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In a broad Moscow street not two hundred yards from the Leningrad station, on the upper floor of an ornate and hideous hotel built by Stalin in the style known to Muscovites as Empire During the Plague, the British Council's first ever audio fair for the teaching of the English language and the spread of British culture was grinding to its excruciating end. The time was half past five, the summer weather erratic. After fierce rain showers all day long, a false sunlight was blazing in the puddles and raising vapour from the pavements. Of the passers-by, the younger ones wore jeans and sneakers, but their elders were still huddled in their warmers.

The room the Council had rented was not expensive but neither was it appropriate to the occasion. I have seen it – Not long ago, in Moscow on quite another mission, I tiptoed up the great empty staircase and, with a diplomatic passport in my pocket, stood in the eternal dusk that shrouds old ball-rooms when they are asleep – With its plump brown pillars and gilded mirrors, it was better suited to the last hours of a sinking liner than the launch of a great initiative. On the ceiling, snarling Russians in proletarian caps shook their fists at Lenin. Their vigour contrasted unhelpfully with the chipped green racks of sound cassettes along the walls, featuring *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *Advanced Computer English in Three Hours*.

The sackcloth sound-booths, locally procured and lacking many of their promised features, had the sadness of deck chairs on a rainy beach. The exhibitors' stands, crammed under the shadow of an overhanging gallery, seemed as blasphemous as betting shops in a tabernacle.

Nevertheless a fair of sorts had taken place. People had come, as Moscow people do, provided they have the documents and status to satisfy the hard-eyed boys in leather jackets at the door. Out of politeness. Out of curiosity. To talk to Westerners. Because it is there. And now on the fifth and final evening the great farewell cocktail party of exhibitors and invited guests was getting into its stride. A handful of the small *nomenclatura* of the Soviet cultural bureaucracy was gathering under the chandelier, the ladies in their beehive hairstyles and flowered frocks designed for slenderer frames, the gentlemen slimmed by the shiny French-tailored suits that signified access to the special clothing stores. Only their British hosts, in despondent shades of grey, observed the monotone of socialist austerity. The hubbub rose, a brigade of pinafores governesses distributed the curling salami sandwiches and warm white wine. A senior British diplomat who was not quite the Ambassador shook the better hands and said he was delighted.

Only Niki Landau among them had withheld himself from the celebrations. He was stooped over the table in his empty stand, totting up his last orders and checking his dockets against expenses, for it was a maxim of Landau's never to go out and play until he had wrapped up his day's business.

And in the corner of his eye – an anxious blue blur was all that she amounted to – this Soviet woman he was deliberately ignoring. *Trouble*, he was thinking as he laboured. *Avoid*.

The air of festivity had not communicated itself to Landau,

festive by temperament though he was. For one thing, he had a lifelong aversion to British officialdom, ever since his father had been forcibly returned to Poland. The British themselves, he told me later, he would hear no wrong of them. He was one of them by adoption and he had the poker-backed reverence of the convert. But the Foreign Office flunkys were another matter. And the loftier they were, and the more they twitched and smirked and raised their stupid eyebrows at him, the more he hated them and thought about his dad. For another thing, if he had been left to himself, he would never have come to the audio fair in the first place. He'd have been tucked up in Brighton with a nice new little friend he had, called Lydia, in a nice little private hotel he knew for taking little friends.

'Better to keep our powder dry till the Moscow book fair in September,' Landau had advised his clients at their headquarters on the Western by-pass. 'The Russkies love a book, you see, Bernard, but the audio market scares them and they aren't geared for it. Go in with the book fair, we'll clean up. Go in with the audio fair, we're dead.'

But Landau's clients were young and rich and did not believe in death. 'Niki boy,' said Bernard, walking round behind him and putting a hand on his shoulder, which Landau didn't like, 'in the world today, we've got to show the flag. We're patriots, see, Niki? Like you. That's why we're an offshore company. With the *glasnost* today, the Soviet Union, it's the Mount Everest of the recording business. And you're going to put us on the top, Niki. Because if you're not, we'll find somebody who will. Somebody younger, Niki, right? Somebody with the drive and the class.'

The drive Landau had still. But the class, as he himself was the first to tell you, the class, forget it. He was a card, that's

what he liked to be. A pushy, short-arsed Polish card and proud of it. He was Old Nik the cheeky chappie of the Eastward-facing reps, capable, he liked to boast, of selling filthy pictures to a Georgian convent or hair tonic to a Rumanian billiard ball. He was Landau the undersized bedroom athlete, who wore raised heels to give his Slav body the English scale he admired, and ritzy suits that whistled 'here I am'. When Old Nik set up his stand, his travelling colleagues assured our unattributable enquirers, you could hear the tinkle of the handbell on his Polish vendor's barrow.

And little Landau shared the joke with them, he played their game. 'Boys, I'm the Pole you wouldn't touch with a barge,' he would declare proudly as he ordered up another round. Which was his way of getting them to laugh with him. Instead of at him. And then most likely, to demonstrate his point, he would whip a comb from his top pocket and drop into a crouch. And with the aid of a picture on the wall, or any other polished surface, he'd sweep back his too-black hair in preparation for fresh conquest, using both his little hands to coax it into manliness. 'Who's that comely one I'm looking at over there in the corner, then?' he'd ask, in his godless blend of ghetto Polish and East End cockney. 'Hullo there, sweetheart! Why are we suffering all alone tonight?' And once out of five times he'd score, which in Landau's book was an acceptable rate of return, always provided you kept asking.

But this evening Landau wasn't thinking of scoring or even asking. He was thinking that yet again he had worked his heart out all week for a pittance – or as he put it more graphically to me, a tart's kiss. And that every fair these days, whether it was a book fair or an audio fair or any other kind of fair, took a little more out of him than he liked to admit to

himself, just as every woman did. And gave him a fraction too little in return. And that tomorrow's plane back to London couldn't come too soon. And that if this Russian bird in blue didn't stop insinuating herself into his attention when he was trying to close his books and put on his party smile and join the jubilant throng, he would very likely say something to her in her own language that both of them would live to regret.

