

The Petticoat Searchers

By Rachael Anne Long

©RACHAELANNELONG2026

all rights reserved

*No portion of this manuscript may be used, shared or copied
without the express permission of the author*

Contents

Chapter One

der Engländer

Chapter Two

The Treason Express

Chapter Three

A Single Ticket

Chapter Four

The Micawber Factor

Chapter Five

A Morning Caller

Chapter Six

The Investigation Opens

Chapter Seven

The Candle in the Mirror

~ Interval ~

Chapter Eight

The English Abroad

Chapter Nine

Take Me To Church

Chapter Ten

L'hôtel Mercure

~~~

**Chapter Eleven**

A Simple Twist in the Plot

**Chapter Twelve**

The Room on the Third Floor

**Chapter Thirteen**

More Ado With the Third Floor Room

**Chapter Fourteen**

Chicken Farming in Bavaria

**Chapter Fifteen**

Strangers on a Train

**Chapter Sixteen**

One Half of the Odd Couple

**Chapter One**  
der Engländer  
*a Prologue to Treason*

The Silver Cross  
a pub in Whitehall  
London  
Wednesday 5th October 1887

The Silver Cross pub while not crowded was sufficiently busy to enable the man a degree of anonymity. After getting a drink he'd chosen a small table against the wall offering a view of the entrance, and there he sat and waited.

He picked up and sniffed then put down, untasted, the glass of claret. He felt he couldn't sit in the pub and go unnoticed without a drink. However, he should have ordered something different, instead of automatically asking for claret—he tutted quietly, club habits, eh what?

This pub claret, he pushed the glass to the middle of the table, would most certainly be quite a step down from the twelve year old Bordeaux he was used to quaffing at his club or indeed, anything available in the Naval Intelligence Division's offices, a mere ten minute walk away and where he was a passed-over lieutenant—a rank unbecoming, he believed at least, of his intellect, ability and skills. He ought to have been captaining his own ship by now, not sifting through banal reports.

He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke from the corner of his mouth and slowly glanced around; here they were the hoi polloi; the cabbies, the clerks, the middlings; the lesser knowns and also rans. All together yet separate in this public house.

“Here mate, you looks like a decent gent; someone with what you'd call a discerning eye. I got me some very nice Egyptian mummy trinkets. All the rage they is: rings an' wot-not, straight from the fingers of some long gone Egyptian king or queen. All top notch stuff, pukka. You interested?”

He looked up at the man and once again blew cigarette smoke from the corner of his mouth then shook his head and refocused his attention to the pub entrance. He wasn't interested in cheap trinket tat.

“Not a trinket sort of feller then, eh?” The hawker, for that's what this man was, plied his trade from table to table, from patron to patron and in the morrow he'd drift from market stall to market stall all to earn a bit of coin or more. He leaned in closer, lowering his voice. “You after a bit of private entertainment, is that it? I got a very

nice looking belly dancer. Egyptian an' all she is. Very supple and eager to satisfy, if you get me drift."

The seated man looked up at the hawker, exasperated and thought of pouring the glass of claret over the man's head or just shoving him away...the man's breath was foetid. But no, he had more pressing business. Instead in quite plain terms, he told the hawker to go away.

"That's the trouble with your lot, init, you thinks you owns the world. In here seeing how the workers enjoy themselves are you, is that it? A bit of slumming for you? Too far up yourself to know what enjoyment is that's your problem." And with that the hawker went off in search of someone more malleable.

But that there was it, the seated man silently said to himself. That there, that man was an emblem of everything wrong with the country and the Empire. The great unwashed with their irresponsible breeding were ruining everything.

He lit another cigarette. The writing was on the wall for the *great* British Empire. It was as rotten at the bottom as it was at the top. Those in the top positions were the more blameworthy though; whether it be the government, the army or the navy, all were moribund and atrophied. There were other, stronger nations clamouring and ready to rule better and more efficiently than Britain and her absent queen.

Just look at Naval Intelligence; how long had it taken for the intelligence division to be set up? It was only in February of this year it came into being; cleaved off from the Foreign Office. It would take years for it to become more than the skeleton department it currently was. And all the while other nations were striding ahead.

"Ah, mein Herr."

The greeting jolted him from his reverie. He looked up, annoyed, at the tall thin man standing before him—he could not have looked any more Prussian if he had tried.

"Are you mad? I picked this public house for discretion, yet you march in and announce to any open ears..." He stubbed out his cigarette.

The Prussian smiled, a thin smug smile. "Herr—Nein, I will exercise, whatever it is you English call it... Discretion-ness? Ja? Now, if you will permit, I will sit and we may discuss our, let us call them affairs..."

The Englishman indicated for the Prussian to sit and pushed the untouched glass of claret toward him. The Prussian declined, saying he only ever imbibed wines produced by the German Empire.

“We had better make this quick. I need to get back to the office.” The Englishman lied as he always did. He trusted the Prussian less than...well, less than the Prussian trusted him.

The Prussian raised an eyebrow. “Your dedication surprises me. If it were me...well, clearly it is not. But you are aware, you will be unable to risk remaining here in London, let alone in your position—”

“You don’t have to lecture me. I am ready and packed; he lied again. I need only the money you promised. Do you have it?”

Since their first meeting some months ago, the Prussian had come to enjoy the Englishman’s impatience and anxious nervousness. There were times too he liked to provoke it.

The man sat opposite the Prussian was hopelessly naive and had that typical English arrogance about him. It was entertaining watching this passed-over, what? Ah, the Prussian sighed to himself; Napoleon was correct: the English were nothing more than shopkeepers; *petit bourgeoisie*, peddling and hawking their wares. And this man’s wares, his stock-in-trade? Treason.

Honour, duty and discipline were ingrained within Prussian military culture. He could no more betray the *vaterland* than cut off his right arm. If he were able to satisfactorily conclude this transaction, he would be certain of a promotion: a very good promotion. Perhaps a move to Paris? Yes, there was talk of aiding the French in their desire to bring more of Africa under their influence—this nation of shop people here could keep India: *Afrika* offered greater untapped wealth and riches. Let the French do the hard, heavy work and then the German Empire, led by the dominant Prussians, would march in and take over; just as they had done so to the French homeland in 1871.

The Prussian smiled to himself, was this what they called diplomatic artifice? Or just subterfuge? Non, *c’est un stratagème astucieux*, as the French would say. Well, it was one of them at least, surely?

“I’m talking to you, damn you! This is my life!”

“Was ist das?”

“Speak bloody English; we are already attracting looks.”

The Prussian looked around. He only saw people caught up in their own little lives.

“I fear you are developing paranoia, my friend. You should have remained in your linen suit, it brought out your better temperament. This sack suit, cutaway jacket,

cheap tweed nonsense combination,” the Prussian waved his hand dismissively at the Englishman’s attire. “Whatever it is has made you quite sour. I can recommend my own tailor, if you wish?”

“If you knew anything, you would know an Englishman would never wear a linen suit beyond the end of summer.” He testily lit another cigarette.

The Prussian nodded and got to his feet. “You talk of English tradition yet you betray your country for money.” He looked down at the Englishman. “I have a cab waiting outside. I suggest we take a ride, away from whatever eyes and ears that seem to be concerning you here.”



The carriage ride had been brief. The Prussian had handed him an envelope containing an amount to cover expenses. He would not receive payment for the goods until they were delivered—this had caused a heated exchange being as it was at variance with their original agreement.

The Prussian then brought an additional element into play: unless the Englishman delivered the goods to Paris, the Prussian would see him exposed. His parlous financial status, inveterate gambling and willingness to betray his country broadcast to every newspaper editor in Fleet Street. He would be disgraced, ruined and imprisoned.

To emphasise his point, the Prussian handed *der Engländer*, as he liked to call him, a small Remington Derringer pistol.

“If you decide to renege on our agreement, this will be your salvation. A Model 95 with twin barrels. Even you could not fail to fatally shoot yourself.”

The Englishman and would-be traitor, took the small pistol and turned it over in his hands. He cocked the hammer and looked at the Prussian.

“I could just shoot you in the head and have done with it. End this nonsense.”

The Prussian took out a silver cigarette case opened it and removed an amber holder. He slowly fitted a cigarette into the holder, lit it and looked thoughtfully at the man sat next to him.

“Yes, you could proceed in that manner, if you so wish. However, this cab driver is in the employ of the Imperial German Army and has instructions to deliver a letter to the

editor of The Times newspaper, should you attempt to harm or kill me. Besides, the pistol has yet to be loaded.”

He reached into a pocket on the cab door and produced a small box and an envelope the size of a calling card. “There are ten bullets in this box. If you require more you will need to purchase them yourself. Inside the envelope is the address in Paris where you will deliver the goods. Your money will be paid upon receipt and verification of the goods. You understand, ja?”

The Englishman shook his head. “Paris! You really do take the biscuit.”

The Prussian turned slightly toward *der Engländer* and drew in on his cigarette. “Let me put this as you English are fond of saying, in a succinct way; you my little *Engländer* have chosen to betray your country for money. You are the Judas in this transaction, I am merely an opportunist. However, there is always the possibility your estimable Scotland Yard is aware of your intentions and surveilling you. Similarly, you may be some sort of agent provocateur and this,” he waved his hand dismissively once more at the Englishman, “this is just an act; some pathetic entrapment ploy. A game devised to embarrass the Imperial German Empire.”

He raised an eyebrow waiting for a response but none was forthcoming. “I do not wish to be bested by you or your government and its Empire. Therefore we will meet and exchange in Paris, away from the jurisdiction of your Majesty, Her officers and the auspices of the British Empire. Verstehst du mich?”

The Englishman said nothing, what could he say? He opened the envelope and removed a blank calling card, turning it over he read the neatly written address.

“A church? A bloody church! Is this some sort of joke?”

“A little indulgence on my behalf, perhaps. It does, however, have its practicalities: quietude and privacy. It would also not be unusual for disparate people to, if you will allow a pun, congregate in such an area without suspicion. Furthermore, it is not difficult to locate.

Someone from my staff will wait in the church every morning for a week, beginning on Monday 17th of October but excluding Sunday. That I believe will provide ample time for you. Although, you may wish to secure the goods sooner rather than later and make your way to Paris in a casual manner. I myself will be in the vicinity of the church from time to time to observe. Is that clear? Gut.”

The Prussian tapped on the ceiling of the cab with his signet ring. A moment later the cab drew to a halt.

“Ah jah, one more thing; a code phrase, to allow you and my staff member to identify each other. I suggest, *Unseasonable weather for the time of year*. To which the reply should be, *I have my winter coat*. Questions? Nein, gut. Good evening to you, Herr Leutnant.”

The Englishman stepped from the cab and watched as it drove off. Perhaps he should have tried the Americans instead? Although he had the impression they wanted everything gratis... The Russians had not been interested in his offer—perhaps he had been too vague? Deliberately so, obviously. And that was why he’d gone to the Germans. Pointless going to the French... A simple case of expediency—loyalty had nothing to do with it.

He turned and began walking back to the offices of Naval Intelligence. He’d get the ‘goods’ tonight or maybe—he stopped and looked in the first envelope the Prussian had given him, the one with his expenses. Generous, he muttered then slipped the envelope into his inside jacket pocket.

Perhaps a little flutter was called for? Yes, a hand or two of cards at his club. After all, this expense money was free money. And he would be collecting a great deal more in Paris. The ‘goods’ could wait another night or two. After Paris he fancied America and yes, a change of name. One can’t be too careful. Escape all this; reinvent himself. Once in America he would buy the biggest plot of land he was able; populate it with cattle and an army of cowboys. His own fiefdom.

He looked around and flagged down a passing cab.



## Chapter Two

### The Treason Express

The Redoubt Club  
Pall Mall  
London  
Thursday 6th October 1887

He awoke with his head feeling thick, as if it were filled with one of London's choking pea soup fogs. He rolled to his left side, eyes still closed: he needed a moment or three to assess if...wait; good, a little sweaty but thankfully no nausea. His body though; it felt like—he tried to think: it felt like an over-done piece of liver. Yes! Quite specific that but, yes. He was indeed somewhat liverish but pigs liver not lambs. He yawned and pushed a hand through his hair. He only had the vaguest of recollection of the previous night. How many bottles of claret had he got through? And more importantly, how many hands of cards had he lost...?

He opened one eye then the other and looked around: he was in his room at the club and not some brothel. There had been talk during the evening of visiting a nearby house of ill repute but from what little he could recollect, nothing came of it. At least he didn't recall anything coming of it. He suddenly flinched, worried, and nervously reached out and felt the sheets behind him. Relief. He was alone; no lady of the night slumbered contentedly next to him and who he would then need to smuggle out, dressed no doubt in his overcoat and best hat. He'd been caught like that before and threatened with expulsion from the Redoubt—he'd only managed to retain his membership by paying a hefty fine. Why was it always easier to smuggle a woman in to the club than get one out?

He propped himself up, time to get dressed; a little hair of the dog wouldn't go amiss. Perhaps a light breakfast and then put in a few hours at the Naval Intelligence Division before lunch.



Lunchtime had not arrived soon enough. He needed a good, fatty soup and a hunk of bread. Something basic and earthy to comfort his constitution. A glass or two of champagne to wash it down, if indeed soup needed washing down. Yes, champagne would off-set any creeping nausea or biliousness that may unexpectedly arise. It sounded good: the peasant heartiness of a fatty soup combined with the refinement of the wine of kings. Where to dine though? Somewhere with an agreeable clientele and reasonable prices. Unless he were able to dine for free...This was something his

losses last night certainly dictated. Although, he had almost got away scot free with those losses...

After breakfasting and a little brandy snifter, he had been passing through the foyer of his club toward the front doors on his way to the Naval Intelligence Division offices, when one of the club's stewards approached him.

"Begging your pardon, sir. The Bursar sends his compliments and asks if he might have a word?"

He looked from the steward to the front doors and inwardly cursed. Half a dozen more strides and he would have been outside and away.

"Very well. Is he in his office?"

The steward nodded and escorted him to a well-polished oak door with the hand-painted legend, Office of the Bursar. After a polite knock, the steward opened the door and showed him in. The room was dominated by a sturdy but plain and functional oak desk, burnished to a glass-like finish.

"Ah, there you are. Sorry to way-lay you on your way out. This will only take a minute." The Bursar motioned for him to sit and slid a piece of paper across the desk.

"You wrote out this IOU last night, I believe. Quite a large amount for a friendly game of cards."

He stared at the note then looked up at the bursar and nodded.

"It is your note, is it not? You do confirm that? I mean, you did issue it and it is correct? As you know, the club holds all such notes until they are settled. We find it a slightly more agreeable arrangement. Gentlemen do not wish to be looked upon as unseemly by chasing debts."

He nodded at the Bursar once more but added, he could not attest to the amount. He had a vague recollection that it been several hundreds of pounds but £1,500?

"Oh, it is not the amount that concerns me. Your German uncle recently settled your outstanding account here at the club and we do like to look after our gentlemen and offer whatever concessions we are able." The Bursar smiled and continued. "No, you merely forgot to sign and date the IOU." He held out a dip pen. "If you please, unless of course, you do dispute the note?"

"No, no dispute. I am more than happy to sign." Frankly he didn't care. If all went well he'd be out of the country before he would be required to settle it. Besides, a

gambling IOU wasn't real money... He scrawled his signature and offered the pen to the Bursar.

“And the date of course.”

“Ah yes, the date.” He brusquely scribbled the date and handed the note and pen back. “Will that be all?”

The Bursar nodded. “I must say your German uncle was very striking in his uniform. On your father's side of the family?”

He got to his feet and quietly cursed the Prussian. He wasn't bothered about selling out his country or the Empire—they no-longer...what? No-longer resonated with his beliefs. A smile rippled across his face. Yes, that sounded good. Stuff the British Empire, this was about him. It was just, well, he'd prefer to retain some degree of control. Blasted Prussian! The damnable man had prepared the ground and laid the foundations in a ruthlessly efficient Prussian way. He must want the goods badly. The pay-off in Paris had better be a good one. Otherwise... He smiled politely at the Bursar.

“On my mother's side actually.” With that he bade the Bursar good morning and left the room.

Outside the club he cursed the Prussian again—the man was no uncle to him or even a relative. He had said to the Prussian, “Give me the money to clear my club account: think of it as a down-payment towards the goods.” But no, the Prussian did not trust him. He had a horrible feeling and not just from the hangover, that the Prussian would expose him, goods or no goods. He'd better do the job tonight then afterwards get a train from Victoria Station down to Dover and the first available paddle steamer across the Channel to France. He gave a little chuckle, forget the *Express d'Orient* this would be *L'Express de la Trahison!*

He was suddenly jolted from his recollection of that morning's meeting with the Bursar by a cheery slap on the back.

“There you are, old boy. Took your time coming out. Looked like you were away with the fairies. I've been loitering about outside, waiting, for a good ten minutes. Must say, quite surprised at getting a telegram suggesting lunch. Extravagant eh? Dammit, you look washed up. Heavy night, last night, what?”

He'd opted to dine at the National Liberal Club at its new location on the Embankment: he was friendly with a Liberal Party constituency agent who was always happy to sign him in at the Liberal Club as a guest and pick up the tab for lunch. In return, he would listen to an endless drone of the Liberal Party's woes for an hour and a half.

And here was the constituency agent in person. The man knew nothing of what he did, only that he was attached to the Foreign Office as a Naval aide. He extended his hand and greeted the constituency agent as enthusiastically as his lingering hangover would allow. The constituency agent's ebullient manner never ceased, by turns it both elevated his mood and annoyed him. But then where else could one dine out in London for the price of a telegram?



## Chapter Three

### A Single Ticket

Office of Naval Intelligence, Whitehall  
Friday 7th October  
Afternoon

“Oh Fortuna, why hast thou forsaken me?” He didn’t speak it out loud just thought the words. It was true enough though, he needed some good fortune. Otherwise he’d never get his hands on the damnable goods. Today, this afternoon, this moment now was the first time he had been alone in the office he shared with three others. He got up from his desk and exhaled noisily, venting his frustration. He had hoped to have been in Paris by now. Well, he’d really hoped to have been there two days ago! Enjoying whatever distractions were on offer. The sooner he was away from here the better.

He stubbed out his cigarette, checking his watch as he did so; a regular Friday afternoon ritual and one that, all being quiet, hastened the end of the working day, was drinks in the Naval Intelligence Director’s office. Seeing this as an opportunity, he had sent his three colleagues on ahead, lying that he wanted to finish the memo he was attaching to a file he’d been working on—he would be no more than five minutes, six at the most he told them.

He’d been attempting to get his hands on the goods as he liked to call them, since, well it didn’t matter, it just felt like a long time! All to no avail. His attempts constantly thwarted: his four-man office had been busy and fully occupied, tasked to explore whatever possibilities there were of close-blockades and major coastal assaults using naval units. Not on any specific coastline just in general, which was not helpful. A lot of fanciful schemes had been put forward and he was becoming wearisome of constantly looking at ways of combing different elements of each scheme to come up with one cohesive strategy. The Admiralty and Foreign Office failed to understand what may have worked in 1812, was likely no longer feasible over seventy years later!

The afternoon had passed slowly, scribbled ideas on paper either crossed through or noted as ‘Possible’ and given to one of his colleagues to look into further. The hands of the wall mounted office clock seemed to move backward rather than forward, stretching out the afternoon until it reached a point where it felt it had never started nor would it ever end.

But now, finally, he was alone and could open the safe untroubled by curious eyes, and remove the goods he had agreed to sell to the Prussian. He slowly unlocked and pulled open the door of the five-foot tall, free-standing safe and reached in...

“Are you coming?” A head poked around the office door “The old man is asking if you’ve got yourself lost again? He says you were never able to navigate your way at sea either!”

He stepped back from the safe and turned to face the door, startled: his attempt frustrated.

“I was just about to come actually.” He tried to sound composed, not surprised; masking his intentions, readying his lie.

“I was just locking up some files.”

Quite strategically he had tucked a random file from his desk under his arm. He now waved the file in the air then dropped it on one of the safe’s shelves, closed and locked the safe door then placed the key back in the duty officer’s desk drawer.

“Don’t forget to sign the key book.”

He nodded, smiled and removed the key book from the same drawer and scrawled an entry, noting he had opened the safe on 7th October at 3.55 pm for *misc files*. He placed the book back in the drawer with the key and proceeded with his colleague for drinks in the Director’s office.



Saturday 8th October  
Afternoon and evening

Saturdays in the office were always half days, everyone without exception took the afternoon as ‘holiday’: an accepted perk. The end of the working week had been reached and everything was more relaxed safe in the oft-cited but never completely proven maxim that no one civilised ever started a war on a Saturday! From the many intelligence reports he had studied over his short career, most nations seemed to go to war on a Tuesday or a Thursday. Of course once at war, any bloody day was good enough for fighting!

Today of all the days of the week, he had found it easy to open the safe and remove unnoticed the goods he had promised the Prussian. In fact it had been laughably easy: of the three other naval officers he shared the office with, one was now off sick, another on an errand to the Foreign Office and the third had gone in search of tea and buns. Almost as much as drinks with the Director on a Friday afternoon, tea and buns were a Saturday tradition.

He left the Naval Intelligence offices at lunchtime and made his way to his club where, to the surprise of the steward serving in the reading room, he ordered a large brandy and downed it before the man had time to turn away. Fortified and if not fully relaxed he repaired to his room where after a brief nap, he changed out of his naval uniform into a dark green plaid, single breasted suit. For the first time in many months he felt alive, fizzing with electricity. This business of treason was intoxicating!

He had already chosen a selection of clothes to take with him to Paris. He now placed them, with the goods from the Naval Intelligence safe in a Gladstone bag and tried to think what else he would need. Of course, he could always get one of the club's stewards to pack for him but then...No, he wanted to slip away quietly, hopefully unnoticed. Whatever he forgot to pack he'd have to buy in Paris.

Next, taking some paper from the desk drawer, he wrote out the address in Paris from the card the Prussian had given him. He wrote in slightly large letters to allow him to show the address to whatever Parisian cabbie he came across. The Prussian's hand writing while being legible was quite small and ornate.

He checked his watch: the train was due to depart Victoria Station at 8pm for Dover, more than enough time for an early dinner here at the club.



It was his first time travelling on the London, Chatham and Dover Railway or the LC&DR to give its common abbreviation. He did not find the experience enjoyable. Boarding at Victoria Station had been straightforward, the train punctual. However, the carriage had become draughty, mostly due to the man sitting opposite insisting on the window being open from the moment he had got on.

From Victoria Station until the said arrival of the man, the journey had been uneventful, bordering on pleasant even. The man, possibly one of the new breed of so called commercial salesmen had boarded at Chatham Station, roughly the half way point between London and Dover and taken the seat opposite. The carriage was empty other than the two of them.

The man had been one of those chatty types, the sort who would not have been out of place at a meeting of The Ladies Discussion Society. He'd stared at the man with this thought in his head and pictured him, moustache and mutton chops intact, in a florid dress of some description. This had made him smile and although the image amused him somewhat, he began to feel uneasy and immediately he'd finished his cigarette,

he lit another one. What if this man were not a commercial salesman but someone from Scotland Yard, his treason discovered and this man sent to arrest him?

“Not a good traveller then?” The commercial salesman enquired, watching him, seeming to study his face.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Not good at travelling, I asked. That’s why you are smoking cigarette after cigarette. Me, forgive the pun, but travelling comes with the territory. Going all the way are you?”

He inhaled slowly on the cigarette, releasing the smoke through his nostrils. He was a good traveller, yes, he told the man. It was just...he imagined leaning forward and beckoning the man closer and saying; *I am indeed a very good traveller truth be known. It’s just that...I have stolen some very secretive documents from the Navy Intelligence Division...*

Of course he didn’t, wouldn’t say that: the man might actually be Scotland Yard. He decided to spin a lie. “I’m just getting over a recent bereavement. Thought a few days on the coast would help.”

“Quite understand. But if I may say, I would have thought someone in your obvious distress would be more soberly dressed?”

The man was irritating. No wonder he was a travelling commercial salesman; his wife probably welcomed his absences. The man was still talking; he for his part had stopped listening though. He closed his eyes but no sooner had he done so than he detected a sudden draft.

