grabbed my arm, opened a door and shoved me into the room. He still had the gun, I was sure.

The thing about being in this sort of situation, we were told, was to act stupid and wait for the moment.

"They always make a mistake, sir" my instructor had said, "They'll need a pen or paper or something, take their eyes off you. Just act very fast when the time comes."

And, of course, he was right, although the drills were carefully staged to minimise damage, not to me, but to him.

The first thing I noticed was the perfume. Some women haven't learned that the expensive scents are made of rarer ingredients and are detectable long after the wearer realises it. I had also learned during my training, by observation this time, that well bred girls had been taught to use it sparingly; others not so well bred tended to bathe in the stuff. So when the room shouted "Shalimar" at me I knew two things. The woman now sitting opposite me was the same one who'd been behind me in the kitchen; and she hadn't graced any expensive girl's school. Well, well, I thought, so that was the tip that the lovely Maria had slipped in; and it fitted with the subdued eagerness with which the Administrator had told me about Lady Varian's trip to Trieste.

The woman sitting behind the elegant desk was, however, sending me different signals. There are some people who have a presence that is denied to mere mortals. We expect to find them on the stage or in movies, of course, but they crop up in real life too. I had suffered under one of them; Victoria's mother had a surreal beauty and a presence that I only later discovered was like stage make up; when she forgot to wear it she became a selfish, spiteful woman. She had long ago disappeared out of Victoria's life. Attempts to trace her had been unsuccessful, perhaps because of a lack of genuine interest.

The woman I was looking at certainly did not have bleached blonde hair; it was dark brown and professionally coiffed; she was expertly made up. From what I could see of her clothes they were tailored to her rather attractive figure. I could see her legs under the desk and they were long and well, eye-catching. She might have been one of those models that you see in the posters as you go up and down the Underground escalators. Someone had once commented that it was just as well that you never heard those models speak.

She was assessing me now, and the length of time meant she wasn't sure enough to attack me immediately. But attack she would. I decided that I'd had enough of the game-playing, so I said, "Lady Varian, I presume."

The effect was immediate. She leapt to her feet, uttering a string of rather juicy epithets that went well with the voice she'd used behind me in the kitchen. So, I thought, here's confirmation, as if I needed it. What I still couldn't work out was how she'd manipulated herself into marriage with Sir Evelyn. From what I had heard, he could have chosen from any of the progeny of hard-up aristocracy. There was something else, somewhere, an explanation for a youngish woman winning the prize. I thought about the vetting for all those at the higher levels of the Diplomatic circuit; surely someone had failed to identify this fraud? No, I thought, there's got to be more.

"Lady Varian, you have created a situation that places you in much danger. Surely, someone explained how dangerous this part of the world is? I'm here to resolve matters, keep you safe, if possible. If not.." I shrugged my shoulders, leaving the impression that either she cooperated or I'd throw her to the wolves.

A change came over her. She took a deep breath and leant forward with her hands on the desk in a belligerent posture.

"And just who are you, barging in here and threatening me like this?"

This time her voice was cultured and exuded power, something out of a play she'd been in once, I suspected. She was surprisingly good at this role. I should have spent more time on the absent wife, a loose end that even Tillotson hadn't spotted. Or had he?

If I'd been more diligent, I might have arrived in Belgrade with her stage name. Wait a minute, I realised, Harry may know, he just loved the seedier side of Shaftesbury Avenue. He'd almost press-ganged me into going to the Windmill, although I'd enjoyed it once I was there. There's something about two youngish men watching a girlie show; taking a woman would have ruined the whole evening. I recalled Harry's deep throated growl when a particularly cute feather dancer got over-excited and dropped one of her feathers. But right now my access to Harry was rather limited.

"I'm not your enemy, Lady Varian, but you have to realise that several governments are alerted to the situation and, well, they won't hesitate to protect their interests,"

"What do you mean, how can I be a threat to anyone? I'm just a girl who's lost her way."

Now she was playing another part, the innocent ingénue, as if she was something in 'The Boy Friend'. But I'd seen that act before. It was fine on the stage but never rang true elsewhere. I grinned.

"Lady Varian, whether you wish to accept the situation or not is rather by the way; I can help you but you may find others are less sympathetic."

"Others? What others?"

She seemed genuinely puzzled. But she was an Ambassador's wife, she must have been briefed on the delicate political situation and how easy it would be to spark an explosion of nationalistic fervour in the different cultures in the Balkans. Perhaps she was briefed but didn't understand? I certainly wasn't going to step into that trap.