That she was Russian went without saying. Only a Russian woman would have a plastic perhaps-bag dangling from her arm in readiness for the chance purchase that is the triumph of everyday life, even if most perhaps-bags were of string. Only a Russian would be so nosy as to stand close enough to check a man's arithmetic. And only a Russian would preface her interruption with one of those fastidious grunts, which in a man always reminded Landau of his father doing up his shoe laces, and in a woman, Harry, bed.

'Excuse me, sir. Are you the gentleman from Abercrombie & Blair?' she asked.

'Not here, dear,' said Landau without lifting his head. She had spoken English, so he had spoken English in return, which was the way he played it always.

'Mr. Barley?'

'Not Barley, dear. Landau.'

'But this is Mr. Barley's stand.'

'This is not Barley's stand. This is my stand. Abercrombie & Blair are next door.'

Still without looking up, Landau jabbed his pencil-end to the left, towards the empty stand on the other side of the partition, where a green and gold board proclaimed the ancient publishing house of Abercrombie & Blair of Norfolk Street, Strand.

‘But that stand is empty. No one is there,’ the woman objected. ‘It was empty yesterday also.’

‘Correct. Right on,’ Landau retorted in a tone that was final enough for anybody. Then he ostentatiously lowered himself further into his account book, waiting for the blue blur to remove itself. Which was rude of him, he knew, and her continuing presence made him feel ruder.

‘But where is Scott Blair? Where is the man they call Barley? I must speak to him. It is very urgent.’

Landau was by now hating the woman with unreasoning ferocity.

‘Mr. Scott Blair,’ he began as he snapped up his head and stared at her full on, ‘more commonly known to his intimates as Barley, is *awol*, madam. That means absent without leave. His company booked a stand – yes. And Mr. Scott Blair is chairman, president, governor-general and for all I know life-time dictator of that company. However, he did not occupy his stand –’ but here, having caught her eye, he began to lose his footing. ‘Listen, dear, I happen to be trying to make a living here, right? I am not making it for Mr. Barley Scott Blair, love him as I may.’

Then he stopped, as a chivalrous concern replaced his momentary anger. The woman was trembling. Not only with the hands that held her brown perhaps-bag, but at the neck, for her prim blue dress was finished with a collar of old lace and Landau could see how it shook against her skin and how her skin was actually whiter than the lace. Yet her mouth and jaw were set with determination and her expression commanded him.

‘Please, sir, you must be very kind and help me,’ she said as if there were no choice.

Now Landau prided himself on knowing women. It was

another of his irksome boasts but it was not without foundation. 'Women, they're my hobby, my life's study and my consuming passion, Harry,' he confided to me, and the conviction in his voice was as solemn as a Mason's pledge. He could no longer tell you how many he had had, but he was pleased to say that the figure ran into the hundreds and there was not one of them who had cause to regret the experience. 'I play straight, I choose wisely, Harry,' he assured me, tapping one side of his nose with his forefinger. 'No cut wrists, no broken marriages, no harsh words afterwards.' How true this was, nobody would ever know, myself included, but there can be no doubt that the instincts that had guided him through his philanderings came rushing to his assistance as he formed his judgments about the woman.

She was earnest. She was intelligent. She was determined. She was scared, even though her dark eyes were lit with humour. And she had that rare quality which Landau in his flowery way liked to call the Class That Only Nature Can Bestow. In other words, she had quality as well as strength. And since in moments of crisis our thoughts do not run consecutively but rather sweep over us in waves of intuition and experience, he sensed all these things at once and was on terms with them by the time she spoke to him again.

'A Soviet friend of mine has written a creative and important work of literature,' she said after taking a deep breath. 'It is a novel. A great novel. Its message is important for all mankind.'

She had dried up.

'A novel,' Landau prompted. And then, for no reason he could afterwards think of, 'What's its title, dear?'

The strength in her, he decided, came neither from bravado nor insanity but from conviction.

‘What’s its message then, if it hasn’t got a title?’

‘It concerns actions before words. It rejects the gradualism of the *perestroika*. It demands action and rejects all cosmetic change.’

‘Nice,’ said Landau, impressed.

She spoke like my mother used to, Harry: chin up and straight into your face.

‘In spite of *glasnost* and the supposed liberalism of the new guidelines, my friend’s novel cannot yet be published in the Soviet Union,’ she continued. ‘Mr. Scott Blair has undertaken to publish it with discretion.’

‘Lady,’ said Landau kindly, his face now close to hers. ‘If your friend’s novel is published by the great house of Abercrombie & Blair, believe me, you can be assured of total secrecy.’

He said this partly as a joke he couldn’t resist and partly because his instincts told him to take the stiffness out of their conversation and make it less conspicuous to anybody watching. And whether she understood the joke or not, the woman smiled also, a swift warm smile of self-encouragement that was like a victory over her fears.

‘Then, Mr. Landau, if you love peace, please take this manuscript with you back to England and give it immediately to Mr. Scott Blair. Only to Mr. Scott Blair. It is a gift of trust.’

What happened next happened quickly, a street-corner transaction, willing seller to willing buyer. The first thing Landau did was look behind her, past her shoulder. He did that for his own preservation as well as hers. It was his experience that when the Russkies wanted to get up to a piece of mischief, they always had other people close by. But his end of the assembly room was empty, the area beneath the gallery

where the stands were was dark and the party at the centre of the room was by now in full cry. The three boys in leather jackets at the front door were talking stodgily among themselves.

His survey completed, he read the girl's plastic name badge on her lapel, which was something he would normally have done earlier but her black-brown eyes had distracted him. Yekaterina Orlova, he read. And underneath, the word 'October', given in both English and Russian, this being the name of one of Moscow's smaller State publishing houses specialising in translations of Soviet books for export, mainly to other Socialist countries, which I am afraid condemned it to a certain dowdiness.

Next he told her what to do, or perhaps he was already telling her by the time he read her badge. Landau was a street kid, up to all the tricks. The woman might be as brave as six lions and by the look of her probably was. But she was no conspirator. Therefore he took her unhesitatingly into his protection. And in doing so he spoke to her as he would to any woman who needed his basic counsel, such as where to find his hotel bedroom or what to tell her hubby when she got home.