“I’ve opened the window. Get some air circulating. Myself I am not a partaker and you do seem to be filling the carriage with smoke.” The salesman gave a nervous laugh. “If we had a sudden fire in here, we’d not see it because of all your cigarette smoke!”

In his mind, he grabbed the salesman, this irritating little man, removed his wallet; found the imagined Scotland Yard identity card, took whatever money the man had then yanked open the carriage door and thrust him out into the dark night and certain death.

The salesman, perhaps sensing he had irritated his travelling companion pulled out a hip flask and offered it to him. “It’s nothing special. At least it takes the edge off. We all need a good nip of something now and again. I’m going all the way through; all the way to France. This time tomorrow, no wait that’s Sunday. Monday then, I’ll be

knee deep in fabrics: picking out whatever looks good but comes cheap and having it shipped back *poste haste* as the French say.”

He declined the hip flask and felt duty bound to point out *post haste* was not French. The French were more likely to say something along the lines of *à toute vitesse*.

“Bit of an educated man then, eh?” The salesman took a long swig from his hip flask.

He ignored him. If there was one thing he didn’t want, it was to share a paddle steam ferry and then a French train with this man. What to do though, what to do?

“Here we are,” said the man nodding at the open window. “Dover. End of the line.” He lifted the front of his hat barely an inch, bid farewell and was out the door and scurrying across the platform.

“Thank god for that,” he muttered to himself then stood up and pulled his Gladstone bag from the overhead rack and alighted the train.

No sooner was he off the train though than he was informed by a porter that night’s ferry had been cancelled due to adverse weather in the English Channel. The next ferry would be 10am the next day, weather dependent.



**Chapter Four**  
The Micawber Factor

Office of Runcible Briggs  
Clifton  
Bristol  
Thursday 13th October 1887

Isidore reached the top of the narrow, double-back stairs and standing on the small landing paused for a moment. She could do with a pair of gloves for although it was only just coming up to mid October, the weather had begun to change; what would have been a gentle breeze mere weeks ago now had a bite to it. There was to be no Indian summer of balmy halcyon days this year, just an interminable slide toward winter. It didn't help that Isidore felt weary and had been up since god knows what o'clock and had yet to eat or even enjoy a cup of something tepid let alone hot.

She let out an undisguised yawn and as she did so, reached out and gave the small brass plate attached to the door in front of her a gentle wipe with the cuff of her overcoat.

In an understated script the plate on the door read,

Runcible Briggs ~ Consultive Detective.

She smiled at the name then turned the doorknob but for whatever reason, and unusually, the door was locked. She pressed against it with her shoulder and called out.

“Tilley, are you in? Open the door. It's me, I'm back. Why's it locked? I'm positively exhausted out here; I want to warm myself on the stove!”

The potbelly stove had been a valuable addition to the office and one that brought dividends, especially on days like today. It also helped that it required less coal and was correspondingly cheaper to run than the fireplace it stood in.

Isidore released the doorknob and began rummaging through her pockets; she knew she had a door key tucked away somewhere: overcoat pockets, no; she unbuttoned her overcoat: jacket inside pockets, no. Hah, the pockets of her plus fours? No...but, tada!

“Et voila!” Isidore exclaimed and pulled a bronze-coloured key from her jacket breast pocket and brandished it with a flourish in the air.

“And for my next trick, I will make a space in this wall, which I will call an open doorway!”

Isidore slid the key into the lock, turned it and gave the handle a firm twist and the door a good push and stepped into a small porch area. She slipped off her overcoat and hung it on one of the three ornate metal hooks. Two steps later, entering through the inner door, she was in the office proper of Runcible Briggs Consultive Detective. A further half step and she stopped dead.

Tilley, Isidore’s assistant, was in what Isidore in her typical understated way would call a delicately compromising position. Not wishing to intrude further, Isidore quietly retraced her steps to the front door, back out onto the landing and waited...

Several minutes later a tall, smartly dressed, well-built man, looking very pleased with himself strode confidently out of the office and, to Isidore’s mind, positively skipped down the stairs. Seconds later Tilley appeared, spitting into a handkerchief.

“Sorry Izz, he insisted I lock the door. When you came in, things had reached a, erm critical moment, as they say. Now I really need to go down to the lavvie.”

“Just a minute, you might find this useful,” Isidore stepped into the porch and pulled a hip flask from her overcoat pocket. “Rinse and spit. It never fails to take the taste away.” She grinned then watched Tilley clatter hastily down the stairs.

On the ground floor were, quite luxuriously, two indoor lavatories—something reflected in the premium rent charged by the building’s landlord.

Isidore re-entered the office, put a small scoop of coal into the stove and warmed her hands while waiting for the kettle to come to the boil.

By the time Tilley returned, Isidore was sat behind her desk, hands wrapped around a milk-less, over-sized cup of tea. She looked up at her tall, auburn-haired assistant, who just managed to stay on the right side of what the Germans termed *geschick*; the French, *mort-chic* and various London periodicals, the *à la mode* haunted-gaunt look.

“Sorry, Izz, I really needed to spew that out. There was no way I was keeping that inside me. It felt like bone factory glue! God knows what sort of life he’s been living to get...”

Tilley stopped, shrugged and handed back the hip flask.

“It’s only cheap stuff, I’m afraid, Tills. Needs must as they say. But it suffices as something to keep the blood flowing on a cold day, or indeed, as a mouth rinse. At least it’s not the rot-gut brandy that isn’t even good enough for cooking with. We

haven't quite reached those depths." Isidore flashed a smile then added a splash of the brandy to her tea.

Tilley agreed. "Yes, that definitely is a cheap brandy, Izz. But I have had a lot worse I am sad to say!" She opened her hand and dropped four sovereigns onto Isidore's desk blotter.

"Was this from your...encounter?"

Tilley nodded. "An American gentleman, as they say. Quite generous. He could have probably got himself two or three dock whores for a whole week for that amount. I did tell him I was very exclusive: it's funny how old habits die hard. He was here on some business or other; heading to London next and then onward to Southampton and a ship back to America. Wanted to experience a true, high-class British madam, he said." Tilley gave a mock curtsy.

Isidore shook her head in amusement then reached into her jacket pocket and produced two sovereigns and dropped them next to Tilley's.

"One very well-groomed white cat tracked down and rescued from a tree, complete with her mistress' three-string pearl bracelet with cabochon garnet clasp, worn as a collar would you believe. By the time I retrieved the cat, it was looking a little less well groomed. Luckily being white the pearls didn't stand out as much as they would on say a black cat. Otherwise the cat would likely be no more and the pearl bracelet in a local fence house, I imagine."

Isidore stacked the sovereigns one on top of one another then continued.

"It seems, whenever the lady of the house is away, her maid lets the cat wear the bracelet as a fancy collar. As a treat would you believe! I imagine the cat would rather have a nice piece of fish. In my limited experience of cats they do not go out of their way begging to be dressed in pearls. Treat indeed! I did suggest to the maid, five pounds would be a fairer recompense, given the obvious value of the bracelet, but these sovereigns were all she had to hand, she said. Oh and a pound of Fortnum & Mason's best tea, which I naturally accepted. The lady of the house is away on the coast for a few days and obviously ignorant of the incident and the maid is having to stretch out the meagre housekeeping money she was left."

Tilley gave a wicked grin. "You should have kidnapped the cat then taken it back when the lady returned home. Perhaps she would have given a more generous reward."

Isidore laughed. "Either that or accused me of thievery, called for a policeman and no doubt dismissed the maid! At least we now have enough for this quarter's rent. And only a week late!

Plus, I do believe we can stretch to a cheap luncheon.” Isidore finished her tea. “Speaking of rent though, I was down around Broad Street the other day. It looks as if there is the possibility of an office or two becoming vacant. The rent would be less than here.”

Tilley shrugged. “But at least here it’s well away by a good mile and a steep hill, from the hurly burley and stench of the docks.” She held up her hand. “I know Broad Street isn’t right on the docks but... Look, who knows what gets thrown in those docks: pig swill; dogs, cats, people! Besides, we’re on the high ground here and that must count for something.”

“I agree, Tills, there is that. But we would be a short distance from The Grand Hotel, if we moved to Broad Street. Perhaps we’d get some work from there?”

“Other than fill-in waitresses or maids, you mean?”

The two fell silent. Income over the last few months had been erratic. Rescuing pearl bedecked cats from trees was not what Isidore had in mind when she founded Runcible Briggs. Nor did she envisage her assistant having to service random Americans to raise rent money.

Isidore picked up the stack of sovereigns and dropped them one at a time back on top of each other. “As Micawber said, Tills, more or less anyway; income twenty pounds, outgoings nineteen pounds, Micawber happy. Income twenty pounds, outgoings twenty-one pounds, Micawber in misery.

Come on, grab your coat; Micawber is happy, we are currently in credit. We will pay the quarter’s rent, get chastised by the landlord over its lateness and then dine: drown our sorrows with beer and oysters at the Alma. I haven’t eaten since yesterday!”



The Alma Tavern  
Clifton, Bristol

Isidore and Tilley entered the Alma Tavern, a mere ten or so minutes stroll from the Runcible Briggs office. The tavern, not unusually for that time of day, was quiet. A little dark inside perhaps but in the main it was clean and hospitable. Isidore ordered enough oysters for them both to share and two glasses of porter. They then sat themselves at a small table next to a window.

For a good twenty minutes they fell silent, making their way through the oysters—pausing only for long sips of porter. The silence was eventually broken by Tilley.

“Tell me, how was the cat rescue? The actual trekking down of it, I mean. I see you donned your plus fours—very fetching if I do say so.”

Isidore gave a little laugh.

“I think it cost me more to have them taken in and re-tailored than what they are worth. I just assumed getting a pair of men’s trousers, albeit from a pawn shop, and having them altered would be cheaper than having a pair made by an obliging tailor.”

Isidore sighed then added.

“A woman’s lot is a hard one, Tills. At some point someone somewhere will recognise that women like to wear things other than skirts and dresses. But despite their cost, these plus fours have proven quite practical and are the ideal thing when meandering around the streets of Clifton at ungodly hours of the night and early morning, in search of a cat...”

“How on earth did you manage to track it down? I mean cats are just...” Tilley made a face.

“I would like to say it was by the inspired use of deductive reasoning...” Isidore giggled. “But sadly it wasn’t. Instead one consulted a felinologist, don’t you know. He just happened to also be a taxidermist. A strange mix I thought, and is in the process of launching, *A Weekly Journal Devoted to Cats*. I did remark as a title it seemed over-long. He agreed and thought he may just go with, *Paws for Thought*.” Isidore gave a grimace. “But, by-the-by, he did tell me cats like to explore in ever increasing circles. Using that I tried to circle around the house in...well you get the notion.

I eventually found the cat stuck in a tree some quarter of a mile from the house, more than relieved to be rescued and definitely too hungry to fight or run. I think years of pampering had dulled or diminished the cat’s otherwise natural abilities.

The maid told me later when I returned the cat and pearl bracelet-collar, she had placed the bracelet around the cat’s neck, then become distracted searching for a grooming brush. The cat seized upon this opportunity and made off through an open window. The poor maid spent a very sleepless night fretting over her carelessness. She had even packed her bag and written out her notice.

Now, no more cat-talk; let us raise a toast with our remaining drink to a more successful up-coming quarter than this last one. Perhaps with winter looming and

dark nights, there may be more detecting to be done. Or at least more people in need of our detecting services and who will pay the full going rate!”

“I’ll certainly drink to that!”

Isidore touched glasses with Tilley and suggested they ought to make a move. Otherwise, not only would they would while away their afternoon and left over money in the pub thus becoming miseries like Micawber but perhaps attract more attention from the figure currently leaning with their back against the bar and staring at them.

In a lowered voice, Isidore asked Tilley, “You don’t know them do you? They have been watching us, not constantly but just enough to make me think we should leave before they decide to become a pester.”

Tilley looked over at the bar, studying the figure. “You know what, I do think I do know them, Izz.”

Believing there had at last been some sense of recognition, the bar-prop approached the two women. “Tilley? It is you isn’t it? I know my eyes sometimes play me tricks but...”

Tilley smiled. “Hello stranger. Yes, indeed it is me. How are you?”

The stranger smiled warmly and nodded at Isidore, winking. “Have you got yerself a wife now, eh?”

From their dress, this friend or past acquaintance of Tilley’s was clearly a sailor: a merchant captain. Their face weathered by wind and sea spray but and this is what Tilley had always said about Captain Eliot Marian, their eyes had a warm, kindly sparkle about them.

“Cap’n Marian this is Miss Runce, my employer.”

Cap’n Marian touched a finger to their worn cap. “Tilley and I go back a short while, shall we say. I didn’t mean any disrespect suggestin’ you were Tilley’s wife. I have what they call a skewed outlook.”

“Of course not, no apology needed. Sometimes it’s the skewed outlook that saves us.” Isidore held out her hand. “Pleased to meet you. Unfortunately we were just about to leave.”

“Now that is a shame indeed. But we are all slaves to the toil and heave of makin’ coin. If you ever be down by the floatin’ harbour have a look out for me ship. Tilley knows her well. You are both welcome on board for a glass of whatever I’ve got to

hand or even a cup of tea if you prefer. We will be there for say another week then we sail for France—just a short jaunt across the channel and back.” Cap’n Marian touched a finger to their cap again as Tilley and Isidore got to their feet.

For a moment Tilley smiled at Cap’n Marian and held her hand out before quickly withdrawing it and stepping forward, planted a kiss on the cap’n’s cheek. She turned to Isidore.

“Cap’n Marian here saved me and gave me, well, gave me hope when there seemed none.” Tilley turned back to Cap’n Marian and squeezed their hand. “You took me in and looked after me.”

Cap’n Marian waved a hand dismissing Tilley’s words. “All I did was see wrong being done, step in and help out.” Cap’n Marian gave a shake of the head. “You were a terrible sailor tho’. Every gentle swell had you lurching for a pail or the ship’s rail.”

“Gentle swell? I will tell you, Izz, I went down to Ceylon and back with this person in a three masted clipper. Six months there and the same back! By the time we returned to Bristol fully laden with tea, I was so used to being at sea, I couldn’t walk straight for a week! What Cap’n Marian here calls gentle swells were nothing more than full blown storms!”

Cap’n Marian laughed out loud. “It is good to see you doing well and in good company. I am off to see my sister in her fancy house; I’ll show her the books from the last voyage and see if she agrees we should invest in a steamship. She’s the one holding the purse strings, right enough. As good as our old clipper be and as good and loyal as our crew, we need to move with the times.” Cap’n Marian touched their cap once more and bade Tilley and Isidore a pleasant afternoon.

Outside the Alma Tavern, Isidore remarked Cap’n Marian seemed to be a good-hearted type.

Tilley agreed. “The Cap’n and their sister are Quakers. I never got to meet her but Cap’n Marian used to say she was as stern as she was teetotal. The Cap’n’s a bit more luskish but is no less imbibed with a deep sense of honesty and rightness. Completely trustworthy: just don’t go sailing with them, they have a taste for rough seas!”



**Chapter Five**  
A Morning Caller

Office of Runcible Briggs  
Clifton  
Bristol  
Friday 14th October 1887

Tilley had thus far spent the morning sewing up a rip in the seat of Isidore's plus-fours—incurred but unnoticed, Isidore surmised, during her rescue of the Pearl Cat, as they had begun to refer to the recent cat case .

While Tilley deftly stitched away, Isidore finished writing an account of the cat rescue in *The Official Case History of Runcible Briggs*. Isidore had tentatively numbered the journal as *Vol. 1*—the first of many volumes she hoped. The journal detailed in brief but succinct and unadorned terms, every case, no matter how small or inconsequential, they had undertaken since opening the—Isidore stopped and looked over at Tilley.

“Is *detectancy* a word?”

“What do you mean?”

“What we do or what we are meant to be doing; aiming and striving to do. Would you call it *detectancy*?”

“You mean detectives, as in detecting?”

Isidore nodded. “Are we, is this, a *detectancy* business or just...?”

“Well, you are the educated one; I thought it was just a detective consultancy. Is this for the journal?”

“Mmm, yes. Don't worry, it was just an idle thought.” Isidore blotted the page, gave it a little blow over and closed the journal. She leaned back in her seat and studied the plus-fours Tilley was now holding up for her inspection.

“That is a very good job, if I do say so. You have such neat stitching, Tills. I think I will get you to do all my repairs and alterations from now.” Isidore gave a hopeful smile.

“I don’t know about that. But neat sewing is something I have Cap’n Marian to thank for. There is little else to do on long ship evenings but improve your sewing. Or play cards, or drink, or whittle or even all four!”

At that moment there was a rapping on the inner door of the office. The sort of rap that only came from the handle of a walking cane.

“Are we expecting company this morning?” Isidore stared at the door, waiting for it to swing open and reveal their visitor.

Tilley shook her head and folded up the plus-fours, placing them on Isidore’s desk. There was another burst of rapping on the door.

“Well, Izz, it is definitely not the landlord. We paid him yesterday. Is there anyone else we owe money?”

Isidore ran a hand over her head, checking her bun was secure. “I don’t believe so. At least no one who immediately comes to mind. Unless...” She paused, thinking. “No, I do believe at this current moment in time, we are solvent. We have on hand the princely sum of nineteen shillings and sixpence, half-penny. Or is it ha’penny.”

“I suppose if it was a royal sum rather than just a princely one it would be more, wouldn’t it?” Tilley grinned.

“Very true. We must be more aspirant! Now, would you like to see who is at the door, before they begin to damage the paintwork and we have to use our nineteen shillings to hire a painter?”

“Me? Why not you? Whoever it is behind that door may have a walking stick in one hand and a revolver in the other.”

Isidore pulled open her desk drawer and removed a short leather cosh then called out to the mystery door rapper. “Come in. The door is not locked.”

Tilley picked up a heavy glass paperweight. “I can see the headline now: *Detectives Slain In Own Office*. Underneath it would say; *Female detectives fail to detect danger!*”

“No, Tills, they’d go with something like; *Petticoat Searchers Slain!* That’s what they call we women detectives, is it not; Petticoat Searchers? And there would be a remark that if only we’d worn bustled dresses, we could have had a concealed revolver. Mind you, the size of some of these bustles you could hide a shotgun in them!

Perhaps a better headline would be, *Work Kills Women* and something in the text along the lines of, *women are only guaranteed safety in the home.*”

The inner door to the office swung open and a tall man with a well-groomed moustache and short, greying hair entered the office. In one hand he held a walking cane with an ornate silver top and in the other, not a revolver but a hat. He swung the cane in front of himself and laughed. “So, ladies, is it to be death by paperweight or your little cosh, Isidore? Forgive me but I could not help but eavesdrop.”

Isidore sprang to her feet. “Uncle! I’m stunned. What are you doing in Bristol?”

The man offered his hat and cane to Tilley. “You don’t mind, do you. I do not see a hat or coat stand.”

“We are saving up for one and usually the floor suffices. But as you seem to be related to Isidore, I will place these on my desk.”

“Very considerate of you, miss.

Isidore. I have left the comfort of Scotland Yard to come and visit you with an offer of work. But first...” The man looked from Isidore to Tilley.

“Of course, my apologies. Uncle, this is Tilley, my assistant. Tilley this is my uncle, the Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard, Charles Runce.”

Tilley nodded. “Impressive. Would the Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard like a cup of tea?”

“Tea would be most welcome, thank you. I will assume you make it without milk?”

Together Isidore and Tilley replied, “Always.”

Runce smiled and sat himself down. “I started Isidore here on her path of discovery regards milk-less tea. I myself learned to go without milk during the Siege of Lucknow, when I was a young subaltern serving in India.”

Isidore put a hand to her head and pretended to swoon. “Don’t let him get started on the Siege of Lucknow, Tilley, we’ll be here until midnight!”

“There’s no respect left in the world!” Runce smiled again and fell silent while Tilley poured out three cups of tea—she hadn’t bothered making a fresh pot, just refreshed the existing one from the recently boiled kettle.

“You said you had an offer of work, Uncle?”

“And there’s my Isidore, always straight to the point.”

Tilley handed Runce a cup of tea and apologised for the lack of saucers then sat down behind her desk. The office was not a big one, about the size of a parlour in an average-sized, middle class, terraced house. With two desks, attendant chairs plus a further two chairs for visitors or clients; an eight drop-drawer filing cabinet and a small utility table, the room was what Tilley termed, cosy.

Runce placed his saucerless cup on the edge of Isidore's desk. "Sadly Isidore, I am not going to ask you to return to Scotland Yard."

"Good, because I would not. My days trying to bring order to the Records Department are long gone. Besides, I would be constantly looking around for Briggs."

Runce nodded. He too missed the methodological approach of the late Detective Inspector Reginald Briggs. "Here we are two years later and he is still sorely missed. The two of you were a good, working match. I still find it hard to believe something as random as a ricocheting bullet..." He stopped, noticing Isidore's eyes beginning to well up.

"But enough of this. I am sure his spirit walks with us each and every day. Now let us move on to why I am here."

Tilley leaned forward on her desk. "I'm all ears..."

"It is rather sensitive, Isidore. Perhaps we could discuss it privately?"

"I assume, whatever the matter is, you believe my, even our, talents would be of use?"

Runce nodded.

"In that case, Tilley will remain. She is my assistant and we work together; equal, interdependent and reliable. Discretion is our stock-in-trade"

"Ah, I recognise the words from your business card." Runce laced his fingers together and for a moment rested his chin on them. "As you wish. However, this is a most confidential matter." He paused for effect to underline the seriousness then resumed.

"A little over a week ago, a set of blueprints or plans, if you will, went missing from an office in Whitehall. They need to be recovered lest they fall into the wrong hands."

"I see and these blueprints, plans, Uncle, would they have been held in say the Foreign Office? No, wait, you said fall into the wrong hands. That would imply something new that would give us an advantage over any adversary. Therefore the

Whitehall office in question would not be related to the army—their strength lies in numbers, supply lines and battlefield strategy. That means it is the navy we must look to and do I recall a department for Naval Intelligence was set up earlier in the year?”

Runce looked at Tilley and smiled. “She is good, isn’t she.

You are quite correct, Isidore. A set of blueprints was removed from a safe in the Naval Intelligence Division, rather than department, last Saturday. It is believed a young Naval lieutenant is responsible.”

“And you have been unable to retrieve the blueprints, even with all of the Yard’s resources? Who did you put on the case?”

“To a degree our hands are tied. We have to be succinct lest we alert our erm... Let us just say, the Navy would like the matter resolving...quietly. As for resources, thus far the investigation has been headed up by Inspector Williams.”

Isidore let out a guffaw. “Oh, Uncle. Surely not Sweaty Williams! Is he really an inspector now?” She shook her head in disbelief and leaned back in her chair and exhaled at the ceiling before leaning forward once more and looking at Tilley.

“Williams. Tills, was a sergeant assigned to the last case I worked on with Briggs. He was nothing but trouble and at one point tried to arrest me and Briggs! He also had a propensity for sweating.” She shook her head again and looked at her uncle.

“The man, dear Uncle, is a buffoon and he hates women, even though he is married—probably more by accident than design. He was less than useless during that Fitzpatrick case. A man caught up in his own importance!” She let out a long sigh.

Runce gave an imperceptible nod in agreement. “We must all work with the cloth we are given. Although I will say, Inspector Williams has progressed the case, shall we say as far as he is able. All to no avail. Hence my visit today. Would you be prepared to take the case on?”

“It’s not nepotism, is it?”

“Hardly. Williams has got as far as can get. The Commissioner has instructed or rather given authorisation for the use of outside agency. It is either that or we...” Under his breath, Runce muttered, “...give Williams even more resources to waste.”

“I, we, will not work with Sweaty, sorry, Inspector Williams. And we will need paying. Something on account. Work has been a little thin of late.”

Runce nodded. “Yes, that is acceptable.” He took out his wallet and removed several five pound notes and handed them to Isidore. “This will be a payment on account for

sundry expenses. I'll need some sort of invoice or receipt. Let me know if more is required."

Isidore passed the five pound notes to Tilley who began drawing up a formal receipt. "Shall I mark it as funds received from Assistant Commissioner Runce, Scotland Yard, in respect of consultive work?"

Runce nodded. "Now, my dear ladies we must repair to London forthwith and commence investigations. I retained a cab with ample room—it is currently parked downstairs. We can get the first available train to London, if that is acceptable to you both? I know this is very short notice or indeed, no notice at all but you will appreciate time is of the essence. Hopefully you are both seasoned in travelling light?"

Isidore looked at Tilley who nodded and handed Runce his receipt.



## **Chapter Six** The Investigation Opens

The Redoubt Club  
Pall Mall  
London  
Evening  
Friday 14th October 1887

Isidore and Tilley stood on the steps of The Redoubt Club, firmly on the pavement side of the entrance, not so much because they were female but rather, because they were not male. An odd tautological, meaningless distinction Isidore thought.

However, according to The Redoubt's doorman, who had successfully barred both Isidore and Tilley from entering but allowed Runce free passage, there was a distinct and discernible difference.