"So how is the Marshal?" I threw in to try to get her talking.

She looked at me with that sort of developing hatred that only a woman used to having her own way can produce, an incendiary glare that I was only half prepared for.

"Oh, come on, Lady Varian, we can go on all night, but you are in danger right now. If I can find you, there are plenty of agents of other governments who may want you out of the way. They won't be far behind. That's why the Marshal gave you a guard with a gun."

I wondered what version of this woman would appear next.

“How did you find out about the Marshal and me?” This time she was the submissive wife confessing her sins.

“It’s my job, Lady Varian,” I said, “You left a few clues behind, exchanging that travel voucher for a ticket to Trieste. I managed to pry that bit out of the Residence.”

She sighed and turned her head to look out of the window. I let her chew it over. She was, undoubtedly an attractive woman with an unusual ability to project whatever mood she wanted to create. She had stage presence, that mysterious force that some can turn on like a light; they can walk onto a stage and in seconds become Maggie, the cat on a hot tin roof. She had all the right physical attributes; for me, though, she was simply a fraud, and a dangerous one with too many powerful connections. Although, I thought, she did seem to be just parked here at this Castle, so perhaps it would give me time to apply the necessary manipulation.

When I first started in this business, I admit I was naive, although one or two older women who should have known better used more expressive language. Along the way I had learned a thing or two which came down to the realisation that women were equipped with quite different thought processes and instincts than men. Victoria had presented an insolvable puzzle after the incident at the Oxenham Ball, and to be honest, I never really understood why she had anything more to do with me. I’m glad she did. But I learned that any attempt by me to persuade a woman, using the sort of logic that men understood, was doomed to failure. In fact, if I’d had any success at all, it was by using reverse logic - take the bait away and leave the room.

So I said, “Where is the Marshal now, Lady Varian?”

The woman put her face in her hands. I watched as her shoulders went through the expected motions.

“Men,” she hissed, “All the same, they’re all the same, only want one thing and when they’ve got it, well, kiss me goodbye, Sergeant major.”

I couldn’t help laughing, it was such an incongruous expression, an echo of that old WWII song, how did it go? – ‘Kiss me good night, Sergeant major; tuck me in my little wooden bed...’

She looked up, and suddenly smiled, “I’m not fooling you, sweetheart, am I?” The east End accent was back.

“I knew it was dangerous, but, well, all that Embassy social stuff, I just couldn’t stand it. Sir Evelyn’s alright in his way, but, well, a girl like me has to have some spice in her life, know what I mean?”

I did. Harry had let slip what went on in some of those so called ‘safe houses’, not as we in Intelligence used the term, but places known to Harry and his mates where he could, for a fee, of course, direct visitors from out of town, and out of country for that matter. It wasn’t necessary to elaborate on what went on there, but Harry had once said that the bonuses came when some marks had to be resuscitated in expensive private sanatoria.

So that was it; it was simply an adventure for Lady Varian to satisfy an appetite that she’d developed in her life before she landed Sir Evelyn.

We had been told about the ‘adventures’ that took place in diplomatic, political and aristocratic circles. One of the more interesting sessions in my early career took place in that strange subterranean chamber so close to St. James Park. The psychologist had waffled on about the darker side of men’s appetites, the need for danger, for conquest, for bacchanalian orgies where men behaved like satyrs consorting with nymphs. I had grown tired of his erudition and asked if it really wasn’t as simple as men wanting sex without consequences. He’d taken off his glasses without smiling, and said mine was one way of putting it, but that such cravings didn’t just apply

to men. Once I started to think about it, it did explain some of those strange outbursts when I had walked away from a woman in a situation she had created, one that I had only recognised a little too late.

So, I thought, Lady Varian had fallen for a dangerous man like the Marshal, and yielded to her appetites. What would he do once he had assuaged his sexual drive? Get her out of the way, of course, and her she was. And, unless I was mistaken, she knew that it was over. So what to do? “Lady Varian,” I said, “you’re going to have to pay the price for this adventure, aren’t you?” She nodded reluctantly; she seemed to have lost a lot of that energy that she had when she first spoke to me.

I began to see a solution. Get her back to the sceptered isle, concoct some cover story and avoid the potential diplomatic gaffe.

“Tell me where you called home, before you met Sir Evelyn.”