'Got it with you then, have you, dear?' he asked, peering down at the perhaps-bag and smiling like a friend.

'Yes.'

'In there, is it?'

'Yes.'

'Then give me the whole bag normally,' Landau said, talking her through her act. 'That's the way. Now give me a friendly Russian kiss. The formal sort. Nice. You've brought me an official farewell gift on the last evening of the fair, you see. Something that will cement Anglo-Soviet relations and

make me overweight on the flight home unless I dump it in the dustbin at the airport. Very normal transaction. I must have received half a dozen such gifts today already.'

Part of this was spoken while he crouched with his back to her. For, reaching into the bag, he had already slipped out the brown-paper parcel that was inside it and was dropping it deftly into his briefcase, which was of the home-filing variety, very compendious, with compartments that opened in a fan.

'Married, are we, Katya?'

No answer. Maybe she hadn't heard. Or she was too busy watching him.

'Is it your husband who's written the novel, then?' said Landau, undeterred by her silence.

'It is dangerous for you,' she whispered. 'You must believe in what you are doing. Then everything is clear.'

As if he had not heard this warning at all, Landau selected, from a pile of samples that he had kept to give away tonight, a four-pack of the Royal Shakespeare Company's specially commissioned reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which he placed ostentatiously on the table and signed for her on the plastic casing with a felt-tip pen: 'From Niki to Katya, Peace', and the date. Then he put the four-pack ceremoniously into the perhaps-bag for her, and gathered the handles of the bag together and pressed them into her hand, because she was becoming lifeless and he was worried she might break down or cease to function. Only then did he give her the reassurance that she seemed to be asking for, while he continued to hold her hand, which was cold, he told me, but nice.

'All of us have got to do something risky now and then, haven't we, dear?' Landau said lightly. 'Going to adorn the party, are we?'

‘No.’

‘Like a nice dinner out somewhere?’

‘It is not convenient.’

‘You want me to take you to the door?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘I think we’ve got to smile, dear,’ he said, still in English as he walked her across the room, chatting to her like the good salesman he had once again become.

Reaching the great landing, he shook her hand. ‘See you at the book fair, then? September. And thanks for warning me, okay? I’ll bear it in mind. Still, the main thing is, we’ve got a deal. Which is always nice. Right?’

She took his hand and seemed to draw courage from it, for she smiled again and her smile was dazed but grateful, and almost irresistibly warm.

‘My friend has made a great gesture,’ she explained as she pushed back an unruly lock of hair. ‘Please be sure that Mr. Barley is aware of this.’

‘I’ll tell him. Don’t you worry,’ said Landau jauntily.

He would have liked another smile just for himself, but she had lost interest in him. She was delving in her bag for her card, which he knew she had forgotten till this moment. ‘ORLOVA, Yekaterina Borisovna,’ it read, in Cyrillic one side and Roman the other, again with the name October in both renderings. She gave it to him, then walked stiffly down the pompous staircase, head up and one hand on the broad marble balustrade, the other hand trailing the perhaps-bag. The boys in leather jackets watched her all the way down to the hall. And Landau, while he popped the card into his top pocket with the half-dozen others he’d collected in the last two hours, saw them watch her and gave the boys a wink. And the boys after due reflection winked back at him, because

this was the new season of openness when a pair of good Russian hips could be acknowledged for what they were, even to a foreigner.

For the fifty minutes of revelry that remained, Niki Landau threw his heart into the party. Sang and danced for a grim-faced Scottish librarian in pearls. Recited a witty political anecdote about Mrs. Thatcher for a pair of pale listeners from the State Copyright Agency, VAAP, till they suddenly emitted wild laughter. Buttered up three ladies from Progress Publishers and, in a series of nimble journeys to his briefcase, presented each with a memento of his stay, for Landau was a natural giver and remembered names and promises, just as he remembered so many other things, with the directness of an unencumbered mind. But all the while he kept the briefcase unobtrusively in view, and even before the guests had left, he was holding it in his spare hand while he made his farewells. And when he boarded the private bus that was waiting to take the reps back to their hotel, he sat with it on his knees while he joined in a tuneful unison of rugby songs, led as usual by Spikey Morgan.

‘Ladies present now, boys,’ Landau warned and, standing up, commanded silence at the passages that he considered too broad. But even when he was playing the great conductor he contrived to keep a firm grip on the briefcase.

At the hotel entrance the usual gaggle of pimps, drug-pushers and currency dealers hung around and, together with their KGB minders, watched the group enter. But Landau saw nothing in their behaviour to concern him, whether over-watchful or over-casual. The crippled old warrior who guarded the passageway to the lifts demanded as usual to see his hotel pass, but when Landau, who had already presented him with a hundred Marlboros, asked him accusingly in

Russian why he wasn't out flirting with his girlfriend tonight, he gave a rasping laugh and punched him on the shoulder in goodfellowship.

'If they're trying to frame me, I thought, they'd better be quick about it or the trail will be cold, Harry,' he told me, taking the part of the opposition rather than his own. 'When you frame, Harry, you've got to move in fast while the evidence is still planted on the victim,' he explained, as if he had been framing people all his life.

'Bar of the National, nine o'clock then,' Spikey Morgan said to him wearily when they had fought their way out at the fourth floor.

'Could be, could be not, Spikey,' Landau replied. 'I'm not quite myself, to be honest.'

'Thank God for that,' said Spikey through a yawn, and plodded off into his own dark corridor watched by the evil-eyed floor concierge in her horsebox.

Reaching his bedroom door Landau braced himself before putting the key into the lock. They'd do it now, he thought. Here and now would be the best time to snatch me and the manuscript.

But when he stepped inside, the room was empty and undisturbed and he felt foolish for having suspected it of being any different. Still alive, he thought, and set the briefcase on the bed.