"This is a member's only club," the doorman had explained in a way that only a literal gatekeeper could. "It doesn't mean women are barred, only that entrance is given only and ever to members and I am afraid membership is currently only open to gentlemen of a particular social standing and honourability."

Isidore had snorted at this piece of nonsense and was prepared to argue with the doorman but he retreated inside and stood staring at them through the gleaming glass panels of the Redoubt's double doors, bathed in the club's recently installed electric lights. A pair of stewards took up position to his left and right as reinforcement.

"Clearly," Isidore turned to Tilley, "It takes three men to deny two women entrance."

"Is this where we disappear around the corner, don our theatrical moustaches, shove a half-smoked cigar in our mouths and return doing a suitable male striding-swagger?"

"We could, Tills, but I am afraid your dress may give us away. At least I had the foresight, despite Uncle's disapproving looks, to don my plus-fours. I just hope Uncle can persuade whoever is in charge of the club, to let us in. We really need to find out whatever we can about this would-be traitor."

Tilley agreed. "Until then we must position ourselves, as the saying goes, like two baskets of oranges."

"She's a basket of oranges fit for any man's table." Isidore called out in a very bad, mock cockney accent. She then apologised to Tilley who burst out laughing, just as a police constable strode along the pavement.

"Been drinking have we, ladies?" The constable enquired, using his hand-held lamp to not so much illuminate as cast an eerie glow over their faces. "Had one gin too many and thought you'd come down to Pall Mall and accost some upstanding and respectable gents?"

Isidore and Tilley looked up and down the length of the wide street and shook their heads. Isidore then put on her bad mock cockney accent again.

"Well stone me, Missus Beaton, we gone and got here too early to meet any gents! Or is we just too late?" She studied the police constable. "You ain't a gent are you?"

The constable produced a pair of handcuffs and set about cuffing the two women together.

"I am arresting the two of you for being up to no good in a respectable area and for you," he indicated Isidore, "for wearing men's clothing in public and for your 'friend' for encouraging and abetting you. You are both unnatural. Perhaps a night in the cells and a visit to the magistrate in the morning will let you see the error of your ways."

At that moment the double doors of The Redoubt club opened, spilling brash illumination onto the steps and Charles Runce emerged.

"Can I be of assistance Constable?"

“Do not fret, sir. All is in hand. I have arrested these two vagrants and am taking them for a night in the cells.”

Runce gave a pursed smile, opened his overcoat and reached into his jacket.

“I hope you are not intending to offer me a bribe, sir? That would be most improper.” A sudden thought flashed across the constable’s mind. Perhaps this gentleman had procured the services of these two ‘ladies’ for the night...

“Do you know these ladies, sir?”

Runce nodded. “I do indeed. One is my niece and both are morally upstanding and respectable women.” He showed the constable his Scotland Yard warrant card.

The constable’s face flushed red and he began to stammer an apology, incorrectly calling Runce, Commissioner.

Runce waved his hand. “These things are sent to beset and test us, Constable. You must remember, if you wish to get on, not all is as it may first appear.”

The constable nodded vigorously, retrieved his handcuffs and began backing away, stepping into the road and narrowly avoiding being run-over by a speeding, unlit cab.

Runce turned away without commenting further and motioned to the doorman to open the Redoubt’s doors. “Shall we enter, ladies?”

Inside the polished marble-floored foyer a short, balding man greeted them. In contrast to the inky night beyond the club’s doors, the foyer shone with modernity—no doubt frightening its older members for whom gaslight had offered a comforting anonymity.

“My name is Edward Barrington-Smyth, I am the Redoubt Club’s bursar.” The balding man kept his hands firmly clasped behind his back, he would not be offering his hand to either of these two female interlopers into this bastion of male refuge.

“The Assistant Commissioner has explained the situation to me and while we would not usually countenance any admission of women into the club, I have relented in this instance as it is a matter of—” He stopped and looked Runce and then the doorman and stewards who had positioned themselves behind Isidore and Tilley.

“A matter of the deepest discretion.” Runce finished the bursar’s sentence.

Barrington-Smyth nodded and indicated the stairs. “The room in question is this way. I will lead the way. Ronson here will follow on behind.” He clicked his fingers at one of the stewards.

The room, Bursar Barrington-Smyth explained to Runce, Isidore and Tilley as he unlocked and opened the door and stepped inside, was one of several provided by the club for a suitable stipend to its more regular members.

Isidore cast her eyes around the room decorated as it was in a somewhat gaudy, if not currently en vogue Egyptian style. Runce thanked the bursar then gently escorted him out of the room, closing the door and standing with his back against it.

“The room is all yours, ladies,” Runce announced. “You may proceed.”

“Well, Tilley, shall we make a start?” Isidore rubbed her hands together. “What are your first impressions, what do you make of this room?”

“Let me see; the bed looks very comfortable, a nice size too. I could do without the high headboard and the ornamental pillars on each side though. As for the blue and gold colouring of everything... Is this what they call Egyptomania? Ugh. It really does need a woman’s touch in here.”

Isidore held a finger to her lips. “Shh, you’ll hurt their male pride. But I do agree, it is very much a man’s room with a man’s idea of furnishing. Very Egyptian temple style. I’m surprised there isn’t sand on the floor!

Now, you take the wardrobe and bedside cabinet, Tills. I will go through this writing bureau and the chest of drawers over there.”

Opening the unnecessarily ornate wardrobe, Tilley found a Royal Navy uniform with the rank and insignia of a lieutenant, neatly hung up. She removed her coat and dropped it onto the bed then slipped on the uniform jacket, her hands darting into the pockets as she did so. “He seems to be of a small build, our missing sailor—he mustn’t get invited to too many lavish dinners. A skinny chap, I imagine.”

Isidore turned around from where she was seated at the writing bureau. “You should be careful, your captain friend might think you want to join them on another long voyage!”

“You are connected with a captain in the navy?” Runce enquired from his position at the door.

Tilley laughed. “No, Isidore is being—I will be polite—playful. Several years ago I went on a voyage to Ceylon and back, on a clipper ship. It was...an experience as they say.”

Runce nodded then took out and opened a regulation Scotland Yard note book. “I haven’t needed to use one of these for a good many years. Useful little thing; I made what I hope are pertinent notes before I left for Bristol this morning.” He stepped away from the door, making sure it was still closed as he did so.

“The man we believe we are looking for is one Charles Fraiser. He is aged 24 and went through the Royal Naval College at Greenwich, passed his lieutenant exam after some years at sea, and was regarded as very promising and likely to progress. However, on receiving his royal commission and becoming a lieutenant, he seems to have lost his way somewhat or at least ambition. This is probably the navy way of saying, he was not up to the job. Indeed, his previous captain recommended the transfer to what is now the Navy’s Intelligence Division—at that time it was still part of the Foreign Office. Perhaps a means of getting rid of him? It seems whilst Fraiser is considered bright, he is less than competent at navigation—something of a prerequisite on a ship one would imagine...”

Isidore nodded in an abstract way at Runce’s words, more interested in the envelope she had discovered at the back of the small middle drawer of the writing bureau. She opened the envelope and removed the card inside, smiling as she did so.

“Ah, mes amis, voila!” Isidore held up the card.

Runce took the card, read the address and frowned. At the same time, Tilley pulled out a railway timetable from the wardrobe. As she flicked through the pages, a handbill advertising English Channel paddle-steamer crossings, dropped to the floor.

“Well,” Tilley said, looking from Runce to Isidore, “What do we have here? An advertisement for Channel crossings and a railway timetable with train times from Victoria Station to Dover heavily marked in pencil on let me see; Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays.”

“And we have a card here with an address in Paris.” Isidore looked at Tilley then Runce. “I think we may know where our man is heading.”

Runce looked thoughtful. “It seems very easy, does it not. All rather convenient; we just stumble across all these clues.”

“Clearly, Uncle, they were too easy for Williams to fail to stumble across. I would say these clues fall firmly into the class of carelessness rather than deliberate obfuscation. What do you say, Tilley?”

Tilley agreed. “It seems he may have been a little hasty in his departure, if not forgetful. There is a smart leather travelling case containing a razor, shaving and hair

brushes as well as other toilet requirements, in the wardrobe. From the feel and quality I would say it is most certainly not cheap.”

Runce said nothing. Inspector Williams had assured him he had thoroughly searched Fraiser’s room—perhaps he had done so with his eyes closed. “Very well. We have lost much time. Are the two of you prepared to follow Fraiser to France? Although I fear we may be the last ones to the ball.”

Isidore took the small card back from Runce. “Beneath the address it states, *Monday 17 October—one week*. I don’t think whoever is meeting Fraiser agreed a set date. It seems they have allowed some latitude.”

She looked again at the small envelope the card had been in. On the inside flap of the envelope was scribbled *Oberst TVP* next to a tiny stick man with what looked to be a pistol pointed at the head. Isidore passed the envelope to Runce.

“Clearly *Oberst* is a German army rank and perhaps *TVP* the person’s initials? This stick man with a gun to his head—do we take this to be Fraiser and how he views his situation?”

Tilley peered over Runce’s arm at the envelope. “Perhaps that is what he wants to do to whoever this *TVP* is? I mean, why does he need to take these plans or blueprints to Paris? Could he not pass them to the buyer here in London? Much less fuss.

I assume it is a money thing and not because this Fraiser chap has German sympathies?”

“A very valid point, Tilley.” Runce handed the envelope back to Isidore then turned and opened the door, he’d guessed either Barrington-Smyth or the steward would be stood up against the door, craning their ears. He was not disappointed as the startled bursar almost fell into the room.

“Ah, Bursar. Can you tell me if Fraiser had any visitors recently, either to his room here or the club generally?”

The bursar distractedly adjusted his dark grey frock coat—a coat which had been worn by the last two holders of the bursar post—let in or out as the post-occupier’s build required.

“No visitors to his room that I am aware of.” He turned to the steward and cast an enquiring eye. The steward shook his head. The bursar continued.

“However, last year, I believe, he was caught trying to smuggle out a—” the bursar gave a little cough, “A lady of the night, if you will. Presumably he had been more

successful at getting her into the club. Beyond that, no; no visitors or guests. However, but no, the man was not visiting Fraiser as such.”

“Please, elucidate, we will be the arbiters of any relevance.” Runce indicated for the bursar to proceed.

“The man claimed to be his uncle and settled Fraiser’s outstanding club bill. In fact, he left him slightly in credit.”

“Was there anything that stood out about this man? Is it usual for family members to settle outstanding bills?” Isidore gave the bursar a piercing look.

“From time to time, a member’s family will settle an outstanding amount. But this tends to be when the club member has departed for the higher realms.”

“You mean died?” This from Tilley.

Barrington-Smyth nodded.

“And what of this uncle you mentioned?” Back to Runce now.

The bursar gave a little grimace. “These are delicate, confidential matters.”

“So is the security of the Empire. Silence my dear Barrington-Smyth, can be taken as culpability and collusion. Would you like to escort me back to Scotland Yard?”

The bursar put up his hands as if trying to deflect Runce’s cold stare. “No, please, I apologise. The uncle was Prussian. Very mannered, of a military bearing but not in uniform; in a very fine tailored morning coat. Fraiser told me the man he was his uncle, on his mother’s side. He did not divulge the man’s name. Will that suffice?”

Runce nodded and told the bursar he could go but as the man turned to leave, Runce grasped his shoulder halting him. “My apologies; do you have a telephone in your office? I suddenly feel a need to consult with someone.”

Barrington-Smyth gave a curt nod. “If you will follow me...”

Sensing her uncle was on to something, Isidore pushed the small card and envelope into her pocket, picked up Tilley’s coat from the bed and guided her toward the door. On the door’s threshold, the steward who had accompanied Barrington-Smyth, removed the uniform jacket from Tilley with a brusque, “Thank you, madam.”

Isidore and Tilley loitered in the club’s foyer while Runce disappeared alone into the bursar’s office. Some minutes later he emerged a smile on his face.

“Ladies we are off to Rules Restaurant for a little bit of supper and a meeting with a representative of Her Majesty’s Foreign Office.” Runce beckoned over the doorman, slipped a coin into his hand and instructed him to get a cab.



**Chapter Seven**  
The Candle in the Mirror

Rules Restaurant  
Pall Mall  
London

Late evening  
Friday 14th October 1887

Upon their arrival at Rules Restaurant; Runce, Isidore and Tilley, divested of their coats, were guided by a waiter through to a quiet table at the rear of the restaurant.

A well-proportioned man, his hair and mutton-chop whiskers silvered with age but neatly trimmed, sat with his back to a wall; on seeing Runce he got to his feet and extended a welcoming hand.

“My dear boy. It has been far too long. Your telephone call was a ray of joy in what has thus far been a...” He paused noticing Isidore and Tilley. “...rather tiring day. There, how’s that for politeness!”

Runce took the man’s hand then introduced Isidore and Tilley. “This is Robert Currie, a distinguished member of the Foreign Office, and a very old friend for whom I have not devoted enough time of late.”

Currie gestured for the three to seat themselves. “You make me sound rather grand, dear boy. I am afraid I am only an under-secretary to the actual under-secretary of the Foreign Secretary. If one wanted to be vulgar, one might say I was within spitting distance of the levers of, if not power, then foreign policy matters. Sadly, I am more devoted to gastronomy than a high-flying career.”

Runce relaxed into a chair and smiled. “I almost telephoned the F.O. before remembering it was more likely you would be here rather than toiling the evening away over dusty files.” His face then turned quite serious. “We have come as I briefly outlined on the telephone, to discuss a rather delicate matter. My niece, Isidore, and her assistant, Tilley, have been engaged by Scotland Yard—”

Currie tapped the table and put a finger to his lips causing Runce to look around, suspecting someone was eavesdropping.

“Let us order and eat first, get some sustenance into our grey matter. Plenty of time for discussion afterwards. Fortunately, I had yet to place my order when your telephone call came through. I thought it only polite to await your arrival.

I would recommend starting with the soup, then the always excellent beef and oyster pie and something sweet and decadent to finish. Unless of course, ladies, you would prefer something lighter, fish perhaps? If so I recommend a bottle of Cabinet Steinberger.”

Currie looked around the table.

“I see, no takers for fish? In that case, pie all round and...” He gave a little chuckle, “...a bottle or three of Bordeaux? Or perhaps a good burgundy, something with a bit of weight, yes? I suggest an 1864...”

Ahh, a hard crowd to please, eh? No takers or enthusiasm for burgundy? Disappointing. Bordeaux it is then, shall we say 1870 from the time of the Franco-Prussian war? But most definitely well before 1880 when pesky insects ate the vine roots.”

The meal and ready supply of 1864 Bordeaux was consumed if not in complete silence then lightly peppered with small talk. Half-way through the main course, Isidore whispered to Tilley, “By the end of this meal, this will be the most either of us has eaten for several days!” Tilley, in a cycle of chewing and swallowing, could only nod in agreement.

As soon as the meal was over and the table cleared, Runce took out his regulation notebook while Currie, having also devoured Isidore and Tilley’s left-overs, leaned back and surreptitiously loosened the bottom two buttons of his waistcoat. He gave a sigh of satisfaction then summoned a waiter and ordered a carafe of aerated water.

“I have come to find a glass of this wondrously fizzed drink to be the perfect digestive.” Currie smiled at Isidore and Tilley. “I will admit,” he continued, “it is a desired taste much like the spa waters of Bath and Lourdes. The restaurant kindly gets it in for me. I usually dine here a good three times week, sometimes more if I am able. Always here at the back out of sight and free from the choking cigar munchers at the front of the restaurant.” He raised his right hand and tapped the wall behind him.

“Behind this wall is the kitchen. I often joke, I get to eat twice; once as I savour the delicious aromas emerging from the kitchen and a second time when my meal is served. Additionally, I am able to enjoy food that mere seconds before was in the

hands of the chef. Many a soufflé has collapsed because of too long a wait or extended walk to the table.” Currie sighed once more but this time in the way only someone who had watched a soufflé deflate in front of their eyes would understand.

“Shall we get started?” Runce opened his notebook and began to outline the case. After ten minutes he stopped and looked at Currie.

“You seem...”

Currie smiled. “Forgive me, I have been unkind. I am aware of the, shall we be delicate and say, misplaced documents? I thought if I let you continue your elucidation—” Currie stopped and waved a hand. “It matters nought though.

We in the F.O. were made aware through corridor whispers, nothing official obviously, of the *misplacement* on Tuesday morning. It seems the Navy or rather their intelligence division became aware late Monday afternoon of the absence of the documents. Needless-to-say they decided to keep the matter *quiet*.” Currie dropped his voice to utter this last word then continued.

“But as in all things, as you will appreciate, word gets out. As far as the F.O. is concerned, this is a Navy matter.” He stopped for a moment before adding.

“It is somewhat ironic that while the Navy Intelligence Division was part of the F.O., nothing went astray, missing or otherwise. Now within mere months of becoming their own sovereign entity we have this...” Currie made a *there you are* gesture with his hands.

“I don’t believe there is more I can add beyond that. Clearly, hence your presence, Scotland Yard was called in by the Admiralty to investigate the matter.”

Runce closed his notebook but said nothing further, instead he looked toward Isidore.

Taking her cue, Isidore leaned forward. “We have made some progress; for instance we know the man’s name but you possibly already knew that? He also seems to have made contact with a Prussian—specifically it seems, a member of the German army rather than their diplomatic entourage and he has, I presume, taken steps to pass the documents on and—”

Runce suddenly interrupted Isidore and slapped a hand to his forehead. “What a lummox I am! It had completely slipped my mind. Before I telephoned you from the Redoubt Club, Robert, I decided on a long shot to telephone the Dover Harbour Board and after some difficulty, I managed to speak with the harbour master at Dover. Initially I had tried the London, Chatham and Dover Railway first but without success.

It may not particularly help us but, the harbour master informed me there were no steam ferry crossings to France on either Sunday or Monday due to stormy weather in the English Channel. Crossings did resume on Tuesday. However, because of the backlog of passengers, it is very possible our man did not get a crossing until either Tuesday evening or even Wednesday morning—we cannot guarantee that though.”

“You are losing me dear boy and girl. How are we now discussing non-crossings of the Channel?”

Tilley gave a slight cough. “If I may explain and fill in some gaps.” She glanced at Runce and Isidore who both nodded.

“The person who took the documents we are seeking, has erm, fled the country. In his room at the gentlemen’s club we found a railway timetable for the London-Chatman railway and an advertisement for steam ferry crossings to France. Isidore also came across a blank calling card, on which was noted the address of a church in Paris. We therefore decided, no deduced, he was taking the documents to Paris to sell or pass on.”

Currie looked at Runce. “I can see why Scotland Yard has chosen to enlist the services of these two admirable women.”

Runce gave the merest flicker of a smile, silently ruing once more the hapless Inspector Williams and his inability to find let alone piece together any clues. “We thank you, Robert. However, it is this last part I thought pertinent to discuss with you.”

“Visiting Paris? It has been many a year since I last trod the boulevards, dear boy. Ah, être jeune et gay à Paris. J’ai été profondément touché.” Currie looked wistful a contented smile spreading across his face. “Sadly, all I have now is my enjoyment and indulgence of food. Oh to be young again and carefree in Paris.”

“Quite, indeed. We do though feel, Robert, there is still a slim opportunity of recovering the documents. Isidore and Tilley are therefore intending to leave for Paris soonest. We, they, would like some advice...” Runce lowered his voice. “There is this seemingly Prussian involvement.”

Currie took a long drink of his fizzed water. “I believe I understand what you are hinting at. As you ladies are not, strictly speaking representing Her Majesty’s Imperial Government, I do not foresee any immediate diplomatic complications from your side. However, you will have no formal recourse for assistance should things go awry. No *protection diplomatique* as they say. But, I can give you a name to contact in Paris—someone who owes me a favour or two and they will help in whatever way they are able, should the need arise.

Having said that, there may well be something bigger at play here: especially Charles as you now mention potential Prussian involvement. France and Germany are not on the best of terms. There are those in both governments who would welcome a state of warfare between the two nations.

Indeed, it was only in recent months France felt it had been, shall we say slighted, when one of its police inspectors was lured across the border by the Germans for a meeting and then arrested, accused of spying and gaoled! Things became very tense but aggression was avoided. Never-the-less this was quite the provocation!”

Currie adjusted his seating, feeling the fizzed water bringing on an eruption. He held a napkin to his mouth and disguised the burp as a cough.

“Dammit, dear boy. Please, my apologies, ladies. But these waters you are entering are very murky: we could be here for some time. I therefore take it none of you will object to port and cheese? Aerated water is fine, it does what it does but it does not inspire one to wax upon complex matters. For you ladies, perhaps you would prefer chablis? I believe it pairs well with most cheeses.” Currie briefly paused and as there was no descent, called over a waiter and ordered a selection of cheeses as well as port and chablis.

For the next hour, fortified by port and selected cheeses, Currie explained recent French political and diplomatic machinations beginning with the German humiliation of France in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, the subsequent German occupation and the consequent collapse of the Second French Republic. Adding to the French misery was the announcement of the founding of the German Empire in of all places, the Palace of Versailles!

Well, if that wasn't a slap across the face to the French, Currie said, he didn't know what was. Then there were the massive bank vault emptying reparations demanded by the German Empire and so on...

Eventually, as Currie took pause and suggested further port, Runce demurred saying Isidore and Tilley needed to be alert and rested for their journey to Paris.

“Quite right, dear boy, quite right. I do sometimes get carried along in the rush of things. Let me summon a waiter to arrange a cab for you. I myself will tarry a little longer and finish the remaining port. Now remember, ladies, the reflection of a candle flame in a mirror often obscures what one is trying to view—the eye is drawn to the flame rather than the object itself...”

Or in other words, this whole stolen document episode may just be a means of one side trying to rile the other. The German Empire saying to the French, we can act with impunity on your soil, we can even buy foreign secrets here. Or it could be the

French entrapping the Germans. In which case your fleeing traitor is an unwitting *agent provocateur*.” Currie nodded sagely, more to himself than anyone else.

He then got to his feet and bade Runce, Isidore and Tilley, “*Bonne soirée et bonne chance aux mesdames*.” He smiled warmly, gently shook hands and watched as the trio made their way out of the restaurant.

Settling back into his seat, Currie refilled his glass then catching the eye of a waiter, instructed him to invite a rather slim, well groomed young man sitting at the next table, over to join him.

“Ah, you have brought your own glass, half full I see.” Currie gave a little chuckle. The man reached out to help himself to some cheese but Currie gently tapped the back of the extended hand.

“One should always wait to be invited first, Guliford. Anticipation is everything, so they say.” Currie took a long sip of port and studied the man for a moment. “I take it you were able to listen in?”

The man, Guliford, nodded. “I was able to make out most of what was said. However, I felt you were engaging in...” he drained his glass and glanced at the almost empty bottle of port. “Shall we say, subterfuge?”

Currie poured the last of the port into his own glass. He studied his hands, not saying anything, rubbing his thumb into the palm of first one hand then the other. Guliford was his protege, his willing accomplice in all things Foreign Office. If Currie described himself as the under secretary to the under secretary then Guliford was the office junior’s junior. Two made-up titles if ever there were any. In reality theirs was a clandestine world where murk was their stock-in-trade.

“I would hardly call it subterfuge, my boy, I gave my honest opinion. A reasonably truthful summation of the current situation and also someone to contact should they need assistance.”

Guliford smiled and beckoned a waiter over. “Shall we indulge in coffee?”

Currie nodded. “Yes, the port is all gone and sadly, I am not sure my constitution will bear another bottle. Now, my little carnation, we do have a quandary. Everything I relayed to Runce and his ladies was correct.” He closed one eye and squinted up at the ceiling. “More or less...”

Should the French discover the German Empire is using their country as a forwarding address, I imagine they will be rather displeased. I fear it will not take much prodding for tempers to boil. Indeed I would suggest, since the Schnaebelé affair, tensions have been constantly simmering. Perhaps this is what the German Empire is hoping for...”

Guliford said nothing while their coffee was being served. As soon as the waiter had moved away he smiled knowingly. “You’ve already informed the French, haven’t you?” He leaned back, watching for a satisfied smile to flicker across Currie’s face but none was forthcoming. “You have your whist face on. Has tonight just been about tactical deception?”

Currie tutted and pushed his coffee cup to one side. “I have not informed the French. Just yet. It would serve us better to regain that which was stolen. There are other games we can engage in to rile our continental cousins. Any contretemps between France and Germany, that we do not get sucked into, can only be to our benefit.

Now, I must beat a retreat. My bed will have been turned down and my night cap readied. You are welcome to join me...”

Guliford watched Currie get unsteadily to his feet. A good night cap would likely send the man straight to sleep. He inwardly sighed. The things he did for his career.