She looked up with eyes begging for sympathy, but I had a job to do and her feelings were not going to be spared. She told me where she’d lived and I recognised the area, close to where Harry had his house, that innocuous row house at the end of a stub street, with its remodelled interior, paid for with who knew how many devious schemes. I never did find out how he’d got permission to join his house to another in the next street, an escape route that no one would uncover unless they’d lived in Harry’s house for a while. I bet there was some Councillor somewhere who owed Harry some debt, probably requiring Harry’s silence.

“Ever heard of Harry Sparrow?” I threw in.

She shot a look of anger at me. “That creep, finger in every pie, knows everyone, don’t he? Oh, they warned me; ‘Don’t get the wrong side of Harry, bad things happen to his enemies’. And did I listen? Tried to pull a fast one and crapped in my own corner, didn’t I? I had to get out of there, sharpish.”

Here was the voice of Dockland that I knew from my days with Harry, so many years ago. Those people lived a life like no other, rough and cheerful, open to any entrepreneurial suggestion, able to put you in touch with just the right person, always at arm’s length, though.

I grinned at her. “Talk to your guard, I have to get back to Trieste, make some arrangements. I can get you out of here and back to England. What you do about Sir Evelyn is up to you.”

She nodded dumbly, got up and began to talk to the guard. He nodded and grinned at me. Behind her back he gave me an Italian signal. It meant that I was especially favoured by the Lady. Fat chance of that, I thought.

I went by taxi to Trieste, which was big enough to sport an agency with the familiar light blue sign and where I sent a message to Tillotson saying that I had been fortunate to find the lost consignment and needed a routing. He’d have to move considerable mountains of bumf to get the consignment back to the sceptered isle and into a warehouse. I derived several moments of pleasure thinking of the sweat upon his brow. But he would set it up with his usual fastidiousness, something I was glad of, even if he’d never hear me say so.

I telephoned Maria and thanked her for the introduction; she would understand, I knew. And I did enjoy hearing her voice again. After that, I asked the agency to locate a limousine and driver for me; I’d have to talk fast when I got home; the accountants would have their little sharpened pencils in the ‘en garde’ position. I took a room in a hotel, one of those respectable places down a side street that they insisted we look for. Apparently the worst place I could hide in was a

luxury hotel; they were the first targets for a surveillance team; besides, many of the employees in large hotels moonlighted for the very intelligence agencies that could be looking for me. Early the next morning I dropped into the international travel agency and slipped the usual 'retainer' to the manager, who graciously passed over the telegram. Not that he could have read it.

Tillotson had gone a bit overboard, I thought, the overnight special Orient Simplon Express from Venice to London via Paris. There were two tickets and a sleeping carriage reservation. It was a minute or two before I realised that Lady Varian had to be guarded and when I saw who the guard was to be, I have to say I was taken by surprise. I knew Tillotson was devious, but this took the top prize.

I sent the limousine to the Castelletto and telephoned to give Lady Varian certain instructions, which involved a construction out of pillows and one of her hats. The limousine driver had his instructions too, a destination of the forecourt of one of the luxury hotels in the centre of Trieste. Then I obtained a car from the agency; the manager looked shocked when I asked for a Fiat 500, that most inconspicuous of utilitarian vehicles in Italy. I put on my Austrian hat and made sure the feather was visible from the driver's side window. I drove with as much Italian machismo as I could back to the Castelletto. Lady Varian was waiting.

"The limousine has gone," she said sadly, "I did love that hat."

She didn't ask any more questions, just looked with disdain at the Fiat.

"What is that?" she asked.

"It's your saving grace," I said.

The guard cleared his throat.

"Mr. Hare, sir," he began in perfect, if rather affected English, "As you realised, we were being watched from the Castell. As soon as the limousine left, a car followed. Nice decoy, if I may say so." He was smiling.

I managed to keep my face straight. So Tillotson was, as usual, ahead of the game. How many agents he had who could pose as one of Tito's guards, I would never know. But we were running short of time, the train left from Venice and it was a long drive.

"Excellent impersonation," I said, "Next time use a more modern gun."

He shrugged. "Best we could do in the circumstances, sir."

I handed him the keys to the Fiat. "Venice Station, tickets in the glove pocket. Make sure Lady Varian behaves."

He looked puzzled; he'd be more than that when he discovered he had to share a sleeping compartment with his charge.

"Come on, then," I said to Lady Varian, opening the door of the Fiat, "You're going back to the green and pleasant land."

"Pleasant for you." was all she said.

When I got back to London, Tillotson was his usual icy self, trying hard to pay a sincere compliment.

"When you've finished here, go to the Strand Hotel. You should ask for Sir Evelyn Varian. He wants to see you."