Then he pulled the handkerchief-sized curtains as close as they would go, which was halfway, and hung the useless 'Do Not Disturb' notice on the door, which he then locked. He emptied the pockets of his suit, including the pocket where he stored incoming business cards, pulled off his jacket and tie, his metal armbands, finally his shirt. From the fridge he poured himself half an inch of lemon vodka and took a sip.

Landau was not a drinker really, he explained to me, but when in Moscow he did like a nice lemon vodka to end his day. Taking his glass to the bathroom, he stood before the mirror and for a good ten minutes anxiously examined the roots of his hair for signs of white, touching out offending spots with the aid of a new formula that was working wonders. Having completed this labour to his satisfaction, he bound his skull with an elaborate rubber turban like a bathing cap and showered, while he sang 'I am the very model of a modern major-general' rather well. Then he towelled himself, vigorously for the sake of his muscle-tone, slipped into a bold flowered bathrobe and marched back to the bedroom still singing.

And he did these things partly because he always did them and needed the steady familiarity of his own routines, but partly also because he was proud of having thrown caution to the winds for once and not found twenty-five sound reasons for doing nothing, which these days he might have done.

She was a lady, she was afraid, she needed help, Harry. When did Niki Landau ever refuse a lady? And if he was wrong about her, well then she'd made a crying fool of him and he might as well pack up his toothbrush and report himself at the front door of the Lubyanka for five years' study of their excellent graffiti without the option. Because he'd rather be made a fool of twenty times over than turn away that woman without a reason. And so saying, if only in his mind, for he was always alert to the possibility of microphones, Landau drew her parcel from the briefcase and with a certain shyness set to work untying the string but not cutting it, just the way he had been taught by his sainted mother, whose photograph at this moment nestled faithfully in his wallet.

They've got the same glow, he thought in pleasant recognition as he worried patiently at the knot. It's the Slav skin. It's the Slav eyes, the smile. Two nice Slav girls together. The only difference was that Katya hadn't finished up in Treblinka.

The knot finally yielded. Landau coiled up the string and laid it on the bed. I have to know, you see, dear, he explained to the woman Yekaterina Borisovna in his mind. I don't want to pry, I'm not the nosy one, but if I've got to con my way through Moscow customs, I'd better know what I'm conning them out of, because it helps.

Delicately so as not to tear it, using both hands, Landau parted the brown paper. He did not see himself as any sort of a hero, or not yet. What was a danger to a Moscow beauty might not be a danger to him. He had grown up hard, it was true. The East End of London had been no rest cure for a ten-year-old Polish immigrant, and Landau had taken his share of split lips, broken noses, smashed knuckles and hunger. But if you had asked him now or at any time in the last thirty years what his definition of a hero was, he would have replied without a second's thought that a hero was the first man out of the back door when they started yelling for volunteers.

One thing he did know as he stared at the contents of that brown-paper parcel: he had the buzz on him. Why he had it was something he could sort out later when there weren't better things to do. But if dodgy work needed to be done tonight, Niki Landau was your man. Because when Niki has the buzz, Harry, no one buzzes better, as the girls all know.

The first thing he saw was the envelope. He registered the three notebooks underneath it and saw that the envelope and notebooks were joined with a thick elastic band, the kind he always saved but never found a use for. But it was the envelope

that held him because it had her writing on it – a strict copy-book kind of writing that confirmed his pure image of her. One square brown envelope, glued rather messily and addressed ‘Personal for Mr. Bartholomew Scott Blair, urgent’.

Slipping it free of the elastic band, Landau held it to the light but it was opaque and revealed no shadow. He explored it with his finger and thumb. One sheet of thin paper inside, two at most. *Mr. Scott Blair has undertaken to publish it with discretion*, he remembered. *Mr. Landau, if you love peace . . . give it immediately to Mr. Scott Blair. Only to Mr. Scott Blair . . . it is a gift of trust.*

She trusts me too, he thought. He turned the envelope over. The back was blank.

And there being only so much that one may learn from a sealed brown envelope, and since Landau drew the line at reading Barley’s or anybody else’s personal mail, he opened his briefcase again and, peering into the stationery compartment, extracted from it a plain manila envelope of his own, with the words ‘From the desk of Mr. Nicholas P. Landau’ inscribed tastefully on the flap. Then he popped the brown envelope inside the manila one and sealed it. Then he scribbled the name ‘Barley’ on it and filed it in the compartment marked ‘Social’, which contained such oddities as visiting cards that had been pressed on him by strangers and notes of odd commissions he had undertaken to perform for people – such as the publishing lady who needed refills for her Parker pen or the Ministry of Culture official who wanted a Snoopy T-shirt for his nephew or the lady from October who simply happened to be passing while he was wrapping up his stand.

And Landau did this because with the tradecraft that was instinctive in him, if totally untaught, he knew that his first job was to keep the envelope as far away as possible from the

notebooks. If the notebooks were trouble, then he wanted nothing that would link them with the letter. And vice versa. And in this he was entirely right. Our most versatile and erudite trainers, dyed in all the oceans of our Service folklore, would not have told it to him one whit differently.

Only then did he take up the three notebooks and slip off the elastic band while he kept one ear cocked for footfalls in the corridor. Three grubby Russian notebooks, he reflected, selecting the top one and turning it slowly over. Bound in crudely illustrated board, the spine in fraying cloth. Two hundred and twenty-four pages of poor-quality, feint-ruled quarto, if Landau remembered correctly from the days when he peddled stationery, Soviet price around twenty kopeks retail from any good stationer, always provided that the delivery had arrived and that you were standing in the right queue on the right day.

Finally he opened the notebook and stared at the first page.

She's daft, he thought, fighting off his disgust.

She's in the hands of a nutter. Poor kid.