~~~~~

~ **Interval** ~

The song of Tilley

*Tilley was a poor girl
Some called her a wretch;
Tilley put out for men
Tarrying on corners for a whirl.
To her their desires did they fetch
And for coin she always gave a good time,
Giving up her treasured pearl.*

Tilley liked to say she was brought up in a house but came of age on the street. It was an easy throw away comment that told little and hid much.

All had seemed pleasant in Tilley’s early life until her father, a soldier in the British army and part of the force that was known as the British Expedition to Abyssinia, was lost in one of the battles to defeat Emperor Tewodros of that nation. Somewhat disparagingly afterwards it was said the country of Abyssinia had,

“no seaboard...consequently, no cities or forts to bombard...nor...vessels to attack, and no commerce to appropriate.”

Such is the arrogance of the British Empire.

Abyssinia: a nation so lacking in perceived western imperialist basics, the mighty British Empire would not have lowered itself to militarily engage had it not been for the British hostages Tewodros had taken... In short, excepting this, Abyssinia would not have been worth a second glance. And yet in this foray to an inconsequential nation, British soldiers were seriously injured and died.

When Tilley's father didn't return home from Abyssinia and was declared missing without trace, presumed dead, Tilley's mother took to standing outside the entrance gates of his regiment's barracks every day—hoping against hope he would emerge and throw his arms around her. After three months, she finally accepted he was not coming home and there would be no grave only a prayer in their local church to protect and guide his immortal soul into God's embrace.

After that everything changed. Tilley's mother took to gin to dull the pain of her loss, neglecting Tilley and her two younger siblings. There had almost been four of them but poor Little Albert as he would have been called had been still born just two weeks before Tilley's father left for Abyssinia. Tilley's mother would sob into her pillow at night, crying out, "Oh Lord free me from this torment." Melodramatic, yes, but then that was the gin

In the story Tilley told, it wasn't so much the Lord who eased her mother's torment and offered kind words as the gin. But in her gin stupors, Tilley's mother did indeed swear she heard the Lord speak to her, flattering and encouraging her. Until he stopped and began to admonish her. To block out His voice she drank more.

Barely on the cusp of ten and with an incapacitated mother and two siblings to clothe and feed, Tilley took a job at the local bakery. The baker wouldn't apprentice her—he'd happily take on a lad or boy apprentice but not a girl; she could fetch and carry, sweep the floor and make deliveries of morning rolls for middle-class households to partake with their breakfast. Fourteen hours a day, six days a week toiling for the bakery and then home to tender, nurture and provide for her brother, sister and mother.

After six months, Tilley was run ragged; not just with working but looking after and caring for her younger siblings—both under the age of seven—and also her mother too who was firmly in the grip of a wasting gin addiction and whose life was little more than a cycle of drinking to incapacity and sleeping. Often Tilley couldn't tell if her mother was truly asleep or just comatose from gin.

Desperate as she was and seeing no end to the plight the family was in, Tilley wrote to her mother's brother: could he, would he, help them or even take them in?

Tilley's uncle was a Methodist lay preacher and involved, as were most Methodists, in the Temperance Movement. He lived in Cornwall where he had a regular preaching circuit. Once a year, his ministry permitting, he would visit his sister, Tilley's mother. During his last visit all had been well, Tilley's father still alive and yet to embark for Abyssinia and Tilley's mother far from the gin oblivion she would consign herself into.

A week after sending the letter, Tilley wrote again. Within days of sending this second letter, Tilley's uncle, smartly dressed and tall, was standing at their door. However, if Tilley was hoping for deliverance there was none. Her uncle told her in forthright terms to lock her mother in a room and leave her to purge her (alcoholic) demons.

"Give her nought but milk and bread for a week. If by then she is purged of her want, I will return. Otherwise, there are asylums aplenty willing to accept drunken wretches. In the meantime I will take your brother and sister to live with me. This abode is no place for children. If you assign your mother, my sister, to an asylum (he could not countenance to say her name) you will be welcomed into my home."

And that was that. He left some money and a pamphlet he had published on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as it was known; extolling the values, as laid out by Methodist founder John Wesley, of scripture, tradition, reason and experience. The four tenets by which one should live.

Tilley cried, how she cried after her brother and sister left and the door closed. But she did as her uncle suggested and locked her mother in a bedroom but next morning found the door open and her mother slumped across the kitchen table, having managed to break the bedroom door's lock, find the money Tilley had put aside for rent and spend it on gin.

Try as Tilley might, she could not purge her mother of her addiction and so she tried to control it and bring her mother to a point where she could be relied upon to undertake simple tasks. The gin drinking never ceased though. Some weeks were worse than others. At times Tilley would find her mother begging in the street, at other times she would pester customers outside and inside the bakery for money. The third time this happened, Tilley lost her job...

To sustain herself and her mother, Tilley gained a cleaning job in a local brothel. The hours were shorter and less arduous than the bakery. But for such a young soul, it was an eye opener even if Tilley was only ever in the brothel on a morning when the *staff* as the brothel owner liked to call her ladies were sleeping.

It took several years for Tilley's mother to succumb to the effects of gin, longer than Tilley had imagined and indeed, there was a time when Tilley thought her mother, having imbibed so much gin over the years, had pickled herself and would just go on

forever—despite her alcohol ravaged features, lost teeth, slurred words and addled brain. Even in that condition and when her mother dragged them both down into the lowest of low melancholic troughs, Tilley could not bring herself to consign her mother to an asylum.

By the time she was fifteen, Tilley had moved from brothel cleaner to earning her keep on street corners; a doyen of the five-finger pull, the thigh job and other tricks she had learned, been taught or discovered during her brothel time—Tilley was coached in and soon became adept in the ways to avoid pregnancy; most men, she found, especially with the thigh job, were ignorant of female anatomy and thought they were paying for and getting something they were not. Tilley was also picky about whom she gave her favours to...

Eventually Tilley moved on from the world of prostitution—she was a lucky one; some women, women that Tilley knew, were trapped in the cycle bound by their addictions or society's judgement.

For her next venture, Tilley began taking in washing from sailors arriving ashore. She didn't do the washing herself but found some washerwomen to launder the clothes. Once clean, Tilley would tie up the clothes in brown paper, add a label with the sailor's name and ship and then return the bundle. She always made sure to collect payment before the clothes were laundered—all too often sailors returned to their ships after being ashore all spent up.

Tilley's mother fell into the Lord's care on the day Tilley turned sixteen. She didn't cry, it was a blessing, a release.

Half-a-dozen years later, Tilley was making ends meet with her laundry business—until the evening she was attacked. Two youths had been watching her and wrongly thinking she received payment on returning the laundered bundles, made their move.

Tilley was first accosted, pinned against a wall then a knife used to cut open her bodice. One of the youths exclaiming, "Slash open her corset. I bet that be where she got her stash."

Finding nothing except Tilley's affronted dignity, the two youths knocked her to the ground and set about laying into her with their boots. They only relented and made off when they heard the shot of a pistol ring out, followed by the rasping voice of Cap'n Marian offering to, "Put enough lead in your arses you'll be good for nowt 'cept ship ballast!"

Tilley was bruised, bloodied; almost knocked senseless. Somehow Cap'n Marian, a slightly-built sailor if ever there was one, managed to get her back to their ship, the Bristol Paquet. Funnily, as Tilley would remark several days later when feeling better

but still not fully recovered, the Paquet was where she had been headed with the laundered package...



Isidore's Version

*Isidore was a looker;
Isidore was a shocker
Who throw away all that was given
For an unnatural roll in the hay.
Isidore was just
A societal mocker*

If Isidore regarded herself as anything it was a re-inventor—although she doubted the word *re-inventor* actually existed. That as well as other things, she would muse to herself, was not included in the shortened academic education she had received...

Isidore had been born into wealth, not the sort of aristocratic wealth her father craved and invested time and money in attempting to secure—the closest he had got, excluding his attempts at securing such by marriage—was a second cousin twice removed who had married a minor relation of the Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, sometime in the previous century.

Isidore's life beyond the death of her mother when she was barely ten, had been reasonably comfortable up until the point she began, as her father termed it, flitting from school to school, mostly so-called 'finishing schools' aimed at polishing and refining etiquette and social graces and instilling those cultural rituals so beloved and demanded of the upper-classes.

In Isidore's own words this flitting from school to school was always the result of her "...being attracted to another girl, and consequently her indiscretions discovered and exposed."

Isidore's father labelled her a serial committer of unnatural acts and eventually decided a European school would be the answer.

This always made Isidore smile whenever she related it. "...at least sur le continent, J'ai amélioré mon jeu, as they say and I restricted myself to," at this point she often giggled; "...head girls and French mistresses. Ah, Je suis l'arriviste!"

First she attended a school in Switzerland and it was there she fell hopelessly, uncontrollably and foolishly in love with the school's head girl: a gloriously witty,

never less than perfectly turned out aristocratic Austrian. They spent their nights entwined together until one morning, having overslept, they were discovered and shamed. Naturally, an Austrian of aristocratic birth must surely have been lead astray by a low born outsider from a newly moneyed, by heritage-steeped aristocrat standards, family.

Isidore's father was not impressed to say the least. This shame Isidore was bringing could dampen his aristocratic aspirations—these were now two-pronged: displaying a believable unbroken lineage from previously said second twice removed Brunswick cousin and entrapping (his words) a down-at-heel (again, his words) dowager countess with whom he had recently struck up an *understanding*.

Unceremoniously and duly warned, Isidore was packed off to a somewhat lesser but no less expensive finishing school or *mädchenpensionat* in Germany. How fitting! Isidore had exclaimed silently to herself, further musing, was she was to be expected to devote her free time to securing the missing heritage link her father so-desired.

At her new school Isidore, as best as she was able, behaved herself or was at least the soul of discretion. She quietly railed against the school's teaching of the *separate spheres* doctrine of home, family and morality. The male sphere, taught only and exclusively in boys' boarding schools, seemed to Isidore to be little more than work, fun and play. Women toiled but men well, they just got all the interesting stuff. Often, quite literally, handed to them.

Then came the summer ball and the senior girls' graduation or as the school's French mistress called it, *Concours du Cheval de l'Année*. Isidore preferred the English, *Horse of the Year Show*, it sounded more vulgar. In reality, it was a chance for the soon to be former senior girls to meet and mingle with eligible young men from wealthy families who were in search of a suitable wife.

Isidore herself would be graduating the following year but she was already a year or two older than some of the current years' graduands. A late bloomer her father would call her when he was being polite. At other times he'd say, she was slow witted for a dullard and under his breath, held back because of her unnatural proclivities. He really never got over his only child being a girl.

Perhaps it was this, Isidore's additional year or two, less a girl and more a woman, that had attracted the eye of the young Prussian army officer—he certainly took an instant liking to her.

Outside on the wide balcony overlooking the school's grounds, he waxed lyrical about his attributes; his recent army promotion from *Fähnrich* or officer-cadet to *Sekondeleutnant*, his prospects beyond this and his impeccable breeding—he hadn't actually said that but Isidore had interjected and added it for him. He'd given her a

curious look then taken off his right glove and held her face in his hand, turning her head one way then the other.

“You have quite remarkable bone structure—clearly this demonstrates your own excellent breeding, hereditary traits. And you remarked in passing you have Prussian ancestry: Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel was it not? This all bodes very well.”

Isidore had found it hard not to guffaw at this. She had casually dropped into their conversation, prior to their moving to the balcony, that her father had distant Prussian links; the far off twice removed second cousin or whatever the connection was—yet it seemed enough to excite this young man, perhaps too much.

He lifted Isidore’s chin and leant in to kiss her, whispering as he did so, “Mein Schatz, wir werden entzückende kinder haben.”

“Children!” Exclaimed Isidore. “With you?” She took a step back and slapped the young Prussian across the face. “A real officer would not be so bold as to embarrass a lady.”

He felt his cheek and smiled. “You have spirit, my dear.”

At that moment Isidore’s French mistress stepped onto the balcony—she had been stood, listening behind the curtains of the balcony’s open doors. She slipped her hand around Isidore’s waist and began guiding her back inside. Turning to face the young Prussian as she did so, she remarked—

“It is not the accepted etiquette of this school, monsieur, for our girls to be unchaperoned. I would ask that you remember this if you are invited to return.”

Isidore smiled. “Your timing is impeccable as always, mademoiselle.”

The French mistress lightly caressed Isidore’s cheek. “I always endeavour to come at the right time.” She gave a little giggle. “Come, the evening is all but over.”

The young Prussian, unseen, had watched the interaction between Isidore and her French mistress and sensed what was passing between the two. Stealthily and at a discreet distance he followed them. That was quite the snub from the Englishwoman he thought to himself and one that required a suitable response...

“And that was how,” Isidore would scandalously tell anyone who enquired, “I came to be expelled from my second and final European finishing school—caught in flagrante delicto with the school’s French mistress. It wasn’t our first time but it was the first time we were discovered.”

The young Prussian officer had followed Isidore and the French mistress to the latter's rooms then, suspecting something transgressive was in the offing, reported his suspicions to the school's headmistress.

Isidore's father was informed the following day and three days later, Isidore was formally expelled from the school and to add to the misery, her father cut off all and any access she had to money. The little money she did have proved barely sufficient to get her as far as Paris and a cheaper than she was accustomed to, hotel room.

“After that,” a wicked smile forming across her face, Isidore would add, “I made ends meet by whoring myself. Quite the come down but by that time I had no money and very little self esteem left. Besides a letter from my father, received on the day I left the finishing school, told me I had shamed him for the last time and would now need to fend for myself.

After six months in Paris, I had made enough money to return to England. If I wasn't déclassé by then, I soon would be. I enrolled in the Pitman Secretarial School, learned all I needed and badgered my uncle who was quite high up in Scotland Yard, for a job.

Once installed at the Yard I met Briggs, we took a shine to each other—nothing romantic we just got on particularly well and he began to request me to write up his reports and then help him in very general terms with the odd case.

When Briggs was fatally wounded while attempting to recapture an escaped convict, I decided to do what the pair of us had always joked about: leave Scotland Yard and open a detective consultancy. Oh yes, I also made a move from London to Bristol—a change of scenery is always good.”

And that was Isidore's potted history as she would relate, very succinctly, to anyone who cared to know.



Chapter Eight

The English Abroad

The First Englishman
Place du Louvre 1st Arrondissement
Paris

Saturday 15th October 1887
Mid Morning

The Englishman, Charles Fraiser, positioned himself outside the tall tower that stood betwixt the 1st arrondissement Town Hall or *Mairie* as it was in French and the church of St-Germain l'Auxerrois, and stared up at the belfry, the square shape of its ground and first floors changing to octagonal for the remaining...he rubbed his chin, what was it, a hundred feet? He nodded to himself, agreeing and then, as he had done the previous day, he entered the tower through its tall oak doors. And like yesterday, he found he was alone. He climbed the stairs to the first floor and looked out the narrow windows.

“Huh, so much for arrangements.” He lit a cigarette, noting the stub of his cigarette from yesterday still lay where he'd dropped and stamped it out. And as he had done yesterday, he walked from window to window until it was time to once again consign his cigarette stub to the floor, stamp it out and leave.

Outside the tower he glanced around, looking for the Prussian or perhaps someone who looked Prussian-like and may be... Oh, what was the point! He lit up another cigarette; perhaps he would take a stroll around the adjacent Louvre museum, consider what to do next. He was beginning to form the opinion he should have taken a long shot and offered the plans to the Austro-Hungarian navy or even, the Japanese! Let's face it, Japan was an island and must undoubtedly have a navy of sorts and imperial ambitions. He doubted if either of those two empires would have insisted on some convoluted exchange. Pedantic Prussians!

As he walked toward the Louvre, his head filled with perhaps this, perhaps that and even; why had he put himself in this position at all, beyond obviously money and debt, he caught a snippet of conversation. An artist had set up an easel and seemed to be rough sketching the belfry. The artist was speaking in accented English to a man standing next to him, a friend or fellow artist perhaps? They were both enjoying a joke.

“It was an American with his wife, looking for the church. It was on this very spot yesterday.” The artist related to his companion. “Do not ask me why, it's not as if it's hidden away. They must have been into the mairie, perhaps to ask where the church was? I watched them come out and walk straight into the beffroi, you know, the belfry, the tower. So I carry doing what I always do, idly sketching and they come out and the woman says,

‘Well, Honey, that's the smallest church I have ever been in. Don't they got no cathedrals in this city?’

I tell you, I nearly fell off my stool, I was laughing that much. I did though cough loudly and point with my pencil at St Germain. The man, l'Américain, starts waving his hand. ‘No, no, we don't want no portrait.’ And they hurried off. Takes all sorts, eh.”

Fraiser thrust his hands into his trouser pockets and spun around. How could he have been so stupid! There, to the right of the belfry, tower or whatever it was meant to be—mini church, architectural indulgence? There it was, the church of St-Germain l’Auxerrois: his place for meeting the Prussian or the assigned lackey. There, in front of his nose! In. Plain. Bloody. Sight! He had wasted his time standing around in a tower, befry, whatever that had nothing to do with the church.

He checked his pocket watch. Dammit! Too late. Tomorrow being Sunday was out so he’d have to try on Monday. He cursed silently and coarsely to himself. His brain was just not functioning. In his mind he was already cantering around his cowboy ranch in America. He was as focused as a broken naval telescope.



The Second Englishman
Place du Louvre 1st Arrondissement
Paris

Saturday 15th October 1887
Midnight

Hilary Guliford yawned loud and obviously; he was so tired he didn’t care who knew. He had been in Paris barely two hours; just long enough to first secure a hotel room—he quickly checked his jacket pocket and removed the hastily folded letterhead he’d torn from a piece of the hotel’s stationery: he knew without it, he would very likely forget where he was staying—then have a quick spruce up and a shot of much needed cognac. After that it was out the door and a short cab ride to, and not being a French speaker of even limited ability, Guliford completely mangled the name of the church.

Never-the-less the cab driver guessed the tired-looking Englishman meant St-Germain l’Auxerrois; he knew of no actual church by the name of *Saint Ger-mane Luxury*... So, he nodded, smiled and responded; “Monsieur, vous parlez français comme une vache espagnole. Un cadeau remarquable!”

Guliford, not understanding a word, had thanked the cab driver. He’d also tipped the man quite generously and foolishly forgot to tell him to wait the two minutes or less it took to traverse once then twice the length of the street outside the aforementioned *German church*, the adjacent belfry and town hall building.

“Well, this all looks straightforward,” Guliford muttered to himself, staring at the church and yawning once more. He gave a little shiver, more to do with tiredness and hunger than cold. Perhaps another cognac or two when he returned to the hotel would stave off the hunger pangs until breakfast time? He turned to his right and began to stride purposefully along the pavement.

Twenty-four hours ago he had been clambering into Robert Currie’s cab expecting, if the man didn’t immediately fall asleep, a night of well, he’d hardly call Currie an energetic lover—he was trying to relive his carefree days of *l’amour sur le continent*. Guliford knew that phrase well enough. In fact, Currie had taught him enough French phrases over the years, to ensure he’d never have a problem picking up a suitably inclined Parisian. Getting a hotel, cab or delivering directions not so much... Currie’s heart was in the right place, he was a good man and if there was one thing he liked more than food or the company of another man, it was *machination*.

On the hoof, as they made their way to his house in the cab, Currie had come up with a plan...

The blueprints, plans, designs or whatever Fraiser had stolen were not overly important Currie had said—copies were held and it was highly probable the Germans and to a lesser extent the French, would come across the same idea given time. Having these stolen documents would merely save them some pencil work; they would still need to construct, test and evaluate the thing.

“My fragrant carnation,” Currie had said to Guliford in the cab, “Just because one knows the ingredients of a soufflé, does not mean one can successfully make the dish! I imagine the same holds true for these blueprints as well.”

“They are blueprints then, rather than a plan or design?”

“Plans, designs, ideas, blueprints; they all amount to the same thing. But place that on one side for the moment. How would you like to take a little jaunt across the Channel to Paris?”

Guliford looked at Currie curiously—he knew him well enough to know when the man was cooking up something. “I thought Scotland Yard had tasked Runce’s niece and her companion with retrieving the whatever we are calling them?”

“I believe in the common parlance one refers to such female detectors as *petticoat searchers*. But yes, you are quite correct and yes again, before you bring the matter up, I am still toying with alerting the French—the things one must do at my age for excitement!”

Currie squeezed then caressed Guliford’s thigh. “Sadly my flower, my brain is working overtime. We will need to forego our embrace of passion for this night...”

Robert Currie, the under secretary to the under secretary of the Foreign Secretary, a made up title if there ever was one, had an idea. “Let traitor Fraiser deliver the plans, documents, whatever into the hands of the Germans, dear boy, but get hold of him first and offer him immunity, but only if he becomes not a traitor to the British Empire but an infiltrator into the German Empire. We can feed him suitable morsels to pass to them, nothing of any real import of course; distraction, obfuscation, downright lies, and he can let us know what they are up to. What say you, young Hilary?”

By now they had arrived outside Currie’s house. Guliford called up to the driver of the two-seat hansom cab, instructing him to circle slowly around the block.

“Do you think Fraiser will go for it. I mean, if we could get him to be even halfway trusted by the Germans...” Guliford paused. This was their stock-in-trade, he and Currie and their actual department—the Foreign Office was just a cover to mask what they really got up to.

“We have nothing to lose. The man has already stolen the goods as it were. It would be foolish of us if we didn’t at least try and salvage something. It would be like stealing a string of sausages from a pork butcher and not bothering to cook the blessed things!”

“I take it, Robert, you really do want me to go to Paris.”

Currie smiled, took out a small notebook and began scribbling away. “Charles Runce and his ladies were very forthcoming with what they had gleaned. I would go as far to say, the two young ladies are very adept. But yes, tomorrow Hilary get yourself off to Paris. Find Fraiser: hopefully before he passes on the goods and make him a suitable offer. Start with immunity and whatever the Germans are paying him we will match. He can return to Naval Intelligence or whatever they call themselves, with his record unsullied. We will smooth everything out. But he must insinuate himself with the Germans and become a reliable, viable conduit.”

“And if I am too late?”

Currie gave a little sigh. “The Seine is wide enough and deep enough, if you understand my meaning. Oh and, if I need to add, this does not invalidate anything I said regarding the potential for a conflict between the French and the Germans.”

And that was that Guliford thought to himself. Here he was, alone in Paris, tasked with finding a traitorous Englishman. Well, he could rule out the cab driver he had just used and the hotel staff he had come across thus far. So, only another two million or thereabouts Paris-dwellers to investigate! He let out a quiet chuckle then stopped dead in his tracks.

In his distracted meandering, Guliford had arrived at the banks of the River Seine or at least the retaining wall separating the street level from the lower cobbled level of the actual riverside of the Seine. Off to his left, in a rough ten o'clock position, the Pont Neuf bridge straddled the Île de la Cité, nestled in the midst of the river. Wrong direction he muttered to himself, about faced and began walking back in the direction of the *German church*. Apart from finding Fraiser the only other thing he needed to do, Currie had told him, was think of a plausible, believable, reason for Fraiser to give to the Germans as to why he was able to return to his position at Naval Intelligence and not be arrested, prosecuted or gaoled as a traitor.

Not too much then! Guliford sighed into the night.

The Englishwomen
Place du Louvre 1st Arrondissement
Paris

Saturday 15th October 1887
Half past Midnight

Isidore and Tilley sat in a cab parked on the Louvre side of what Isidore had termed a square, opposite the St Germain l'Auxerrois church. They had arrived in Paris tired and both had fallen asleep in their shared hotel room, perhaps for too long—Isidore had chosen a small but comfortable hotel, situated by her reckoning roughly halfway between the Gare du Nord train station and the place where Fraiser was to hand over to the Germans that which he had stolen.

Their hotel was a stones throw from the Gaîté-Lyrique theatre. Tonight the theatre was putting on an operetta. Isidore knew this because the hotel's concierge had asked if she required tickets. As keen as she was, she had to regretfully decline...

“Look, that same man is coming back. What do you think?”

Isidore watched the man walk confidently up to the church, hesitate then continue walking in a somewhat uncertain manner out of the square and turn left, disappearing into the Paris night.

“Monsieur, la Seine est-elle par là ?”

The cab driver leaned forward and opened the roof hatch, to see the direction Isidore was pointing.

“Oui, Madame, c'est tout près. Souhaitez-vous y aller maintenant?”

Isidore shook her head. “Non merci. Retournez à l’hôtel, s’il vous plaît.”

“You don’t think that was our man?” Tilley fingered the photograph she had surreptitiously removed from Fraiser’s room at the Redoubt Club.

“It’s hard to tell from this distance and especially with only sufficient light to be able to say, it was definitely a man and not a woman. A very distinctive gait though, did you notice?”

Tilley nodded, adding. “We could try and follow him, perhaps get close enough to see if he matches this photograph.” She gave the photograph, a head and shoulder portrait of Fraiser, a little wave.

Isidore thought for a moment then called up to the cab driver to follow in the direction of the man who had just walked down the street.

Sadly, whoever the man was or wherever he was headed was not to be revealed: he had completely vanished into the night.



Chapter Nine Take Me To Church

St Germain l’Auxerrois
Rue du Louvre
Paris

16th October 1887
Sunday morning

Isidore and Tilley had timed their arrival at St Germain l’Auxerrois, the 13th Century church named after Saint Germanus, to fall comfortably between the end of the morning mass and well before the start of the afternoon one. Although, as Isidore had acknowledged, neither she nor Tilley being of Roman Catholic persuasion as she termed it, they had to rely on the information given by their hotel’s somewhat louche porter who was more enthusiastic about being able to get them into, for suitable recompense *naturellement*, the Café du Bagne—an establishment designed around the theme of a prison eating hall where the staff dressed as convicts—than knowing the precise times of masses. In his broken English the porter had exclaimed rather hyperbolically, “Le Bagne is the sensation of l’ age!”

Never-the-less, aiming to arrive at the church mid to late morning, Isidore and Tilley hoped it would be devoid of the faithful if not completely empty. Besides, a late start to the day allowed for a breakfast albeit light on food but heavy on coffee.

And so it came to pass, Isidore and Tilley stepped through the tall, heavy oak doors and into the narthex area of St Germain l'Auxerrois. In front of them stretched the long, wide nave of the church with its ribbed vaulting and pointed side arches. Then came the crossing or transept and choir areas as they were known, culminating in the curved apse at the far eastward end of the church. They glanced around, reassured they seemed to be alone, the church empty and for a moment the two stood motionless, their breath condensing in the cold air.

Tilley spoke first, almost in a reverential whisper. "Quite impressive. Should we sing a chorus of *Nearer, My God, to Thee*?" She rubbed her hands together. "It has that typical church coldness: much colder in here than it is outside and outside is quite chilly!"

Isidore gave her a dig in the ribs. "That's how they get you; lulled into a sense of wonderment by their impressive architectural largesse. Guard your wits, Tills, otherwise by the end of our visit they will have you dressed up as a choirboy and swinging a thurible full of burning incense. And from that there will be no escape."

She slipped her arm around Tilley's and began to steer her toward a wooden bench over to their left, near the transept.

"Let's sit down and decide how we will wrest the documents from Fraiser tomorrow. Assuming that is, he hasn't already been here and made the handover."

Isidore looked around: St Germain l'Auxerrois had lost its pews during the revolution, likely broken up and used as firewood, when the newly established République Française embarked upon its campaign of dechristianisation and began to use churches, or at least the ones that were not completely destroyed, as little more than over-constructed barns to either store grain and food, or as *Temples de la Raison*—places where reason, liberty, and revolutionary ideals could be spouted, debated, discussed and promoted. Often as not the former churches were used as both.

In place of the pews, Isidore observed, and doubtless rather than go to the expense of having new ones made, once Napoleon Bonaparte had agreed a Concordant with the Pope in 1801, effectively re-christianising the country; St Germain provided instead of pews, simple, unadorned wooden chairs and a few scattered benches.

Unquestionably, Isidore determined as she adjusted herself, the new seating was as equally and as essentially uncomfortable as the original pews had no doubt been. All the better for ensuring the congregation does not *s'endormir* or nod off!

“It’s no good,” Tilley muttered, interrupting Isidore’s silent meditative ruminating. “I can see you squirming about and now I have to stand up and start moving around. I fear if I do not, I am sure I will become petrified like Lot’s wife and hoar frost, if not actual white frost will begin forming on me!” She got to her feet and began striding back and forth. “Why don’t they have fireplaces in churches?”

Isidore grinned. “Lot’s wife was petrified for having a cheeky look behind her.”

Tilley tutted and poked her tongue out at Isidore. “I never look behind for fear of tripping over!”

“Good retort, Tills. I think the Church believes fervent prayer is meant to keep you warm. Besides, if churches had fireplaces, it wouldn’t be long before some manic preacher in the throws of an ecstatic revelation would want to start casting heathens into it!”

“You’ll get no praying out of me, Izzy!” Tilley would have said more except the large oak entrance door of the church opened and a man, dressed in a warm-looking overcoat and Homburg hat entered. Tilley plonked herself heavily back down on the bench next to Isidore.

“A visitor. Pretend we are praying. But not too hard in case we start glowing!” Isidore bowed her head while at the same time trying to watch the man askance.

“He’s looking around, taking things in. Wait, he’s coming this way.”

The man in the Homburg hat walked up to Isidore and Tilley, raised his hat barely a finger width above his head and delivered in appallingly poor, stilted French;

“Bonny journey, two.”

Isidore looked up at the man, her face displaying what she hoped was a French expression of puzzled bemusement. He looked so obviously awkward in that peculiar Englishman abroad way.

“Ah, monsieur, vous êtes anglais, n’est-ce pas ?”

Homburg man, as Isidore now named him in her head, shrugged and raised his hands trying to express in a non language mangling way that he did not understand.

“La messe va bientôt commencer.” Isidore pointed toward the seats in neatly arranged rows off to her right.

There was no reply from the man. He merely raised his hat again, turned and began walking out of the church.

Isidore turned to Tilley and whispered. “He’s the one from last night. The man we saw outside here. He has the same walk. Look, his left leg swings out slightly. Probably an old injury or infirmity.”

“He’s not leaving, Izz, look, he’s sitting himself down on the end chair in the back row. Do you think he’s going to block our exit?”

At that moment the oak entrance door of the church opened again and another man entered. This man however seemed quite different; very confident in himself.



A Man Who Walked Into A Church

Prior to his entrance, Guliford had stood outside the *German church* as he termed it and adjusted his Homburg hat and gave the front of his overcoat a smoothing down. Neat and prim and proper before the gaze of God. He allowed himself a satisfied smirk; The Lord, Our God loves a sinner... Taking a deep breath for he knew not quite what to expect, he opened the heavy oak door and stepped inside.

Standing with his back to the door he took in the interior. Mildly impressive he thought. Some nice architectural details but nothing he couldn't find in England: York Minster, Wells, Salisbury, Durham cathedrals; all grander. He then noticed two women sat on a bench halfway between the front row of chairs and the transept. There was no one else in the church that he could see. Perhaps they were here to pray? He momentarily stared at the two women and was quite suddenly struck with a thought and wondered, were they the same women he had eavesdropped on in the restaurant in London? He had a strange hunch, a feeling in his gut that they were. Of course, he hadn't got a proper look at their faces then but if he heard them speak? Yes, that may help him decide. But just in case they were French, he would use one of the phrases Currie had provided him with, something innocuous and not the one Currie had said never failed him in securing a night of illicit passion. The man was incorrigible.

He took out his pocket notebook and picked out the phrase, *Bon journée à toi*. That seemed a fairly neutral phrase, *Good day to you*, and should bring some sort of response.

Guliford slowly approached the two women, lifted his hat but a fraction and said, in the way a schoolboy reading from the classroom blackboard would attempt in his very first French lesson, “Bonny journey, two.”

Whatever the woman said to him, he didn't understand. He opened his mouth to utter the phrase again but changed his mind. Instead he gave his hat another slight lift, turned and was about to walk out of the church when he noticed the door begin to slowly open. He quickly but smoothly seated himself in the nearest chair—the end chair of the back row. Instinctively he pulled his hat down at the front.



Another Man Who Walked Into A Church

There were better things to do on a Sunday in Paris than visit a church in-between masses. He had tried explaining this but the answer was, Nein! It was imperative, it was put to him, to continue to surveil the church, inside and out.

“But Mein Oberst...” he had protested. “Der Engländer ist ein No-Show.”

At this point his commanding officer, a Prussian, provisionally appointed diplomatic attaché to Paris, had raised his voice. “Enough of these colloquialisms you have picked up from damned knows what street corner in London. If you continue to import them into your language, I will ensure you are returned to Bavaria and the chicken farm you clucked your way out of, let alone be free to roam around Piccadilly Circus!”

At this stern rebuke, the cowed Hauptmann beat a retreat from the provisionally appointed diplomatic attaché's office. Only once outside and the door firmly closed behind him did he feel able, if only in his head, to scream, “It was my uncle's chicken farm, verdammter wichser!”

And that was how Hauptmann Heinrich Müller found himself entering the church of St Germain l'Auxerrois late Sunday morning. To him it seemed obvious, if the Englishman hadn't turned up yet he had likely got cold feet or been caught and arrested by the British. In his head, he imagined dressing down Herr Oberst, the provisionally appointed diplomatic attaché to Paris; “You instructed him in the note you gave him in London, not to attend the church on Sunday! Dummkopf!” Did the man not take heed of any of the instructions he issued?

Still, he was here now. Best get it over: a quick stroll in and out, just to say he had complied with the order.

Müller entered the church and glanced around; two women on a side bench up toward the transept on his left, a solitary man over to his right, occupying a chair in the back row. No one else, not even a priest.

Müller strode confidently up to the transept where there was a small alter with an ornate crucifix. He crossed himself and with his head bowed stood motionless for a

minute as if in prayer. He was however, listening intently to pick up any utterances from the women or indeed the man; the creaking of bench or chair, the sound of footfalls to suggest movement. Hearing nothing he turned and glanced at the two women. Perhaps they were just here for confession? He looked down toward the man seated in the back row of chairs. He seemed out of place. That made Müller curious. Clearly the man was not a worshipper; he'd pulled down the brim of his hat obscuring his face. Hmm something to hide? *War das der Engländer?* Ah, *ja, ja, ja*. Could it be, for whatever reason or reasons he had been unable to attend the church until today and decided, as the English say, *on an off chance* to just turn up?

Müller slowly walked the ten metres or so to the back row of chairs, the click-clack sound of his heels following behind as he neared then reached the seated man.

Müller spoke softly. "Bitte?" He motioned to the vacant chairs next to the man.

The man looked up but the brim of his hat obscured his view of Müller's face. He removed his hat and took a sudden breath; *hard-hearted youth, whose lips would surely scorn a kiss...* My Adonis made flesh! Guliford's heart made a double beat as if it were a kettle drum. He closed his eyes momentarily then spoke.

"Bitter? Yes, it has turned rather cold. Quite unseasonal for the time of year, even if this is the approach of winter."

Müller was confused. Firstly, the man had mistaken *bitte* for *bitter*, an English euphemism for cold and secondly, secondly...English in this church and hiding his face under a hat until he, Müller, had initiated contact—very curious!

He cursed Herr Oberst, the provisionally appointed diplomatic attaché to Paris, again quietly in his head. Why did he not furnish him with a description of *der Engländer* or even a photograph! *Mein verbrannter strudel!* He would have said, *Mein Gott im Himmel!* But he was being mindful of his surroundings.

There was also more; thirdly; a code phrase had been agreed as an identifier; a phrase about unseasonal weather. This therefore must indeed be *der Engländer!*

Müller stepped past the now hatless man and seated himself one chair away and delivered the reply to, *Quite unseasonal for the time of year*; "Yes, I am wearing my winter coat."

Guliford smiled. Who needed Currie's phrases, he thought—picking someone up in a church! He imagined Currie had never been that bold. He swivelled slightly to face the man. Good-looking, no, extremely handsome; sand-coloured hair, fine cheek bones and a perfectly tailored suit. Guliford, the hatless man, leaned in close. He could not pass this moment by.

“Might one invite one for drinks somewhere; perhaps a little light lunch? My hotel is but a short cab ride from here.”

Müller’s eyes were sparkling. He felt almost intoxicated. Here was a chance to obtain the coveted secrets and deliver them, *fait accompli*, not to Herr Oberst, nein, but instead to the Großer Generalstab, the Chief of the General Staff, in Berlin! Aching, Herr Oberst, *achtung!* He, Müller, would claim the reward. Glory, promotion, perhaps even a medal and dare he dream, posted as the new diplomatic attaché to Paris! *Mein Gott, die Ekstase!*



The Third Man Who Walked Into A Church

Fraiser was tired, hungover too and at some point he had been sick down his shirt; his own fault for getting into a drunken argument during a game of cards. Luckily he had only taken a small amount of money with him. However, that lack of funds combined with a loss he was unable to cover, had resulted in a beating. At least they’d left his face alone and had tired after a several well placed punches and kicks. Still, he felt battered and bruised.

He pushed through the church door and slumped into the first chair he came to. Having gone to the tower next to the church twice, he thought he’d better get himself here today and check the damned place out. Tomorrow or maybe the day after was his last chance of meeting with the Prussian or whoever was sent along. Hell, he needed that money.

Two men seated at the opposite end of the row he’d chosen gave him rather disparaging looks. Not wishing to disappoint, he pulled out a grubby handkerchief and loudly blew his nose, grinning as he did so. Next he took out a dented hip flask, raised it up toward the altar in salutation and took a long swig. Wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, he called out, in heavily English accented French,

“Où est le prêtre? Je veux confesser mes péchés!”

Müller leaned his head close to Guliford’s. “Perhaps we should take this as our signal to depart. He demands a priest as if he were demanding more wine in Bremerhaven hurenhaus!”

Guliford gave a curt nod and got to his feet.

Fraiser let out a coarse guffaw. “Conscience weighing too heavy on you? Can’t wait for the priest, huh? Well, turn left out of the door and the Seine is straight-ahead. She’ll smother your guilt for you. Glug, glug, glug.”

Müller began to turn toward the unruly Englishman but felt Guliford's hand grip his arm and steer him away.

"Come, leave him to his drunkenness."

Müller cast a withering look at Fraiser then followed Guliford out of the church, still believing him to be the *Engländer* he sought.

At that moment a priest emerged from a door off to the side of the transept. He stopped in front of the crucifix on the small altar and crossed himself. He then proceeded to the confessional box situated against the wall, a bench length or so away from where Isidore and Tilley were sat.

Isidore got to her feet, straightened her clothing then rubbed her hands vigorously together. "Forget your hoar frost or white frost, Tills. I am sure if we sit on this bench any longer, we will both catch a chill!"

"Are you going to make use of the priest and confess your sins?"

"Not very likely, Tills, I think I have too many. Besides, I like to think you and I are modern women—we are spiritual rather than religious. Furthermore, I hate to say it but I believe that *admiral of the narrow seas* sprawled across the chair over there is none other than the hapless and much sought after, Lieutenant Charles Fraiser."

"Admiral of... Oh, you mean the spifflicated one. The drunk Just our luck." Tilley pulled out the folded photograph of Fraiser, studied it then showed it to Isidore, who nodded; the drunk was indeed the man they sought.

"What do we do now then?"

Isidore began to walk toward the slumped form of Fraiser; his arms now hanging limp at his sides, head tilted back and mouth wide open. Any moment now, she thought, he will begin snoring. She let out a sudden, ugh. She could smell alcohol and stale tobacco, the dark kind so beloved by the French, five paces from Fraiser and quite clearly he hadn't washed or changed in several days. She half turned and beckoned for Tilley to join her.

Together they got the malodorous drunk to his feet and awkwardly navigated their way out of the church and summoned a cab. Not unsurprisingly, the cabbie refused to take Fraiser. It was the same with the next cab and the one after that. However, the fourth cabbie said he would take all three of them, provided Fraiser did not sit in the middle—it was easier to wash vomit off the side of the cab than from the inside, he said. They would also need to pay a fare premium. Isidore agreed and, having taken Fraiser's wallet from his jacket pocket, there being no money left in it, handed the

driver the address of Fraiser's hotel, L'hôtel Mercure—the address helpfully displayed on a hotel business card tucked deep in his wallet.



Chapter Ten

L'hôtel Mercure

L'hôtel Mercure
Rue de Rivoli
Paris

16th October 1887
Sunday early afternoon

On arriving outside L'hôtel Mercure, Isidore asked the cabbie if, for an additional tip of course, he would assist in manoeuvring the comatose Fraiser out of the cab. The man agreed and aided by Tilley, Fraiser was delivered into the hands of two of the hotel's doormen who discreetly, as best they could, bore Fraiser into the grandly styled lobby of the hotel with its Palace of Versailles flourishes, ornate chandeliers, and luxurious carpets and placed the him in an armchair across from the hotel's reception desk—a desk sufficiently long enough to have easily doubled as the bar in Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, had the hotel management decided to lower their standards and begin selling beer and spirits in the lobby.

Tilley settled herself down next to Fraiser, in a chair more padded and comfortable than could ever be imagined by the seating providers of Saint Germain l'Auxerrois. Every so often she leaned toward Fraiser to close his mouth when it dropped open, lest he began snoring. Isidore meanwhile approached the reception desk and explained to the concierge, she needed to deliver Fraiser to his room in order to ready him prior to leaving for London. Therefore, she would need the key for the said room.

The concierge dithered seeming undecided or unable to decide, at least to Isidore. She felt he needed some encouragement and removing the letter of authority given to her by her uncle Charles Runce, empowering her to act for and on behalf of Scotland Yard, leaned over the reception desk and recited the letter to the concierge in French and then added by way of elucidation;

“Monsieur, permettez-moi de vous expliquer : Monsieur Fraiser est un criminel qui ourdit des plans machiavéliques en France.” She slowly nodded her head and repeated, “Des plans machiavéliques en France.”

The concierge muttered, “Machiavélique” and rolled his eyes as if a single day didn’t go by without him hearing of some unlikely scheme or plot. He smiled at Isidore and complimented her on her fluency with his native tongue. Usually the guests of the hotel, be they wealthy or just wealth adjacent, he explained, seemed to delight in butchering the French language in an... He stopped and smiled warmly.

“Non monsieur, c’est absolument vrai! We have had to sedate him very heavily, observe.” Isidore paused while the concierge squinted over at Fraiser. As he did so, Isidore glanced around the lobby of the plush Mercure; it hustled and bustled with if not money then at least the impression of wealth. Was that not part of the allurements of la belle époque? A gilded age which when scratched away revealed the same old deceit, hypocrisy and filth. My god, I need a cognac, Isidore thought. A bloody good dance too wouldn’t go amiss.

“Madame Detective,” the concierge gently touched Isidore’s arm—he’d seen this look before. “A lot to take in, n’est-ce pas? I quite understand.”

Isidore shook her head. “No, no, non, monsieur le concierge. It has been quite some time since I frequented the likes of these circles.” She cast her hand around the room. “Mais maintenant, je suis un enfant des sans-culottes..”

The concierge chuckled. Was this English wit? He didn’t know but he did know there was business to be resolved.

“Will Monsieur Fraiser be settling his account when he departs for London?” He had the room key in his hand, ready to pass on; he knew it would be better to have the man in his room, away from the hotel’s respectable guests. Out of sight, out of mind. But not out of pocket.

Isidore looked at the dishevelled Fraiser, his chin held up by Tilley. He seemed a discredit to traitors and a lightweight compared to serious drunkards. She turned back to the concierge.

“I am not entirely certain Mr Fraiser has sufficient funds to settle anything. I imagine he has amassed quite the debt during his stay here?”

The concierge sighed and confirmed that was very much the case.