Meaningless scribbblings, done by a lunatic with a mapping pen, in Indian ink at breakneck speed and furious angles. In the margins, sideways, longways. Diagonally across itself like a doctor's writing on the blink. Peppered with stupid exclamation marks and underlinings. Some of it Cyrillic, some English. 'The Creator creates creators,' he read in English. 'To be. Not to be. To counter-be.' Followed by a burst of stupid French about the warfare of folly and the folly of warfare, followed by a barbed-wire entanglement. Thank you very much, he thought, and flipped to another page, then another, both so dense with crazy writing you could hardly see the paper. 'Having spent seventy years destroying the popular will, we cannot expect it suddenly to rise up and save

John le Carré

us,' he read. A quote? A night thought? There was no way to tell. References to writers, Russian, Latin and European. Talk of Nietzsche, Kafka and people he'd never heard of, let alone read. More talk of war, this time in English: 'The old declare it, the young fight it, but today the babies and old people fight it too.' He turned another page and came on nothing but a round brown stain. He lifted the notebook to his nose and sniffed. Booze, he thought with contempt. Stinks like a brewery. No wonder he's a mate of Barley Blair's. A double page devoted to a series of hysterical proclamations.

– OUR GREATEST PROGRESS IS IN THE FIELD OF
BACKWARDNESS!

– SOVIET PARALYSIS IS THE MOST PROGRESSIVE IN
THE WORLD!

– OUR BACKWARDNESS IS OUR GREATEST MILI-
TARY SECRET!

– IF WE DON'T KNOW OUR OWN INTENTIONS AND
OUR OWN CAPACITIES, HOW CAN WE KNOW YOURS?

– THE TRUE ENEMY IS OUR OWN INCOMPETENCE!

And on the next page, a poem, painstakingly copied from
Lord knew where:

*He wires in and wires out.
And leaves the people still in doubt
Whether the snake that made the track,
Was going south or coming back.*

Scrambling to his feet, Landau strode angrily to the win-
dow which gave on to a glum courtyard full of uncollected
rubbish.

'A blooming word-artist, Harry. That's what I thought he was. Some long-haired, drug-ridden, self-indulgent genius, and she's gone and thrown herself away on him same as they all do.'

She was lucky there was no Moscow telephone directory or he'd have rung her up and told her what she'd got.

To stoke his anger, he took up the second book, licked his fingertip and whisked contemptuously through it page by page, which was how he came upon the drawings. Then everything went blank for him for a moment, like a flash of empty screen in the middle of a film, while he cursed himself for being an impetuous little Slav instead of a cool calm Englishman. Then he sat down on the bed again, but gently, as if there were someone resting in it, someone he had hurt with his premature condemnations.

For if Landau despised what too often passed for literature, his pleasure in technical matters was unconfined. Even when he didn't follow what he was looking at, he could relish a good page of mathematics all day long. And he knew at one glance, as he had known of the woman Katya, that what he was looking at here was quality. Not your ruled drawing, it was true. Light sketches but all the better for it. Drawn freehand without instruments by somebody who could think with a pencil. Tangents, parabolas, cones. And in between the drawings, businesslike descriptions that architects and engineers use, words like 'aimpoint' and 'captive carry' and 'bias' and gravity and trajectory – 'some in your English, Harry, and some in your Russian.'

Though Harry is not my real name.

Yet when he began to compare the lettering of these beautifully-written words in the second book with the rambling jungle in the first, he discovered to his astonishment

certain unmistakable similarities. So that he had the sensation of looking at a kind of schizophrenic's diary with Dr. Jekyll writing one volume and Mr. Hyde the other.

He looked in the third notebook, which was as orderly and purposeful as the second but arranged like a kind of mathematical log with dates and numbers and formulae and the word 'error' repeating itself frequently, often underlined or lifted with an exclamation mark. Then suddenly Landau stared, and continued staring, and could not remove his eyes from what he was reading. The cosy obscurity of the writer's technical jargon had ended with a bang. So had his philosophical ramblings and classy annotated drawings. The words came off the page with a blazoned clarity.

'The American strategists can sleep in peace. Their nightmares cannot be realised. The Soviet knight is dying inside his armour. He is a secondary power like you British. He can start a war but cannot continue one and cannot win one. Believe me.'

Landau looked no further. A sense of respect, mingled with a strong instinct for self-preservation, advised him that he had disturbed the tomb enough. Taking up the elastic band he put the three notebooks together and snapped it back over them. That's it, he thought. From here on I mind my business and do my duty. Which is to take the manuscript to my adopted England and give it immediately to Mr. Bartholomew *alias* Barley Scott Blair.

Barley Blair, he thought in amazement as he opened his wardrobe and hauled out the large aluminium hand-case where he kept his samples. Well, well. We often wondered whether we were nurturing a spy in our midst and now we know.

Landau's calm was absolute, he assured me. The Englishman had once more taken command of the Pole. 'If Barley

could do it, I could, Harry, that's what I said to myself.' And it was what he said to me too, when for a short spell he appointed me his confessor. People do that to me sometimes. They sense the unrealised part of me and talk to it as if it were the reality.

Lifting the case on to the bed he snapped the locks and drew out two audio-visual kits that the Soviet officials had ordered him to remove from his display – one pictorial history of the twentieth century with spoken commentary which they had arbitrarily ruled to be anti-Soviet, one handbook of the human body with action photographs and a keep-fit exercise cassette, which, after gazing longingly at the pliant young goddess in the leotard, the officials had decided was pornographic.

The history kit was a glossy affair, built as a coffee-table book and containing a quantity of interior pockets for cassettes, parallel texts, progressive vocabulary cards and students' notes. Having emptied the pockets of their contents, Landau offered the notebooks to each in turn but found none large enough. He decided to convert two pockets into one. He fetched a pair of nail scissors from his sponge bag and set to work with steady hands, easing the steel staples out of the centre divide.

Barley Blair, he thought again as he inserted the point of the nail scissors. I should have guessed, if only because you were the one it couldn't possibly be. Mr. Bartholomew Scott Blair, surviving scion of Abercrombie & Blair – spy. The first staple had come loose. He gingerly extracted it. Barley Blair, who couldn't sell hay to a rich horse to save his dying mother on her birthday, we used to say: spy. He began prising the second staple. Whose principal claim to fame was that two years ago at the Belgrade book fair he had drunk Spikey

Morgan under the table on straight vodkas, then played tenor sax with the band so beautifully that even the police were clapping. Spy. Gentleman spy. Well, here's a letter from your lady, as they say in the nursery rhyme.