“However,” Isidore held up her hand. “We must not be daunted. If you furnish me with a piece of paper and a pen, I will give you the address of Scotland Yard for an invoice for the outstanding amount to be forwarded on and I assure you settlement will be forthcoming. Is that agreeable to you, Monsieur le Concierge?”

“Ah très bien, madame, très bien.”

“Oh, one last thing.” Isidore leaned toward the concierge again and discreetly slipped him what she believed a suitably generous gratuity for his assistance. The concierge glanced at his hand and gave a nod of satisfaction.

“Now, Monsieur le Concierge, would you have a porter available to assist in getting Mr Fraiser to his room? And, this is most definitely, the very last thing, please arrange for a tray with a selection of cheeses, meats and bread along with a pot of coffee and two cognacs to be sent up to the room also. The cost should be added to Mr Fraiser’s existing room tally.”

The concierge smiled in his warm way, content all was resolved satisfactorily and without looking around, raised an arm and clicked his fingers, summoning as if out of thin air a porter whom he then instructed to discreetly convey Mr Fraiser to his room.



A Short Cab Ride and More with Guliford

It had not taken long for Guliford and Müller to realise two important things about each other; for one, on Guliford’s behalf, Herr Müller, Guliford’s Adonis made flesh, was not of the same persuasion and of no temperament or inclination to embark upon a discovery of undiscovered shores and unknown pleasures...

For Müller; it was more succinct, Guliford was most certainly not the *Engländer* he was seeking. The man’s utterance of the apparent code phrase had been, improbable as it seemed, mere coincidence. Further interaction was wasteful and pointless.

Agitated that his imagined glory, rewards and honours had been snatched away from him, Müller angrily banged his fist on the roof of the small cab, shouting to the driver, “Halt! Halt!” as they turned into the road known as Quai du Louvre that ran alongside the River Seine. He then and without warning, unceremoniously bundled Guliford out of the cab, sending him sprawling across the pavement and into the wall above the Seine.

Caught unawares by his forced ejection from the cab, Guliford did well to land on the pavement without seriously injuring himself; his left shoulder and hip taking the brunt of the impact rather than his hands or knees. He imagined he had looked quite the sight after involuntarily leaving the cab; tripping and stumbling then twisting full body, first to the right and then to the left as if engaged in some manic dance of St Vitus’s.

He closed his eyes and paused for a moment moving himself into a sitting position, and dismissively waving off the assistance of a passer-by. With his back against the wall, Guliford slowly caught his breath and watched as Müller’s cab completed an about-turn and took a reciprocal course back in the direction of the *German Church*.

Guliford got to his feet, retrieved his hat, dusted it off and placed it back on his head and mustered a wry smile. All things considered, he felt rather sanguine about Müller; he would not now, as Currie would no doubt phrase it, be enjoying some afternoon delight. But there was a positive to take away from all this: he had made contact with and identified the man who was obviously Fraiser's contact—why else would Müller have been in the church and approached him? Clearly, a case of mistaken identity on Müller's behalf. That meant, Guliford realised, neither he nor Müller knew precisely what Fraiser looked like... It also suggested while Müller was Fraiser's contact here in Paris, he had not been so in London.

So many positives. Guliford glanced back at the wall; had Herr Müller taken more heed of his angles, Guliford was sure the German could have sent him tumbling across the pavement, and instead of into the wall, then down the steps barely six feet from where he had landed and into the Seine and a watery finish. Splash! One should be thankful for small mercies he told himself. But now he must return to the *German church*. Perhaps, just perhaps, the unruly drunk sprawled on the chair had been Fraiser?

The walk back to the church took barely three minutes. Indeed the cab ride with Müller could only have been five minutes from clambering in to being forcefully ejected. His heart, Guliford wistfully reflected, won in a church and then dashed against a wall above the Seine in the time it took to leisurely make and serve an *omelette au rhum*. *C'est la vie...*

Guliford stopped abruptly as he neared the church, there was Müller's cab with its distinctive Sabino mottled, chestnut-coloured horse slowly pulling away. Had Müller secured Fraiser? The small window in the back of the cab, barely big enough to see out of let alone into, offered no clue. Quickening his pace, Guliford dashed into the church, startling the priest who was straightening the rows of chairs. No sign of the two women or of Fraiser. Back out to the street just in time to see Müller's cab pause and turn left onto Rue de Rivoli. Guliford inhaled deeply and removed his hat. He would have to somehow follow Müller; he needed to know if Fraiser was indeed in his custody. Glancing around he saw a free cab and immediately flagged it down.

“Speak English?”

The cabbie shrugged. P'haps he did, p'haps he did not.

Guliford cursed and pointed down the road and made a left motion with his hand. Damn he thought, what was the French for *ahead then left*? He needed to do his best to keep Müller's cab in sight. He pulled out some coins and showed them to the cabbie who then nodded, muttered something and copied Guliford's hand gestures and added;

“Continuez tout droit puis tournez à gauche sur la Rue de Rivoli? Oui, monsieur.”

Guliford, getting the gist of the hand movement if not the comprehension of the words, nodded and got into the cab. The pursuit of Müller was now underway. Quite what he intended to do once he caught up with the German, other than confirming Fraiser was with him, he wasn't entirely sure...

As Guliford's cab slowly proceeded up the wide Rue de Rivoli, he found himself leaning ever more out of the left side of the cab, trying to distinguish Müller's cab and its distinctive horse from all the other cabs thronging the Rivoli. Twice he thought he'd seen Müller's cab pull over only to be mistaken. Then, there it was; the cab with the Sabino mottled chestnut horse parked up neatly against the pavement, outside the L'hôtel Mercure, just short of the entrance to the Jardin des Tuileries on the left.

Guliford managed to successfully relate to his cabbie his desire to stop, which the man did but awkwardly so, in the middle of the road amongst the flow of traffic. It then took several minutes for the cab to pull in alongside the pavement. It mattered not though; Guliford could now clearly see Müller standing on the pavement, instructing his cabbie then turning and entering L'hôtel Mercure. Guliford hastily passed a handful of coins to his cabbie, alighted and dodging oncoming cabs, crossed to the pavement and entered the hotel.



A Short Cab Ride and More with Müller

Müller's mood had gradually soured. He could hardly believe had been propositioned in his cab by an Englishman—it was true, the English were exporting their vice around the world beyond their empire. Mein Gott! No wonder they were obsessed with carbolic soap. So much filth! He gave a little shiver. This day must improve otherwise his liverishness would surely consume him!

He had returned to the church in time to see the two women he had come across earlier, bundling the loud, drunk man into a cab, aided by the cab driver. This lout, this drunk had to be Fraiser. Surely, of the five people there had been in the church, one of the two Englishmen had to be the one he sought! Müller cursed again and instructed his driver to follow the cab.

“You do not need to be discreet; they are two women and a drunk, unlikely to notice anything but at the same time, exercise restraint. Do not try and race with them.”

Müller leaned back in the cab and closed his eyes, planning his strategy. It would be easy to get Fraiser away from the two women of that he was sure. Did he need him though beyond securing the documents? And what did the women want with him?

Were they working with the vice-ridden Englishman? Had he been merely a ruse to get him, Müller, out of the church? A distraction? Verdammt!

The cab with the women and Fraiser came to a halt outside L'hôtel Mercure on the Rue de Rivoli. Müller's cab pulled up a cab length or three behind it. He was all for instructing his driver to aid him in snatching *der echte Engländer* right there from the pavement but his instincts told him to wait, to see just what these women wanted with the man. For surely he would not have the documents on his person? It was the documents he wanted more than *der Engländer*.

Müller watched the odd party of three enter the hotel and began to get out of the cab but stopped. Perhaps he should wait, lest they were merely there, assuming this was Fraiser's hotel, to collect the documents...

This was to be a waiting game he told himself and settled back into his seat. How long should he wait though? He stared at the hotel and decided Fraiser, if it were indeed his hotel, was likely on one of the cheaper upper floors; perhaps floor four or five of the seven the hotel seemed to have. After all, from what he had seen in the church, *der Engländer* was a drunk and the last thing a drunk wanted was too many stairs to climb. Müller allowed himself a little smile at this. So, the party of three approach the reception desk, collect the room key; next they tackle the stairs: one, two, three, four flights; enter the room and perhaps engage in the small talk so likened by the English. Then the two women leave Fraiser in his room and descend the stairs and exit the hotel...

Müller glanced at his pocket watch and estimated twenty-five minutes to be ample time. But just in case, he would enter the hotel after he had waited fifteen minutes and seek a suitable vantage point. He noticed the women had not retained their cab, he would keep his waiting. Therefore he could simply snatch the documents from them either in the hotel lobby or on the pavement and leap into his cab and be away. Germanische Effizienz!

Müller exited the cab and instructed the driver to wait. Yes, he confirmed, he would pay waiting time and possibly a small bonus if all went well. He straightened his jacket and cuffs and strode confidently into the lobby of the Mercure.

Glancing around he could not see the women or Fraiser. They were likely, by his calculations, already in *der Engländer's* room. From what he could observe of the lobby area, this was indeed a hotel that required one to have funds. Was Fraiser spending excessively already the money he anticipated getting for the documents he held? The English seem to be so vice-ridden!



Chapter Eleven

A Simple Twist in the Plot

L'hôtel Mercure
Rue de Rivoli
Paris

Guliford stepped into the lobby area of the Mercure and looked around, firstly to see if he could lay eyes on Müller and ascertain if Fraiser were with him and secondly, to take in the opulence. Currie had spoken of this hotel a few times; he had apparently enjoyed his last throw of the dice here, as he put it, some five years ago before devoting himself to the pleasures of gastronomy. He had opined the Mercure and its regular clientele were the epitome of *la belle époque*—what that actually meant Guliford was not entirely sure beyond it making Currie pine wistfully when speaking of the place. He cast his eyes around the lobby: in truth it seemed more of a salon; wealthy and well attired men and women seemed almost draped around the various chairs and tables—nothing to do except gossip, make empty plans and be in the right place at the right time should something interesting occur.

His immediate thought was, Fraiser must be expecting to be well recompensed by the Germans for his treachery. This was far from a cheap hotel.

Espying a nearby empty chair and small sidetable, Guliford seated himself and continued looking around. If anything he felt underdressed and was sure he would soon be asked to leave. But, wait, there was Müller sat on the other side of the lobby. Guliford watched as the German rose to his feet, had he seen him? Was he now going to forcefully eject Guliford from the hotel? No, Müller approached the reception desk and spoke with the clerk. He wasn't looking this way, neither was the clerk—Müller had not spotted him.

Guliford watched intently. He could not make out what was being said, he was too far away, but whatever it was, Müller seemed pleased and made his way to the staircase and proceeded up the stairs. What to do? Should he wait in the lobby or follow Müller? Guliford got to his feet and approached the reception desk.

“I am sorry to trouble you. You do speak English?” A terrible assumption he thought as soon as the words had left his mouth.

The reception clerk nodded. “I do indeed, sir, as well as German and Italian. How may I assist you?” The clerk quietly passed judgement on Guliford's attire and took him to be a tradesman of sorts.

“Very good. I am here for a meeting with Mr Fraiser and Herr Müller.” Guliford’s voice rose at the end of sentence when he said Müller. Despite being bundled out of a cab by the man, he was still attracted to the German. He smiled at the clerk and continued. “Unfortunately, I cannot for the life of me remember which room we are to meet in.”

The clerk nodded. “You also? A German gentleman just now could not recall the room number either.” The clerk took a slip of paper from below the desk and wrote down the floor and room number and passed it to Guliford. “The stairs are over to your right. Will there be anything else?”

Guliford shook his head, thanked the clerk and with the slip of paper in his hand, headed to the stairs. However, no sooner had he placed a hand on the bannister and a foot on the first stair, he paused.

A sudden thought struck him. A thought so profound it stopped him short. He looked up at the stairs curling around in a loose, lazy spiral and muttered to himself. “Perhaps, perhaps...”

Guliford turned and retraced his steps to where he had been seated. Resuming his seat he caught the eye of a waiter.

“Do you speak English?”

The waiter nodded but said nothing.

Good he said to himself. What to order? Not coffee, no. He looked hopefully up at the waiter.

“May I have a gin fizz? Gin, lemon juice, sugar, and soda water. Yes?”

The waiter nodded. “Parfait, monsieur, parfait.”

Some minutes later the waiter returned with a tall, narrow glass of gin fizz on a small silver tray. He held out a paper slip for Guliford to either pay or sign and write down his room number.

Guliford was about to reach for his wallet, noticed the price—rather weighty—and decided to take a chance. He wrote down Fraiser’s room number then added the man’s initials. The waiter placed the glass of gin fizz on the sidetable and without further ado went off to his next customer.

Raising the glass to his lips and taking a sip, Guliford thanked Fraiser then returned to the thought he’d had at the bottom of the stairs.

Just suppose for a moment, he began to ruminate; all is not what it seems. The two women in the church were undoubtedly the ones from Rules Restaurant in London. Furthermore, he was positive, although he had not seen them, they had left the church with Fraiser and come here to L'hôtel Mercure. Müller whom he had followed had also come here. Was Müller their handler and were the women agents of the German Empire? That is what had caused him to stop at the bottom of the stairs: that the women were—

Guliford took another sip of gin fizz then placed the glass on the sidetable, eased back in the chair, crossed his legs and took out the small notebook from his inside jacket pocket. Finding a blank page, he readied his fountain pen and began to write down his thoughts.

Women - agents of GE...

Did Fraiser know them or of them? Was he going to give them up if he was caught?

Things not gone to plan in London - Fraiser missed contact? Fled to Paris.

Müller directing the operation?

The two women arranging to copy documents Fraiser has taken then return and give impression secrets safe?

There was more to this case than there seemed to be. Undoubtedly the women had used their Scotland Yard contact to enable them to take control of the case. But perhaps this was all subterfuge, and Fraiser and his theft of secret documents just a Trojan horse: a means for the women to infiltrate Scotland Yard and its upper echelons and who knows, even his own shady corner of the Foreign Office. Genius!

On one level, Fraiser was in the process of selling secrets to the German Empire. The women mere petticoat detectives, as Currie called them, filling their days until a suitable marriage proposal came along. Blundering their way around Paris at Scotland Yard's expense. But scratch the surface and yes, these women were wily agents of the German Empire, cunningly enacting a well thought out infiltration.

Müller was obviously the head of the operation; perhaps even the planner. No doubt he had entered the church to oversee and observe. Yes, Guliford recalled, when Müller had entered the church, he had stood at the small altar and then spoke briefly to the two women. Had they informed him of Guliford's presence? Did they know why he was here? Someone must have informed them. Currie? The man did enjoy the game, as he put it. Was he just testing Guliford?

Needless-to-say, Müller deployed himself as a distraction to get him, Guliford, out of the church and allow the women to effect Fraiser's removal.

Guliford put his fountain pen and notebook away, drained his gin fizz and got to his feet.

He would telegraph Currie that he knew what was afoot and that the game was up. After that, he would go to Fraiser's room and apprehend the women, Fraiser and Müller. It was likely he would need to telephone the British Embassy for support in getting the women and Fraiser back to London, as his prisoners. As for Müller... He would very likely have to let him go but his card would most certainly be marked and his status in England be classed as *persona non grata*.

Guliford allowed himself a self-satisfied smile. Perhaps this would elevate him from being the office junior's junior or whatever it was Currie always referred to him as. Hah, the office junior's junior—a made up title if ever there was one!



Chapter Twelve

The Room on the Third Floor

L'hôtel Mercure
Rue de Rivoli
Paris

Isidore and Tilley stared down at Fraiser's body stretched out on the bed. The hotel's porters having managed to transport the by then alcoholically myopathic Fraiser to his third floor room, had positioned him on his back but, comically, with his hands laying one over the other on his chest, as if he were recently deceased and ready to be viewed open casket at a wake.

“Mind you, Izz, whatever he was drinking, I wouldn't mind some of the same. I mean, if he can sleep through two men pushing and dragging him up three floors, the next time I'm tossing and turning and unable to get back to sleep at two in the morning, I'm going to be reaching for the same stuff! It certainly looks to have been very effective.”

Isidore gave Fraiser's shoe a wiggle. Nothing. “I think perhaps, Tills, it was absinthe. Quite a lot too. There is a definite scent of anise and more than a suggestion of the wormwood that gives the drink its green colour as well as its bitterness. Judging by his dishevelled state he must have been on quite the spree. There is always the chance, I suppose, he spilled more down his shirt than went into his mouth. But judging by his general incapacity, if not a good dosing of absinthe, he has certainly had quite a lot of something.”

Tilley nodded and reached out and was about to wiggle Fraiser's other foot but there was a knock at the door.

“Are we expecting company, Izzy?”

“Ah yes, forgot to say I arranged for a plate of food, coffee and cognac to be brought up.”

Isidore opened the door and let the waiter carrying a large tray into the room. He set the tray down on the writing desk by the window and poured out two cups of coffee from a silver pot, glancing curiously over at Fraiser as he did so.

“C’est le paludisme.” Isidore shrugged her shoulders in what she hoped came across in a resigned *what can you do* way.

The waiter nodded, understanding. He’d seen malaria sufferers before he said. Then Isidore added.

“Il croyait qu’il y avait de la quinine dans l’absinthe. Quel idiot!”

The waiter shook his head and laughing quietly left the room, closing the door behind him.

Tilley looked at Isidore and raised an eyebrow.

“I said, he suffers from malaria and like an idiot, thought absinthe contained quinine. Now, coffee or cognac first? Maybe coffee then I will construct a sandwich using the bread, cheese and slices of meat.”

“Make that two and god bless the Earl of Sandwich for his wonderful invention.”

“My father knew him, he did.”

“What, the man who invented the sandwich? But that was a hundred years or more ago, surely?”

“No, Tills, not that one. I mean I know my father is old or perhaps I should say, past tense, I knew he was old, given that he disinherited and disowned me some years ago. I suppose he could have miraculously begun de-ageing but I don’t see him going in for the enamelling trend.” Isidore paused, thinking...

“No, I really cannot see him having his top layer of skin removed, however it is they do it—scraping perhaps? Then all the wrinkles filled and smoothed with an arsenic based concoction.” She gave a little shudder at the thought of people actually paying to have this done to themselves, before continuing. “Of course that is assuming, the maid or whoever is his new wife hasn’t stolen all the arsenic in the house to poison him!”

Now, back to the sandwich inventing Earl. That was the 4th Earl, Tills. My father knew the 7th Earl of Sandwich.”

Tilley picked up one of the glasses of cognac and put on her worst possible imitation of a cockney accent. “Where would us common folk be without all you aristos. God bless the Earl.”

Isidore raised the other glass of cognac, adding; “I will have you know, I am officially déclassé and part of the great unwashed. Bless the Earl and all who sail in her! Now, as we scoff and drink we should come up with a plan.”

Tilley took a bite of the sandwich Isidore had made for her, thought for a moment or two and nodded toward Fraiser. “Are we taking this one back with us?”

Isidore shook her head. “Initially I thought yes. However, we both saw the struggle the porters had getting him up here. Can you imagine the two of us having to drag this lump around Paris? We will leave him to his own devices. I did tell the concierge to forward the bill for his stay here, up to today, to Scotland Yard. Without the man, I don’t think they will pay it. But then we have only been tasked with the recovery of that which he stole and not the man as well.”

“Good, a set of stolen documents is so much easier to carry. Besides, I used up all my patience for drinkers, nursing my mother; I have none left for the likes of this one.”

Tilley cast her eyes over Fraiser, shook her head, took another bite of sandwich then turned her attention to the ornate and for her, overly fancy armoire against the wall. Opening the twin doors, she pulled out a Gladstone bag. Cramming the remainder of the sandwich into her mouth, she opened the bag and began to rummage through it, discarding shirts, socks, undergarments until at the very bottom, she found a foolscap-size brown folder.

“And here we are!”

Isidore put down her cognac and took the folder from Tilley. Opening it she glanced at the documents and drawings within. “I’d say, yes, this is indeed what we came for, Tills.”

It was then that Fraiser began to stir, trying to prop himself up, his eyes not quite ready to focus. “Who’s there? I’ve already told you I have no more money.” He gave up trying to raise himself, closed his eyes and slumped back down, his head sinking once more into the pillow as he continued to mutter away inaudibly.

“You brought the chloroform, yes?” Isidore looked at Tilley.

“Of course I did. I thought perhaps we could have one of those wild chloroform parties that seem to be the rage in certain quarters; lure some unsuspecting Parisians into our shared room.”

“I know you are joking but not on this trip, my dear. We need to keep our wits about us and our undergarments firmly fastened. I was thinking, though, now that he is possibly beginning to emerge from his alcohol-induced somnolence, we should administer some chloroform. Just to ensure he remains incapacitated until we can get away.”

Tilley agreed and took a 4oz clear bottle from the chatelaine bag hanging from her waist, passed it to Isidore then returned her attention to the armoire, pulling out a hanger with a finely tailored morning jacket and matching trousers. She held the ensemble against her and looked at Isidore. “What do you think? A good disguise?”

“Try it on if you are that taken. It does look unworn ” Isidore put a hand into Fraiser’s trouser pocket and pulled out his handkerchief to which she applied a generous amount of chloroform. She placed the handkerchief over Fraiser’s mouth and nose and waited a few seconds before removing it.

“I’m not sure how effective this will be. Is just a few seconds contact enough? Should I wait a few minutes then repeat?”

Tilley, half through removing her dress to try on the morning jacket and trousers, suggested adding a bit more chloroform to the handkerchief and applying it again but leaving it in place for a good two or three minutes, then waiting five minutes or so to see if Fraiser was back to being comatose once more.

However, before Isidore was able to administer more of the sweet-smelling, colourless liquid, there was a quiet knock at the door, She had time to throw Tilley an inquisitive look before the door opened.



The Uninvited Guest

Müller stood in the doorway of Fraiser’s room, a satisfied smile on his face. He slowly nodded his head, more to himself to acknowledge he had been correct in his assumption that the two women had indeed taken Fraiser. He’d only been wrong about the floor and frankly that was nothing. He stepped into the room, reached into his jacket and removed a small revolver, closing the door behind him as he did so.

“Meine Damen, welch eine unerwartete Überraschung!”

Tilley, having already pulled on and done up the trousers, hastily buttoned up the morning jacket. She recognised Müller from the church.

“Did you just say, Damn?”

“Damen, Fräulein.”

Isidore stepped away from the bed, the chloroform-soaked handkerchief gripped behind her back. “It was damen, Tills. German for ladies. He added it was a surprise seeing us.”

“At least he’s polite. Apart from the hand gun that is.”

Müller pointed the revolver first at Isidore and then Tilley.

“A good choice,” Isidore looked at the revolver. “A Webley, yes? The so called British Bull Dog model. Four, four, two calibre?”

Müller shook his head. The larger calibre, he said. “Point four-five in your imperial measurement. A small but effective weapon. I am impressed with your knowledge. Now, enough of this pathetic small talk. We are all here very probably for the same thing. I suggest you hand it over.” He clicked the finger and thumb of his left hand.

“Don’t have it. Whatever *it* is.” Tilley looked defiantly at Müller.

“And that is why you have chosen to dress yourself in Fraiser’s clothing, is it not? To perhaps intuit or employ mumbo jumbo psychometry to find—” Müller stopped himself. “Hah, I see you are using your guile to distract me. But I am seeing through it!”

“I think you will find, Herr—I am sorry, I don’t know your name. But never-the-less, you should be aware, psychometry is only possible on metal objects. At least as far as I understand the science.”