Landau picked up the notebooks and offered them to the space he had prepared but it was still not big enough. He would have to make one pocket out of three.

Playing the drunk, thought Landau, his mind still on Barley. Playing the fool and fooling us. Burning up the last of your family money, running the old firm deeper into the ground. Oh yes. Except that somehow or another you always managed to find one of those smart City banking houses to bail you out in the nick of time, didn't you? And what about your chess-playing then? *That* should have been a clue, if Landau had only had eyes for it! How does a man who's drunk himself silly beat all comers at chess then, Harry – straight games – if he isn't a trained spy?

The three pockets had become one pocket, the notebooks fitted more or less inside, the printed indication above them still read 'Student Notes'.

'Notes,' Landau explained in his mind to the inquisitive young customs officer at Sheremetyevo airport. 'Notes, you see, son, like it says. Student's notes. That's why there's a pocket here for notes. And these notes that you are holding in your hand are the work of an actual student following the course. That's why they're here, son, do you see? They are *demonstration notes*. And the drawings here, they're to do with the –'

With socio-economic patterns, son. With demographic population shifts. With vital statistics that you Russkies can never get enough of, can you? Here, seen one of these? It's called a body book.

Which might or might not save Landau's hide, depending on how smart the boy was, and how much they knew, and how they felt about their wives that day.

But for the long night ahead of him, and for the dawn raid when they kicked the door down and burst in on him with drawn pistols and shouted, 'All right, Landau, give us the notebooks!' – for that happy moment, the kit wouldn't do at all. 'Notebooks, Officer? Notebooks? Oh, you mean that bunch of junk some loony Russian beauty pressed on me at the fair tonight. I think you'll probably find them in the rubbish basket, Officer, if the maid hasn't emptied it for once in her life.'

For this contingency also, Landau now meticulously set the scene. Removing the notebooks from the pocket of the history kit, he placed them artistically in the wastepaper basket exactly as if he had flung them there in the rage he had felt when he had taken his first look. To keep them company, he tossed in his surplus trade literature and brochures, as well as a couple of useless farewell gifts he had received: the thin volume of yet another Russian poet, a tin-backed blotter. As a final touch, he added a pair of undarned socks that only your rich Westerner throws away.

Once again I must marvel, as later we all did, at Landau's untutored ingenuity.

Landau did not go out and play that night. He endured the familiar imprisonment of his Moscow hotel room. From his window he watched the long dusk turn to darkness and the dim lights of the city reluctantly brighten. He made himself tea in his little travelling kettle and ate a couple of fruit bars from his iron rations. He dwelt gratefully upon the most rewarding of his conquests. He smiled ruefully at others. He braced himself for pain and solitude and summoned up his hard childhood to help him. He went through the contents

of his wallet and his briefcase and his pockets and took out everything that was particularly private to him which he would not wish to answer for across a bare table – a hot letter a little friend sent him years ago that could still revive his appetites, membership of a certain video-by-mail club that he belonged to. His first instinct was to ‘burn them like in the movies’ but he was restrained by the sight of the smoke detectors in the ceiling, though he’d have laid any money they didn’t work.

So he found a paper bag and, having torn up everything very small, he put the pieces in the bag, dropped the bag out of the window and saw it join the rubbish in the courtyard. Then he stretched himself out on the bed and watched the dark go by. Sometimes he felt brave, sometimes he was so scared that he had to drive his fingernails into his palms to hold himself together. Once he turned on the television set, hoping for nubile girl gymnasts, which he liked. But instead he got the Emperor himself telling his bemused children for the umpteenth time that the old order had no clothes. And when Spikey Morgan, half drunk at best, telephoned from the bar of the National, Landau kept him on the line for company till old Spikey fell asleep.

Only once and at his lowest point did it cross Landau’s mind to present himself at the British Embassy and seek the assistance of the diplomatic bag. His momentary weakness angered him. ‘Those flunkeys?’ he asked himself in scorn. ‘The ones who sent my dad back to Poland? I wouldn’t trust them with a picture postcard of the Eiffel Tower, Harry.’

Besides, that wasn’t what she had asked him to do.

In the morning he dressed himself for his own execution, in his best suit, with the photograph of his mother inside his shirt.

And that is how I see Niki Landau still, whenever I dip into his file, or receive him for what we call a six-monthly top-up, which is when he likes to relive his hour of glory before signing yet another declaration of the Official Secrets Act. I see him stepping jauntily into the Moscow street with the metal suitcase in his hand, not knowing from Adam what's in it, but determined to risk his brave little neck for it anyway.

How he sees me, if he ever thinks of me, I dare not wonder. Hannah, whom I loved but failed, would have no doubt at all. 'As another of those Englishmen with hope in their faces and none in their hearts,' she would say, flushing with anger. For I am afraid she says whatever comes to her these days. Much of her old forbearance is gone.

The whole of Whitehall was agreed that no story should ever begin that way again. Indoctrinated ministers were furious about it. They set up a frightfully secret committee of enquiry to find out what went wrong, hear witnesses, name names, spare no blushes, point fingers, close gaps, prevent a recurrence, appoint me chairman and draft a report. What conclusions our committee reached, if any, remains the loftiest secret of them all, particularly from those of us who sat on it. For the function of such committees, as we all well knew, is to talk earnestly until the dust has settled, and then ourselves return to dust. Which, like a disgruntled Cheshire cat, our committee duly did, leaving nothing behind us but our frightfully secret frown, a meaningless interim working paper, and a bunch of secret annexes in the Treasury archives.

It began, in the less sparing language of Ned and his colleagues at the Russia House, with an imperial cock-up, between the hours of five and eight-thirty on a warm Sunday evening, when one Nicholas P. Landau, travelling salesman and taxpayer in good standing, if of Polish origin, with nothing recorded against, presented himself at the doors of no fewer than four separate Whitehall ministries to plead an urgent interview with an officer of the British Intelligence

Branch, as he was pleased to call it, only to be ridiculed, fobbed off and in one instance physically manhandled. Though whether the two temporary doormen at the Defence Ministry went so far as to grab Landau by the collar and the seat of his pants, as he maintained they did, and frogmarch him to the door, or whether they merely assisted him back into the street, to use *their* words, is a point on which we were unable to achieve a consensus.

But why, our committee asked sternly, did the two doormen feel obliged to provide this assistance in the first place?

Mr. Landau refused to let us look inside his briefcase, sir. Yes, he offered to let us take charge of the briefcase while he waited, provided he kept charge of the key, sir. But that wasn't regulations. And yes, he shook it in our faces, patted it for us, tossed it about in his hands, apparently in order to demonstrate that there was nothing in it that any of us needed to be afraid of. But that wasn't regulations either. And when we tried with a minimum of force to relieve him of the said briefcase, this *gentleman* – as Landau in their testimony had belatedly become – resisted our efforts, sir, and shouted loudly in a foreign accent, causing a disturbance.

But what did he shout? we asked, distressed by the notion of anybody shouting in Whitehall on a Sunday.

Well, sir, so far as we were able to make him out, him in his emotional state, he shouted that this briefcase of his contained highly secret papers, sir. Which had been entrusted to him by a Russian, sir, in Moscow.

And him a rampageous little Pole, sir, they might have added. On a hot cricketing Sunday in London, sir, and us watching the replay of the Pakistanis against Botham in the back room.

Even at the Foreign Office, that freezing hearth of official British hospitality, where the despairing Landau presented himself as a last resort and with the greatest of reluctance, it was only by dint of high entreaty and some honest-to-God Slav tears that he fought his way to the rarefied ear of the Honourable Palmer Wellow, author of a discerning monograph on Liszt.

And if Landau had not used a new tactic, probably the Slav tears would not have helped. Because this time he placed the briefcase open on the counter so that the doorman, who was young but sceptical, could crane his pomaded head to the recently installed armoured glass and scowl down into it with his indolent eyes, and see for himself that it was only a bunch of dirty old notebooks in there and a brown envelope, not bombs.

‘Come-back-Monday-ten-to-five,’ the doorman said through the wonderfully-new electric speaker, as if announcing a Welsh railway station, and slumped back into the darkness of his box.

The gate stood ajar. Landau looked at the young man, and looked past him at the great portico built a hundred years earlier to daunt the unruly princes of the Raj. And the next thing anyone knew, he had picked up his briefcase and, defeating all the seemingly impenetrable defences set up to prevent exactly such an onslaught, was pelting hell-for-leather with it – ‘like a bloomin’ Springbok, sir’ – across the hallowed courtyard up the steps into the enormous hall. And he was in luck. Palmer Wellow, whatever else he was, belonged to the appeasement side of the Foreign Office. And it was Palmer’s day on.

‘Hullo, *hullo*,’ Palmer murmured as he descended the great steps and beheld the disordered figure of Landau panting between two stout guards. ‘Well you *are* in a muck. My

name's Wellow. I'm a resident clerk here.' He held his left fist to his shoulder as if he hated dogs. But his right hand was extended in greeting.

'I don't want a clerk,' said Landau. 'I want a high officer or nothing.'

'Well, a clerk is *fairly* high,' Palmer modestly assured him. 'I expect you're put off by the language.'

It was only right to record – and our committee did – that nobody could fault Palmer Wellow's performance thus far. He was droll but he was effective. He put no polished foot wrong. He led Landau to an interviewing room and sat him down, all attention. He ordered a cup of tea for him with sugar for his shock, and offered him a digestive biscuit. With a costly fountain pen given him by a friend, he wrote down Landau's name and address and those of the companies that hired his services. He wrote down the number of Landau's British passport and his date and place of birth, 1930 in Warsaw. He insisted with disarming truthfulness that he had no knowledge of intelligence matters, but undertook to pass on Landau's material to the 'competent people', who would no doubt give it whatever attention it deserved. And because Landau once again insisted on it, he improvised a receipt for him on a sheet of Foreign Office blue draft, signed it and had the janitor add a date-and-time stamp. He told him that if there was anything further the authorities wished to discuss they would very probably get in touch with him, perhaps by means of the telephone.

Only then did Landau hesitatingly pass his scruffy package across the table and watch with lingering regret as Palmer's languid hand enfolded it.

'But why don't you simply give it to Mr. Scott Blair?' Palmer asked after he had studied the name on the envelope.

'I tried, for Christ's sake!' Landau burst out in fresh exasperation. 'I told you. I rang him everywhere. I've rung him till I'm blue in the face, I tell you. He's not at his home, he's not at work, he's not at his club, he's not at anywhere,' Landau protested, his English grammar slipping in despair. 'From the airport I tried. All right, it's a Saturday.'

'But it's Sunday,' Palmer objected with a forgiving smile.

'So it was a Saturday yesterday, wasn't it! I try his firm. I get an electronic howl. I look in the phone book. There's one in Hammersmith. Not his initials but Scott Blair. I get an angry lady, tells me to go to hell. There's a rep I know, Archie Parr, does the West Country for him. I ask Archie: "Archie, for Christ's sake, how do I get hold of Barley in a hurry?" "He's skedaddled, Niki. Done one of his bunks. Hasn't been seen in the shop for weeks." Enquiries, I try. London, the Home Counties. Not listed, not a Bartholomew. Well he wouldn't be, would he, not if he's a -'

'Not if he's a what?' said Palmer, intrigued.

'Look, he's vanished, right? He's vanished before. There could be reasons why he vanishes. Reasons that you don't know of because you're not meant to. Lives are at stake, could be. Not only his either. It's top urgent, she told me. And top secret. Now get on with it. Please.'

The same evening, there being not much doing on the world front apart from a dreary crisis in the Gulf and a squalid television scandal about soldiers and money in Washington, Palmer took himself off to a rather good party in Montpelier Square that was being thrown by a group of his year from Cambridge – bachelors like himself, but fun. An account of this occasion, too, reached our committee's ears.

'Have any of you heard of a Somebody Scott Blair, by the by?' Wellow asked them at a late hour when his memory of

Landau happened to have been revived by some bars of Chopin he was playing on the piano. 'Wasn't there a Scott Blair who was up with us or something?' he asked again when he failed to get through the noise.