Müller scoffed at Isidore. “You are wrong. You clearly confuse psychometry which is superstition and nonsense with psychometrics, which is a science and will help the German Empire attain a body of people whose mental capacity, personality, and knowledge is by far superior to your faltering British Empire.”

Never one to miss an opportunity to be irreverent, Tilley adjusted the morning jacket, pretended to dust off the sleeves, let out a humph and declared, “Bloody fallen for it again ain’t we, Izzy. Duped into working for the damnable British Empire once more! Blimey, they really knows how to exploit us working classes!”

Isidore let out a laugh and was about to add to Tilley's jape but Müller took a step toward Tilley, uncocked and re-cocked the revolver and pointed it at her head.

"Enough of this English tomfoolery. Both of you step aside. I will attempt to rouse Fraiser from his stupor and get the answers I seek. Unless of course the two of you between you have administered a sleeping draft to him? In which case, you creatures of the night will take this room apart until you find what I want."

Isidore and Tilley backed away from the bed until they were up against the now closed doors of the armoire. Müller, keeping the revolver aimed at first Tilley then Isidore, moved toward the bed. As he leaned over Fraiser, gently patting first one cheek then the other with his hand, Isidore kicked Tilley's foot, to get her attention then quickly whispered into her ear.

"Pin his arms and I will chloroform him." Isidore showed Tilley the still damp handkerchief in her hand. Without pausing for further instruction, Tilley stepped forward and threw her arms around Müller, exclaiming as she did so,

"I find you irresistibly handsome!"

Caught unawares, Müller dropped the revolver and tried to wrest himself free from Tilley's grip, only to find his face smothered with a damp handkerchief. His immediate reaction was to spit and blow into the cloth, to avoid inhaling whatever was on it, while shaking his head from side to side. However, the large amount of chloroform on the handkerchief, the seemingly iron band grip of Tilley's arms and Isidore's forceful application, combined with her grasping of Müller's hair, to keep his head up, meant Müller, overcome by the chloroform in a mere minute crumpled to the floor.

"Best keep it over his mouth and nose for a bit longer, Izzy. Make sure he is completely knocked out."

After a full three minutes, counted by Isidore in her head, she removed the handkerchief from Müller's face. He was now sprawled on the floor, lost in a chloroform-induced sleep.

"That should keep him out of our way. I suspect Fraiser will come round first by which time we will be gone. You have the folder?"

Tilley opened the morning jacket revealing the folder half stuffed into the waistband of the matching trousers. "Elegant yet accommodating as the tailor would no doubt say. What next, Izzy, do we scarper?"

"Are you intending to keep the jacket and trousers on? If you are, you should see if there is a matching hat."

“Good point. Every outfit should have a matching hat. But no, I mean yes to keeping the trousers and jacket on. Unless you object? I will adopt this as my disguise and wear it back to our hotel. I take it that is where we will now go?”

Isidore opened the armoire and from the shelf above the hanging space, pulled out a soft felt hat in the Alpine style. “It will likely sit a little too low on your head, so pad it out with some of the socks you pulled from the Gladstone. While you are doing that I will quickly fold your dress and put it into the bag. I assume you are claiming the Gladstone as well?”

Tilley had moved in front of the armoire’s mirrored door and was adjusting the now sock-padded Alpine hat. She nodded.

“Yes, I’ve always felt I should have a Gladstone bag and this one is of a particularly high quality. There, how does that look?” She turned to face Isidore, the hat at a jaunty angle on her head.

“Very stylish, sir. Shall we depart before our slumbering pair begin to stir?”

Tilley grinned. “I should be honoured to step out with you, madam.”



Chapter Thirteen

More Ado With the Third Floor Room

L'hôtel Mercure
Rue de Rivoli
Paris

Guliford slowly turned the handle of the door to Fraiser’s room. He wasn’t entirely sure what he was going to do; there would be at least four people in the room: the two women from London, Fraiser and the German. From what he had seen in the church, Fraiser was drunk therefore not a threat, neither were the two women. It was likely, being women, they would simply flee the room—even if they were as he suspected, working for the Germans. That left the German, Müller—his tarnished Adonis...

Guliford gave a sardonic smile; a good right jab landed to the side of the Müller’s jaw would prove very satisfying... He’d suffered rebuffs before but never been pushed out of a cab! It would be a pity though to bruise such a handsome face and instead of striking the man he would much prefer... Well, best not dwell on what may have

been. As well as his own slighting, imperial pride was at stake: the Empire had been stolen from.

He took a deep breath; he would throw the door wide open, make some spontaneous declaration regarding the honour of the British Empire and assess whatever befell his eyes before stepping over the threshold. He could then proceed as previously stated. He flexed his right hand in readiness to deliver the jab and pushed the door fully open...

The sight inside the room was not what he had anticipated; a body, it looked to be Fraiser, was stretched out on the bed and another, that of Müller, lay crumpled on the floor, as if suddenly poleaxed. Guliford quickly took in the rest of the room but could not see nor could he—he listened intently—hear anyone else, hiding or otherwise. He closed the door and with his back against it paused, deciding how to proceed. He needed to secure the stolen documents, nothing else. He stepped over the unmoving body of Müller and moved to the bed. The odour of stale alcohol hung about Fraiser like cheap market stall cologne.

He slapped Fraiser hard across the face. There was a mumbled murmur of response but the man's eyes barely opened more than a flicker. Grabbing his shoulders, Guliford forcefully shook him and demanded he hand over the documents but Fraiser remained unresponsive.

Leaving Fraiser, Guliford moved to the small writing table by the window, where the waiter had left the serving tray. There looked to be the remains of a light luncheon; nothing special: a typically French repast of bread, cheese, which he tried and meat that he didn't. He presumed it had been ordered by the women. He picked up the coffee pot, still warm. Taking one of the cups and a napkin from the tray, he wiped around the rim of the cup and poured the remaining coffee from the pot. He took a sip and then another and returned to the bed where he pulled Fraiser up and tried to get the man to take a drink. It was no use though, he spilled more down Fraiser's chin and shirt than into his throat. He dropped Fraiser back, discarded the cup and turned his attention to Müller.

He pushed the German over and onto his back. No signs of a wound. He'd clearly been knocked unconscious or drugged. If it had only been the four in the room, it had to have been the two women who had incapacitated Müller: Guliford's erstwhile German spies. Huh, he would need to give them more credit and be especially wary of them if he crossed paths with them again. But what had transpired? Doubtless some catastrophic falling out. And that meant only one thing, the women must have the documents.

Perhaps they had quarrelled over money? Had someone else offered more for the stolen secrets? Who though; the French, the Russians, the Turks even? He could see Fraiser wanting to sell to the highest bidder and telling the German he'd had a better

offer and trying to elicit more money. But wouldn't that mean Fraiser would be the one knocked out rather than the German? Or would not the women, at the German's behest, have bound and gagged Fraiser and then all three; the two women and Müller, just left with the stolen documents? No, it seemed the women had not only fooled Scotland Yard but also the Germans and had made a deal with someone else.

Guliford paced around the room, looking for clues that might answer his puzzlement. The clothes in the armoire had been rifled and removed from their hangers; a tangle of shirts and so forth formed a little pile on the end of the bed and—

He bent down and sticking out from under the bed, found a Webley Bulldog with a fully loaded five-round chamber. A typically British handgun, the Webley. Was it Fraiser's? He sniffed the end of the short barrel, it had not been recently fired.

Guliford sat down on the end of the bed, turning the revolver over and over in his hands. Something had happened here but what was he missing? Had the women, for whatever reason, double crossed Müller, incapacitated both him and Fraiser? Although Fraiser had clearly incapacitated himself already with alcohol and was just a passive bystander sleeping off his drunkenness. The women must have left with the stolen secrets. Stealing that which was already stolen! He gave a wry smile at this.

A thought flickered across his mind and Guliford recalled what Currie had said about finding Fraiser but not being able to recover the documents. He'd taken it to mean he should eliminate the traitor. Well, it would never be easier than now. He had a gun and a comatose body. However, he was not entirely sure he could turn his hand to assassin. But, what if he made it look like there had been a struggle between Fraiser and Müller and they had killed each other? Or Fraiser had shot the German and then turned the gun on himself? Riddled with guilt at being a traitor. Yes, that seemed more plausible. All he needed to do was arrange the bodies and then shoot Müller in say the chest and Fraiser in the head. Then leave the revolver in Fraiser's hand.

But what if he placed the gun in Fraiser's hand and somehow used the traitor's finger to squeeze the trigger... It would be Fraiser killing Müller and not him. He could use the same method to shoot Fraiser in the head thus absolving himself of immediate guilt. Very good he said to himself, *very good* indeed.

As Guliford was congratulating himself on a cunning plan and was beginning to arrange Müller's body, the door of the room quietly opened and the concierge stepped in flanked by two police officers. The concierge stood to one side and pointed at Guliford and then the body of Müller whom Guliford was manoeuvring across the floor.

"C'est lui. L'autre, c'est l'Allemand." The concierge pointed at Guliford.

One of the police officers stepped forward. "Levez-vous et reculez, monsieur."

“Il est anglais.” Offered the concierge then told Guliford, the policemen wanted him to release Müller and step back.

“As you wish.” Guliford let the German drop to the floor and stood upright, the Webley in his right hand.

The police officers on seeing the Webley, immediately pulled out their own pistols and took aim at Guliford. The concierge let out a shocked cry and backed out of the room.

For a moment, Guliford thought of lunging at the nearest police officer, pushing him over or into the other one and making a run for it. However, he did not relish being caught, tried and sentenced in France. The French would no doubt look upon it as attempted murder of a police officer. Never a good thing, that. Besides, they still used the guillotine. He bent down and placed the Webley on the floor, raised his hands and using the only French phrase he had actually practiced, he said in appallingly bored-sounding, schoolboy French;

“Je suis de nationalité Britannique. Veuillez me présenter un jeune homme séduisant.”

Guliford faltered over some of the words but was certain he had delivered the phrase well enough for it at least, given the circumstances, it to make sense and be understood. Currie had said the phrase had served him well in French Morocco and would adapt equally in Paris. He believed or thought the phrase to mean, *I am British and request you contact my embassy.*

The two police officers looked curiously at each other then called to the concierge to step back into the room and interpret.

The concierge asked Guliford to repeat what he had just said, which he did much to the obvious amusement of the police officers. Shaking his head, the concierge explained to Guliford, what he had just said was actually that he was a British...

Guliford testily interrupted the concierge. “Yes, what is wrong with that? Why is it a source of amusement to these two?”

“As well as saying you are British,” the concierge patiently explained, “you also said, you wanted to be introduced to an attractive young man!”

Guliford closed his eyes, let his shoulders drop and cursed Currie. Clearly this whole escapade had been nothing more than a game to the man: a jape concocted by someone who was bored and needed entertaining. Were the women in on this? Had he been set up from the start? He was crestfallen; had every single deduction, every

assumption, every action he had taken and decision made been spurious, unsound; deluded even?

Then, with a timing that could only be expected in some farcical stage play, a well attired man stepped into the room and introduced himself as Inspector Mahon of the Investigative Bureau of the Préfecture de Police de Paris; La Sûreté.

In accented English he said to Guliford, “You are under arrest for being an agent provocateur and acting against the interests of the French Republic.”

The inspector repeated the instruction to the two police officers and indicated Fraiser and Müller should also be taken into custody but not before a doctor had been sent for.

Guliford slowly shook his head in disbelief. His game was run. He felt like a racing horse, adversely doped to the eyeballs, suddenly realising at the final stretch, winning was never an option; even finishing was never on the cards. He held out his hands for the inevitable handcuffs.



Chapter Fourteen

Chicken Farming in Bavaria

Imperial German Embassy
Hôtel de Beauharnais
Rue de Lille, Paris

Monday - early morning

The Hôtel de Beauharnais had been purchased in 1818 by King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia, and although it had been some time since it changed from the Prussian Ligation to the Imperial German Embassy, the Prussian heritage seemed imbued into its very fabric.

Müller had been released by Inspector Mahon of La Sûreté the previous evening. There were to be no charges or repercussions; it was accepted by Mahon that he, Müller, as he had put it, had been duped into visiting Fraiser’s hotel room in what seemed to be an attempt at entrapment by the British. If nothing else, it was a convenient lie.

The last thing France and Germany needed at the moment was more friction, Mahon had said to Müller, especially from a third party.

Standing outside the Hôtel de Beauharnais, Müller admired its Egyptian inspired portico. It was so out of place, it never failed to make him smile. A German embassy in Paris with Egyptian styling! Although he never quite understood why they still called it The Hôtel, a term of endearment he assumed.

He straightened his uniform, removed his cap and tucked it under his right arm: he much preferred the the dark blue and black peaked cap of his Eisenbahn regiment to the Prussian pickelhaube, even with the plume of a staff officer replacing the spike. The pickelhaube was fine for ceremonial duties but beyond that...he just thought it looked ridiculous. "Mein Gott," he muttered, "The twentieth century is looming on the horizon and we are wearing lightning conductors on our helmets!"

With a smirk on his face, Müller made his way up the steps and into the building. On the second floor he entered the room of the secretary to the provisionally appointed diplomatic attaché to Paris. The secretary, dressed in a dark blue tunic with silver-laced collar patches and the epauletten of a leutnant got to his feet.

"Hauptmann Müller, Herr Oberst is expecting you. Please go through."

Müller looked at the man, barely out of his youth-hood, his immaculate uniform, perfect hair and bearing. Another highly schooled Prussian he thought to himself. No wonder he got the job. Still, it freed Müller up. Although Müller was Herr Oberst's adjutant, he tried to spend as much time as possible away from the man.

Had Müller, been of any import and not just Herr Oberst's adjutant, the secretary would surely have opened door and shown him in. Perhaps even offered coffee... He gave the secretary an empty smile and entered Herr Obert's office closing the door heavily behind him. Someone has been oiling the hinges he thought!

"Herr Oberst, Hauptmann Müller reporting." He stood stiffly to attention, his hat still tucked firmly under his arm.

Herr Oberst got up from behind his desk and walked up to Müller. This is it, Müller said to himself, he has read my report and is now going to shake my hand and say, *This one got away but you did your best, Heinrich*. But no, his hands remained firmly clasped behind his back. He circled Müller once then twice, all the time Müller stood to attention, unmoving, unflinching, staring directly ahead at some distant spot. He heard Herr Oberst mutter something then open the door and call in his secretary. Was that it, was the meeting over?

"Neumann, komm herein."

The secretary, Leutnant Neumann, carrying a folder, stepped into the room.

"Ja, Mein Oberst."

“Observe Müller here. See how he stands rigidly to attention. That is not breeding, Neumann; breeding cannot give you that. It can make you superior, give you intellect and social standing. But it cannot make you stand in this stiff, ram-rod manner: only military training, drill and discipline will give you that.

I would wager you and I could go for luncheon, leaving Müller here and when we returned from our repast after an hour or two, he would be unmoved; still standing like a statue. Observe and take note.”

Neumann stared at Müller but saw little to take in. Never-the-less he acknowledged Herr Oberst’s point. He wondered if he were meant to stand next to Müller and mimic him? But then he saw Herr Oberst give a little waft of his hand dismissing him. He gave a curt nod and retreated from the room.

“You may relax, Müller, stand easy. Neumann is a good secretary, at least so far. If he carries on the same way he has begun, I will retain him, much like I did with you. He is from a good family, knows all the right people. However, he does not drill well and has passed out on two parades this year, according to his file. Perhaps he is more secretary than soldiering man?”

Herr Oberst returned to the chair behind his desk and picked up a book, holding it for Müller to see.

“This slim volume is entitled, *The Breeding and Management of Poultry—Both for Profit and Ornamental*. It is by someone called Meier. Are you aware of this person, perhaps as you are in the trade you know them?”

Müller shook his head. “Nein, Herr Oberst. I am not aware of the book nor the person. As I have previously explained, it is my mother’s brother who is a poultry farmer.”

“Poultry farmer now, not just chickens?” Herr Oberst put the book down and held up his hand indicating he did not want a response.

“Now, to more serious matters. I have your report here.” He leaned forward. “First I must commend you on ensuring it was on my desk first thing this morning. Neumann comes in at 6 am and said it was already here. Sehr gut, Hauptmann, sehr gut.

However, it is rather dispiriting. You appear to have, what is one of those typically British slang words you seem so fond of? Kibble? Nein, nein.” Herr Oberst stared at Müller then slapped his desk. “Kibosh! Ja, you put the kibosh on my carefully constructed operation.” He leaned back in his leather chair—a chair befitting, Müller thought to himself, of someone who was the provisionally appointed diplomatic

attaché to Paris and that was all that was in his mind, other than not wishing to be there of course.

Her Oberst, still leaning back in his chair, called out. “Neumann!”

The door was suddenly flung open, a little too hastily, and banged against the wall. The secretary offered his profuse apologies; the door had been overly free since it was lubricated on Saturday, he said.

“Get it seen to while I am out. Put some dirt back in the hinges if necessary. In the meantime, bring some coffee.”

“As you wish, Herr Oberst.”

“Leave the door until you return. Let us avoid you dropping trays and pots of coffee over my floor.” He turned his attention back to Müller.

“As I was saying, Müller, you ruined several months work with your kiboshing, not to mention the monetary investment. It seems you were bested by—” He stopped and ran his finger across Müller’s report. “Ah, here, by two female agents of the British Empire.” He shook his head.

Müller said nothing, what could he offer or even say. He had been honest in his report and had pointed out, in his opinion, Fraiser was a spinner of lies but he did concede that seemed to contradict his belief the two women, most likely agents of the British Empire, had retrieved the stolen documents. So, yes, there must have actually been documents of some description.

Herr Oberst said nothing but waited while Neumann re-entered the room with a silver tray and poured out first one cup of coffee and was about to pour a second when Herr Oberst placed his hand over the cup. “One will be sufficient, Neumann. You may leave us and close the door, carefully.”

For several minutes Herr Oberst said nothing, slowly sipping at his coffee. Placing the cup in its saucer, he studied Müller. Thinking, deciding. He picked up the poultry book, opened it and began reading aloud.

“It says here, Müller, *Managing the Rooster. To maintain a proper ratio one should ensure 1 rooster for every 8–10 hens. This will ensure a high fertility is attained without excessive hen stress. One should always keep the rooster with the hens for consistent mating.*

“Which are you Müller, rooster or hen? I feel you may well be treating me as a hen, ja?”

That was one image Müller could do without being in his head. He remained silent.

Herr Oberst finished his coffee, all the while studying the silent Müller.

“If it were my choice, Adjutant Hauptmann Müller, I would say you appear to have been a fox in my henhouse. The British hunt foxes, do they not, on horses.” Herr Oberst leaned back in his chair and called for Neumann once more.

The office door opened slowly and Neumann appeared, his hand gripping the handle, lest the door swing away. “Ja, Mein Oberst.”

“What contacts do we have at the Gare du Nord train station, the port at Calais and...” Herr Oberst stared up at the ceiling. “Ja, at Creil and Amiens? Just contact them all and tell them to be on the lookout for two English women travelling on the Paris-Calais train. The women need to be detained.”

Herr Oberst returned his attention to Müller. The English women, he said, will be wanting to leave Paris for the coast and a Channel crossing as soon as practicable.

“It is now 8.10 am. A Paris-Calais train leaves in fifty minutes.” He shouted for Neumann yet again—Müller knew this trait of Herr Oberst’s well. It was why he always tried to either be out of the office himself or ensure Herr Oberst was out and occupied: it was the only way to get anything done!

The secretary was back in the doorway.

“Herr Oberst, I have sent instructions to alert by telegraph our contacts at Creil and Amiens stations as well as the port of Calais. I also took the liberty of readying your private cab and driver, should you wish to go to the Gare du Nord. If not, I will alert our contact there also.”

“Thank you, Neumann. That will be all for now.” He cast his look back to Müller.

“You need to redeem yourself, Müller. As an adjutant you have been very satisfactory, until now. However, I believe young Neumann may have set his sights on usurping you. Therefore you must prove your worth to me.

We will travel to the Gare du Nord, board the Calais train and search it one end to the other. By the time we reach Amiens we will know if the English women are aboard. If they are, I expect you to retrieve and hand me the documents. If the women are not aboard, we will alight at Amiens and await the next Calais bound train. By the end of today we will know if you are—” He tossed the poultry book at Müller, smiling—“remaining a soldier or going back to your chicken farm in Bavaria!”



Chapter Fifteen

Strangers on a Train

The 9am Paris-Calais train
Gare du Nord
Paris

Monday

The Odd Couple

Guliford had been was it lucky or just fortunate? Having Inspector Mahon turn up at Fraiser's hotel room when he did had certainly been serendipitous. It transpired the Inspector was Currie's man in Paris and had been keeping a passing eye on Guliford.

Of course, Guliford told himself, he should not have been surprised about Mahon being Currie's man. When Currie said and he likely said this to different people at different times, he had a man in Paris who owed him a favour or two and could ease a difficult situation, one naturally assumed it would be someone from the British Embassy. That turned out not to be the case...

"Guliford, Monsieur Guliford!" Mahon broke Guliford from his reverie. "Please pass on my regards to Sir Robert but do not to mention to anyone else my facilitation of your return to England. At some point in the future, you may require my assistance again. Who knows? I therefore prefer to remain a sleeping facilitator. Ne brûle pas tes ponts. Vous comprenez?"

Naturally Guliford nodded, indicating that he did understand—even though he did not beyond that *ponts* meant bridge. Clearly his recent experience in Fraiser's hotel room had slipped his mind.

Mahon however, being perceptive and still enjoying Guliford's appallingly delivered phrase about wanting a boy—if it wasn't already half way around the Paris Gendarmerie, it soon would be—leaned forward and whispered into the Englishman's ear.

"It means, do not burn your bridges."

"Yes, thank you. Very apt. Oh, one more thing. Robert is not a Sir." Guliford offered his hand to Mahon.

"I know. It is a little joke between us. Ours is often a silent service." He looked down at Guliford's extended hand. "No need for hand shaking, besides you never know

who is watching.” He then produced a key from his pocket. “You will need this at your journey’s end, to release your travelling companion.”

Guliford took the key and slipped it into his trouser pocket. He then raised his left hand, handcuffed as it was to the right hand of Fraiser. “Thank you also for this, Inspector.”

He was no police officer but Mahon had told Fraiser, he was putting him into the custody of Guliford and he should therefore regard him as such.

Fraiser, in what Currie would likely call a freshly laundered state, took a cigarette from his jacket breast pocket where he had asked for ten cigarettes to be placed and lit it using a lighter from his left jacket pocket. In fluent French he told Mahon, *An oaf like Guliford here would be hard tasked to keep a butterfly in a jar let alone deliver me to Scotland Yard.* He then grinned and further offered;

“Je vous enverrai une photo de mon ranch en Amérique.”

Inspector Mahon simply smiled. “Bonne chance, Monsieur Fraiser, Bonne chance.” He turned his attention back to Guliford.

“I arranged with the garde de train for you to travel in the luggage carriage. It is not ideal but it is secure and there is a seat or two amongst all the baggage with sufficient places for your to attach your companion here, to give you some respite.”

“That is more than fine, thank you Inspector. If nothing else, it will save the awkward looks from other passengers. Ah, that whistle suggests we need to board.”

The garde de train walked down the platform urging the last remaining passengers to board the train. He then ushered Guliford and Fraiser into the luggage carriage.



The Early Birds

Isidore and Tilley had arrived at the Gare du Nord train station a good forty-five minutes before the train’s 9am departure time, and secured themselves, with the requisite tickets, a compartment at the very front of the train. Their travelling bags, including Tilley’s purloined Gladstone bag were placed on the floor below the compartment’s trackside window.

Tilley set about closing and fastening the trackside window blinds while Isidore did the same on the compartment’s corridor side. She also attempted to secure and prevent the door being slid open by wedging a parasol she’d brought with her but not used, behind the handle.

Satisfied with themselves Isidore and Tilley sat down opposite each other.

“What next?” Enquired Tilley. “I think I slept for most if not all of the journey on the way down from Calais. But I fear, for this return journey we must have our wits about us and remain quite vigilant.”

Isidore agreed, telling Tilley, “Given the Germans have gone to so much expense to nurture Fraiser and then get him to Paris, it seems inconceivable, Tills, they will now simply brush off their failure to acquire the documents with a shrug. By the way is the folder still...?”

Tilley patted her hand on the front of her newly acquired jacket. “Still safe and sound.”

“Once we get going it will be five hours or so to Calais. Thankfully an early train means we do not have to contend with darkness. I suspect if the Germans try anything it will either be as soon as we leave the station here or perhaps at Amiens or the end of the line, Calais.”

“Nowhere else?”

“Abbeville could be a contender. But I suspect we will not be entirely out of harms way until we are back in Dover. Where, I strongly suggest we proceed directly to the police station or at the very least, get the Harbour master to telegraph Scotland Yard!”



The Late Ones

Müller and *the provisionally appointed diplomatic attaché to Paris*, scuttered inelegantly on to an empty platform at the Gare du Nord and for several precious minutes tried to orient themselves, having realised the platform was devoid of a train and therefore, quite possibly, the wrong platform.

“Du verdammter Hühnerzüchter, das ist hier nicht die richtige Plattform!” Müller’s commanding officer, Herr Oberst, spat out at him before espying a station porter and in the same impolite manner, demanding. “Von welchem Bahnsteig fährt der Zug nach Calais ab?”

The porter looked at him blankly.

“De quel quai part le train pour Calais?” The Prussian barked out.

“Ah, Calais, essayez la plateforme centrale.”

The Germans scuttered away in the direction the porter had indicated and arrived at the platform for the Calais train, just as it began to pull away.

Müller was all for giving up. The formal dress uniform dictated for his attachment to the embassy, did not lend itself to the sort of movements they were now undertaking. The dress uniform was designed for show and to look distinguished: not for rushing around the busiest train station in Paris on a Monday morning!

He stopped to catch his breath, hands on knees, watching the train slip away. Then he felt a forceful push on his rear; a boot to the jacksie as the British would say and he was sent flailing along the platform, desperately trying not to completely lose his balance and sprawl in an undignified way to the ground.

Somehow, Müller regained his balance and began running; striding long and purposefully along the platform, stretching the seams of his uniform to their utmost tolerance. He outstretched fully his arm and fingers, willing them to extend further and further until... his fingers made contact then curled around the upright handrail of the end carriage and he pulled himself aboard. There was no time for relaxation however, a voice shouted out.

“Grab my hand! Pull me on!”

It was tempting Müller thought, to grasp the hand of the man he had come to despise, begin pulling and then let go and watch him fall and tumble along the platform. But no, that way led to definite demotion and some god-awful posting.

He reached out, his left hand wrapped around the upright handrail and extended himself as much as he could until; finger tip to finger tip, then finger to finger and finally hand to hand, he hauled the pompous Prussian, Herr Oberst, onto the carriage's foot ledge.

Safely inside the carriage, Müller straightened his uniform, dusting himself off here and there and then, as was expected, attended to his commanding officer, making sure his uniform was as presentable as the circumstances permitted.

“Very good, Müller. We will now begin to methodically work our way from one end of this train to the other. Remember, not only are we here to reclaim sensitive documents that we arranged to procure from a foreign power but we are, as we always are, representing the glorious German Empire.”

For Müller it seemed to ring hollow: these last few days had made him have doubts. The inbred Prussian arrogance seemed to overlook the simple fact that if the Germany Empire was so good, so mighty; why did it need to buy the secret plans of

the British? Was all this just part of the so-called Big Game? You steal from me and I steal from you. Ho, ho; all good fun!

He needed a cigarette. “Before we begin, sir, might I smoke a cigarette? The train will not be stopping before, I believe, Arras.”

Herr Oberst looked at Müller in a disappointed way. “Very well, Müller, you may partake in a cigarette. However, you should know, this train is run by the Compagnie des chemins de fer du Nord and as such will stop at Creil, Amiens and Arras. If you recall, I instructed Neumann to activate any local agents we had in these particular areas. If you are to remain on my staff when I officially become the *diplomatic attaché to Paris*, you will need to improve drastically.”

Müller nodded. “Ja, Herr Oberst. I will make strident amends to improve.” Or maybe he would just set out to undermine Neumann—making him look bad would inversely make himself look better, would it not? He finished his cigarette, stamped the butt under foot and followed Herr Oberst through what seemed to be an empty carriage. Perhaps everyone was crammed in the front carriages or even the dining carriage?



The Odd Couple

The baggage carriage was at the very front of the train, immediately behind the tender that carried the vast amount of coal required to feed the ever-hungry locomotive. Guliford had arranged two steamer style trunks to allow Fraiser and himself somewhere to sit. He had also handcuffed the traitor to a metal handrail next to the sliding side door of the carriage, thus freeing himself.

“I suppose it is rather pointless asking you why you did it?” He looked at Fraiser dressed as he was in a crumpled suit, two day old shirt and scuffed shoes. His ruffled hair gave the man a somewhat boyish look. Guliford could imagine him charging down the rugger field at Eton or would it have been Winchester? Either way, he could see it; splattered in mud, ball gripped firmly, blond hair... He stopped himself. Was he developing an attraction to the man?

Fraiser pulled a cigarette from his breast pocket, lit it and smiled. “You wouldn’t understand. You cock hungry public school boys are all the same; you think just because someone speaks a certain way, walks the same as you and mixes in the same clubs, we are the same.” He drew in on the cigarette.

“Never went to Eton, old chap; Harrow or Winchester or any of them. I came up the hard way. Mind you, once I adopted the right accent and the trimmings, I got to like it. Still regarded as an outsider though. First in my family to join the navy. First one to stay out of prison, well, until now.” He laughed.

“By rights, if I had been born into the right family, I would very likely have been a captain by now; despite my shortcomings. Sea sickness. What a laugh.

So, passed over and sidelined; watching all the chinless wonders and daddy’s boys get given a leg up and get on and there was I: too posh to be poor and too poor to be properly posh. All surface no depth.

I despised my peers both poor and moneyed. That was when I thought, stuff the British Empire and our Queen in hiding, I’ll sell the buggers out”

Fraiser finished his cigarette and looked at Guliford. “If you let me go, I’ll let you fondle me balls.”

Guliford stood up and took a step back. He wasn’t sure if Fraiser was simply making all this up; a hard luck story to garner sympathy. As for the ball fondling—wasn’t that sort of thing a tradition in Her Majesty’s navy? The man was a traitor and someone who Curry thought would make a good double or was it triple agent? But did Curry know something else? Had Fraiser been planted in Naval Intelligence for this very reason, to infiltrate the German High Command? God his head was beginning to hurt. How murky had these waters become?

“I’m stepping outside. I need to clear my head. Don’t try anything: I have a gun.” He didn’t but Fraiser was unaware of that.

Standing on the footplate outside the baggage carriage, between that carriage and the next, Guliford breathed in the cold autumnal air. He could do with a stiff drink, a very large stiff drink. He looked down at the gap between the two carriages and the ground whistling at speed. It should be easily step-able. If it wasn’t, he likely wouldn’t feel much beyond the initial impact. He took a deep breath and gave a little leap. Thud! He hit the door of the passenger carriage. A moment later he was standing in the corridor adjusting himself, his heart racing. He closed his eyes and took in a few deep breaths. You’ve done it once, the second time will be easier he told himself.

He glanced around, all very quiet. Perhaps any passengers were either ensconced within their respective compartments or in the dining carriage... If he recalled correctly the dining carriage was about mid-train. So, baggage carriage, this one; dining carriage and then two more.



Chapter Sixteen

One Half of the Odd Couple

The 9am Paris-Calais train
Between Paris and Creil

“Did you hear that?” Isidor sat up straight and looked at Tilley. “If I am not mistaken, it sounded very much like an outside door opening and closing. I mean, not one of these compartment doors, one of the other ones.”

“Are you meaning the doors at either end of the carriage?”

Isidore nodded. “Someone coming in or going out of the door that leads to the baggage carriage.”

“Perhaps it was the train guard?”

Isidore removed her parasol from the compartment door handle and slowly opened the door, just enough to see down the corridor. Interesting she muttered to herself then quietly closed the door and looked at Tilley.

“It’s that man with the odd walk. The one we keep seeing.”

“Are you sure? You want to follow him, don’t you?”

“I think we ought to, Tills. I’m curious to know who he is. I suspect he may well have an interest in that folder you have stashed down your front.”

“I wonder though, Izzy, is it wise?. Obviously he hasn’t found us and wouldn’t we be just, well you know, falling into his arms, as they say.”

“Carpe diem, dear Tills, carpe diem! Come on, it could be exciting. Besides there are two of us and only one of him.”

Isidore and Tilley left their compartment and headed down train and out of their carriage and into the dining carriage, the direction the odd-walk-man had taken.

The dining carriage, it being lunchtime, was quite the bustling place; busy but not overcrowded. Isidore began to shuffle from one foot to the other trying to espy the man they sought.

“Ah, bonjour mesdames. English?” A waiter enquired looking over Isidore and Tilley and instantly forming an opinion based on their attire.

Isidore distractedly nodded at the short man. She was going to ask if he had seen a man with an odd walk when. “There, Tills, over by that window, three quarters of the way down.”

“That one? I’ve never really seen him very clearly before.”

The waiter smiled. Perhaps he would offer these two modern women luncheon in their compartment. They were beginning to attract looks and whispers.

“Do you have a reservation?”

“No, sadly we are not reserved at all.” Isidore too had noticed some disparaging looks. “We are with the gentleman down there.” She pointed down the carriage. “We will have whatever he has ordered, including drinks.”

The waiter nodded, scribbled onto his little pad and left the two modern women to make their own way to the table.

Half way down the carriage, Isidore stopped and turned first to the table of two elderly but clearly wealthy dowagers on her right then the table of three equally mature ladies of a certain stature and breeding to her left and offered her hand.

“Duchess of Marchbank, so pleased to see you once again. You remember my rather fey husband? I took the poor delicate creature to Egypt for his weak chest. He’s a very poor traveller; it’s taken almost a whole year to make our way back.”

Tilley, the supposedly fey and weak-chested husband of the ‘Duchess of Marchbank’ contorted her face, desperately suppressing what would likely develop into uncontrolled laughter.

Without waiting for a response from either table, for she had addressed herself to both, Isidore moved on and was gratified to hear as she did so, one of the dowagers tell another, “I knew her mother, now she was a proper duchess!”

Tilley whispered to Isidore when they were sufficiently out of immediate earshot, “Is there a real Duchess of Marchbank and if there is, when did you marry me off!”

Isidore turned around and planted a kiss on Tilley’s cheek. “If one is confident people will believe anything. There is not, never has been and never will be a Duchess of Marchbank!

Now, here we are at our table.”

Without saying anything or acknowledging the odd-walk-man, Isidore took a seat opposite him then patted on the chair next to her for Tilley before extending her hand toward the man.

“Hello, my name is Isidore Runce and this is my assistant, sorry partner—” Isidore turned and looked at Tilley. “Have we had that conversation or was it just me in my head? The one about you becoming a partner?”

“Oh which one; the one about me being your assistant or your partner or just the husband of a duchess?”

“I get your meaning. These last few days have been a bit...” Isidore let out a breath and turned her eyes back to odd-walk-man.

“Look, I know precisely who you are.” Guliford sounded rather terse.

Isidore leaned forward, resting her crossed arms on the table. “And we know exactly who you are, isn’t that right Tilley.”

Tilley, ever one for playing up a role, rested her chin on the back of her left hand and languidly extended her right hand. “Charmed to finally come face to face with you at last.”

Any further pleasantries or tersely sarcastic exchanges were halted by the arrival of the waiter.

“Monsieur, Mesdames. Three gin fizzes and a plate of oysters. I took the liberty of adding sufficient oysters for three, I hope that is satisfactory.”

“Very satisfactory. The gentleman is paying.”

Guliford scowled at Isidore, downed his gin fizz in one and ordered another.

Isidore turned to Tilley. “Oyster, dear?”

“Don’t mind if I do, dear but...” Tilley noticed the recently duped Dowagers making their way down the carriage. “...will my constitution bear such fare from Neptune’s waters?”

One of the Dowagers stopped and regarded Tilley. “My good man, boiled beef and dumplings are what you need, not this continental frippery. Although I suspect, in your current state a good meal may end you!” Her opinion delivered the Dowager strode on and out of the dining carriage.

Isidore burst into laughter. “Should I call the waiter back and demand a side of boiled beef for my husband to end himself with?”

“No bloody way. Fey husband or not, I intend to gorge on these oysters!”

Having heard enough, Guliford got to his feet. He would intercept the waiter, collect his gin fizz and return to the baggage carriage.

“If you don’t mind,” Isidore looked up at Guliford. “This little bag of mine contains a small pistol. I imagine if I shoot you there will be screaming and people clamouring to leave the carriage. I will say you tried to attack me and I defended myself.”

Guliford sank back down onto his seat. This damnable foray to Paris had been nothing but trouble from the get go.

“What is it you want?”

“We could begin with your name and on whose behalf you are acting; I assume you are, how should I put it, caught up in the same—”

“Adventure?” Offered Tilley.

“Very good, Tills. Yes, adventure.”

Guliford let out a sigh. “If you insist; my name is Guliford. I am attached to the Foreign Office and unlike the two of you, whoever you think you are, I am on official business.” This last bit he was somewhat unsure about and was certain Curry would very likely deny all knowledge, such was their murky world. And, he was beginning to think, having experienced the harsh reality, all a little too murky for him.

“And what were you doing in Paris?”

“Official F.O. business. Nothing to do with you.”

“He’s being rather abrupt, don’t you think Izzy?”

Isidore agreed; Guliford was being less than a helpful chappie. But perhaps a long shot was worth trying. “And where have you left Fraiser?”

“One should never begin a sentence with a conjunction: who knows where it may lead.”

“I had a friend who had one of those, nearly choked to death on it.” Tilley smiled at Guliford.

“Oh, ha, ha. Are you both finished now? I do have other matters to attend.”

“Indeed you do. You may begin attending to those by taking Tilley and I to Fraiser.”

Isidore stretched her arm under the table and jabbed something against Guliford’s left knee cap.

“In all this exciting badinage, I have forgotten is it your left leg or the right one that causes you to limp? I mean you only have two so if I were to shoot the wrong one, I’d still be fifty per cent correct, would I not?”

Guliford shifted uneasily. “Very well, I will take you to Fraiser.”



The Late Ones

Müller and Herr Oberst arrived in the dining carriage several minutes after Isidore, Tilley and Guliford had departed. Not seeing anyone who even vaguely resembled who they were looking for and, if he was honest, Müller was unsure if it was the two women; Fraiser or even the man he had kicked out of his carriage on Sunday morning! He suggested to Herr Oberst, they should perhaps enjoy a small repast before searching the remaining carriage.

“Very well, as you suggest, Müller. But not until we have searched this train completely and secured what now rightly belongs to the German Empire.” Herr Oberst took out his cigarette case and amber holder and slowly went through the ritual of tapping the end of the cigarette on the table they were stood next to then fitting the cigarette in the holder and lighting it with a match dispensed from a silver match case which, like the cigarette case was engraved with his family crest.

Müller tried hard not to roll his eyes at this contorted performance of Herr Oberst’s and muttered silently in his head. “Steck dir die Zigarette in den Mund! Verdammt!”

He had hoped being seconded to Herr Oberst would be good for his career, perhaps a quick promotion. But this affectation the man undertook when lighting a cigarette as well as his infatuation with der Engländer, and now Die Engländerinnen, the English women... Well, it was farcical—the type of farce one might expect to see on the stage in one of London’s many theatres.

“Did you say something, Müller, or are your eyes darting about in search of eligible women? I imagine a cockerel is always on the lookout.”

There it was again, the irritating chicken farmer jibe. Only now he cast Müller as a libidinous cockerel! Dirnenspross!

“My apologies, Herr Oberst.” Müller offered in a weary voice before adding. “I was wondering if you would like a glass of something before we proceed?”

“Müller, our task comes first. Only when we are successful will I allow you to treat me to a late luncheon.”

And so, after Herr Oberst had smoked half his cigarette—only the socially inept ever smoked more than half their cigarette, he told Müller—they exited the dining carriage and made their way into the next carriage, the last passenger-carrying carriage, to continue their search. Except, Herr Oberst had become a little impatient, perhaps the idea of luncheon planted by Müller was beginning to take affect. After checking two compartments, Herr Oberst wanted to move to the baggage carriage and then if nothing was forthcoming from there, resume searching the remaining passenger compartments.

Naturally if there was anything to be discovered, Herr Oberst wanted to be the one uncovering or discovering it; especially if it were the sought after documents and order Engländer, whom Müller surmised Herr Oberst would what: shoot, imprison or demand a refund of the funds bestowed upon him by the German Empire?

Müller moved aside as Herr Oberst brusquely pushed past him, flinging open the baggage carriage door and striding in. However, no sooner had he entered the carriage than Herr Oberst abruptly stopped, causing Müller to blunder into him.

“Damn you and your chicken feet, Müller. Get to one side and be quiet.”

There was little point though, the opening of the door and the attendant influx of exterior noises; the train itself, the rush of air, the sound of the French countryside sliding past was sufficient to alert the others in the carriage that they had been discovered.

Over Herr Oberst’s shoulder, Müller could see the two women; the man he had forcefully pushed out of his cab and Fraiser, gathered if not exactly in a huddle then in close proximity to each other, a handful of meters from where he and Herr Oberst were standing.

“Well quite the little spy network we have here.” Herr Oberst smiled in a very satisfied way. “You may now give yourselves up to me and I will ensure you are well treated.”

Guliford was the first of the group to speak. “My name is Guliford and I represent Her Majesty’s Britannic Empire. These people are all British subjects and are under my diplomatic protection.” He lied of course, he knew he had no authority, but thought it worth a go.

“This is not your British Embassy: this is a train passing through France and I have yet to read any accord that says a moving train can be regarded as such. I repeat, I will take you all into custody now.”

“Just a minute,” Guliford again, “If the British Embassy, as you say, has no jurisdiction on a train then neither do you my German fellow.” Guliford allowed himself the briefest of satisfied smirks.

“In that case,” Herr Oberst adopted a mocking tone to his voice, “My dear fellow, we have what the French call an impasse.” He turned his head toward Müller and asked for his pistol.

“I do not have it with me, Herr Oberst.”

“Of course not. I imagine you have no need for a pistol on the chicken farm: you likely just wring their necks.

Very well, I will summon the train guard and he will detain you until we reach our next stop where you will be removed from the train. In the meantime, Müller here will take your names and whatever titles or ranks you hold.” Herr Oberst started with Guliford. “You, your name.”

“Don’t tell him, Guliford.” Fraiser smiled in a very self satisfying way. If this was his metaphorical end of the line, he’d take everyone down with him.

“Ah, Herr Leutnant Fraiser as *helpful* as always. I understand why you so keenly wished to sell out your countrymen: you simply do not like them!

And your rank or title, Guliford?”

“As we have already established, neither you nor I have jurisdiction on this train. However, as a subject of the British Empire, any attempt to injure me, interfere or detain or otherwise would be regarded as an indirect injury to the British Empire itself.”

“You English are always so, so pompous! Just write down Guliford, Müller. And mark him as a diplomat. Also write down Leutnant Fraiser. Best mark him as a traitor to all.”

Herr Oberst turned his attention to Tilley, stood as she was arms akimbo and ready to if not fight her way out of the carriage then at least barge her way out.

Herr Oberst’s disapproval of modern women was obvious by the sneer he cast toward Tilley.

“And you, you are perhaps Leutnant Fraiser’s catamite? You wear a suit, you have short hair, a feminine disposition. Is this not the epitome of the English vice? What say you, Müller?”

Isidore who had been standing with her back to Herr Oberst now spun around to face him. She had recognised his voice almost instantly and it had cast her back to her finishing school in Germany; back to that ill-fated meeting on the balcony. The man’s precise, mannered vocal delivery; the sense of entitlement dripping from his every intonation. There was no mistake, it was him.

“Ernst Theodor von Tilsit. It has been quite some time, has it not?”

Herr Oberst Ernst Theodor von Tilsit made a dismissive noise and took a step toward Isidore, reaching out his hand as he did so. However, he had no intention of taking her hand and kissing it for he did not regard her worthy of such social etiquette. Instead he opened one side of her ankle length coat and regarded her attire: her favoured plus fours.

“I will apologise to you, Leutnant Fraiser; the catamite is not yours. It would appear Fräulein Runce has not changed her ways since expulsion from her Mädchenschulen. She even dresses in an unnatural way, no doubt to please her catamite.”

Herr Oberst withdrew his hand and told Müller, “Another name for your list. Fräulein Isabel Runce and her catamite. The catamite’s name is unimportant.”

“Actually, it’s Isidore. But then it has been quite some time. And I guessed long ago, von *Til-shit* that it was you who for petty narcissism brought about my expulsion. Was I not submissive enough for you when we met at my school all those years ago? And by the way, whatever your name is,” Isidore looked at Müller, “My business partner and I are currently seconded to Scotland Yard and are acting under the Extradition Act of 1870 and will be taking Fraiser and Guliford here into our custody. And yes, the Act was ratified by the French Republic and is enforceable here on train or off!”

Herr Oberst shrugged dismissively. “It is a shame but also quite fortunate that I discovered your unnatural ways. You could have been moulded into quite the acceptable wife and provider of children. I see you have retained your fine bone structure and I recall your grasp of German was foundational.

Let that be a lesson to you, Müller. Purity of breed is everything. Do not be taken in by the shop frontage. But as a chicken farmer you will be familiar with pedigree breeding.”

Müller was tired of all this chicken farmer jibing. “Very well, which one of you has the documents now? It seems it is no longer Herr Leutnant Fraiser as he has been handcuffed to a hand rail.”

“You must excuse Müller, he can be abrupt and he also wishes to take luncheon in the dining carriage and he is concerned—ah, what are you concerned about, Müller?” Herr Oberst didn’t wait for a reply.

“Yes, hand over the documents the German Empire paid Fraiser to obtain and we can all go back to our normal lives. Except of course for Fräulein Runce and her catamite who epitomise the unnatural.”

Isidore threw a glance at Tilley and gave the slightest of nods. She then slowly opened the front of her coat as Tilley, understanding something was about to happen, dropped her arms and adjusted her footing.

Without saying anything further, Isidore took a step toward Herr Oberst or von Tilshit as she had long ago christened him and brought her right knee up swiftly and forcefully into direct contact with the man’s groin.

Herr Oberst let out an agonising cry as pain erupted in his groin and spread throughout his body and he dropped in agony to the floor.

At the same time, Tilley launched herself at Müller, grabbed his pencil, forced him to the floor and pressed the neatly sharpened pencil tip into the side of his neck.

“I wouldn’t move if I were you; the last thing you want to be doing is wandering around with a snapped off pencil in your neck. Not all ladies find that sort of thing attractive, especially if I get the wrong vein and you start pumping out blood. Very messy and really quite terminal, I should think.”

~~~~~