'Couple of years ahead of us. Trinity,' came a fogged reply from across the room. 'Read History. Jazz fiend. Wanted to blow his saxophone for a living. Old man wouldn't wear it. Barley Blair. Pissed as a rat from daybreak.'

Palmer Wellow played a thunderous chord that stunned the garrulous company to silence. 'I said, is he a poisonous spy?' he enunciated.

'The father? He's dead.'

'The son, ass. Barley.'

Like someone stepping from behind a curtain, his informant emerged from the crowd of young and less young men and stood before him, glass in hand. And Palmer to his pleasure recognised him as a dear chum from Trinity a hundred years ago.

'I really don't know whether Barley's a poisonous spy or not, I'm afraid,' said Palmer's chum, with an asperity habitual to him, as the background babel rose to its former roar. 'He's certainly a failure, if that's a qualification.'

His curiosity whetted still further, Palmer returned to his spacious rooms at the Foreign Office and to Landau's envelope and notebooks, which he had entrusted to the janitor for safekeeping. And it is at this point that his actions, in the words of our interim working paper, took an unhelpful course. Or in the harsher words of Ned and his colleagues in the Russia House, this was where, in any civilised country, P. Wellow would have been strung by his thumbs from a high point in the city and left there in peace to reflect upon his attainments.

For what Palmer did was have a nice time with the notebooks. For two nights and one and a half days. Because he found them so amusing. He did not open the buff envelope – which was by now marked in Landau’s handwriting ‘Extremely Private for the attention of Mr. B. Scott Blair or a top member of the Intelligence’ – because like Landau he was of a school that felt it unbecoming to read other people’s mail. In any case it was glued at both ends, and Palmer was not a man to grapple with physical obstacles. But the notebook – with its crazed aphorisms and quotations, its exhaustive loathing of politicians and soldiery, its scatter-shot references to Pushkin the pure Renaissance man and to Kleist the pure suicide – held him fascinated.

He felt little sense of urgency, none of responsibility. He was a diplomat, not a Friend, as the spies were called. And Friends in Palmer’s zoology were people without the intellectual horsepower to be what Palmer was. Indeed it was his outspoken resentment that the orthodox Foreign Office to which he belonged resembled more and more a cover organisation for the Friends’ disgraceful activities. For Palmer too was a man of impressive erudition, if of a random kind. He had read Arabic and taken a First in Modern History. He had added Russian and Sanskrit in his spare time. He had everything but mathematics and common sense, which explains why he passed over the dreary pages of algebraic formulae, equations and diagrams that made up the other two notebooks, and in contrast to the writer’s philosophical ramblings had a boringly disciplined appearance. And which also explains – though the committee had difficulty accepting such an explanation – why Palmer chose to ignore the Standing Order to Resident Clerks relating to Defectors and Offers of Intelligence whether solicited or otherwise, and to do his own thing.

'He makes the most frantic connections right across the board, Tig,' he told a rather senior colleague in Research Department on the Tuesday, having decided that it was finally time to share his acquisition. 'You simply must read him.'

'But how do we know it's a he, Palms?'

Palmer just felt it, Tig. The vibes.

Palmer's senior colleague glanced at the first notebook, then at the second, then sat down and stared at the third. Then he looked at the drawings in the second book. Then his professional self took over in the emergency.

'I think I'd get this lot across to them fairly sharpish if I were you, Palms,' he said. But on second thoughts he got it across to them himself, very sharpish indeed, having first telephoned Ned on the green line and told him to stand by.

Upon which, two days late, hell broke loose. At four o'clock on the Wednesday morning the lights on the top floor of Ned's stubby brick out-station in Victoria known as the Russia House were still burning brightly as the first bemused meeting of what later became the Bluebird team drew to a close. Five hours after that, having sat out two more meetings in the Service's headquarters in a grand new high-rise block on the Embankment, Ned was back at his desk, the files gathering around him as giddily as if the girls in Registry had decided to erect a street barricade.

'God may move in a mysterious way,' Ned was heard to remark to his red-headed assistant Brock in a lull between deliveries, 'but it's nothing to the way He picks his joes.'

A joe in the parlance is a live source, and a live source in sane English is a spy. Was Ned referring to Landau when he spoke of joes? To Katya? To the unchristened writer of the notebooks? Or was his mind already fixed upon the vaporous outlines of that great British gentleman spy,

Mr. Bartholomew Scott Blair? Brock did not know or care. He came from Glasgow but of Lithuanian parents and abstract concepts made him angry.

As to myself, I had to wait another week before Ned decided with a proper reluctance that it was time to haul in old Palfrey. I've been old Palfrey since I can remember. To this day I have never understood what happened to my Christian names. 'Where's old Palfrey?' they say. 'Where's our tame legal eagle? Get the old lawbender in! Better chuck this one at Palfrey!'

I am quickly dealt with. You need not stumble on me long. Horatio Benedict dePalfrey are my names but you may forget the first two immediately, and somehow nobody has ever remembered the 'de' at all. In the Service I am Harry so, quite often, being an obedient soul, I am Harry to myself. Alone in my poky little bachelor flat of an evening, I am quite inclined to call myself Harry while I cook my chop. Legal adviser to the illegals, that's me, and sometime junior partner to the extinct house of Mackie, Mackie & dePalfrey, Solicitors and Commissioners for Oaths, of Chancery Lane. But that was twenty years ago. For twenty years I have been your most humble secret servant, ready at any time to rob the scales of the same blind goddess whom my young heart was brought up to revere.

A palfrey, I am told, was neither a warhorse nor a hunter, but a saddle horse deemed suitable for ladies. Well, there's only one little lady who ever rode this Palfrey any distance, but she rode him nearly to his grave and her name was Hannah. And it was because of Hannah that I scurried for shelter inside the secret citadel where passion has no place, where the walls are so thick I cannot hear her beating fists or tearful

voice imploring me to let her in and brave the scandal that so terrified a young solicitor at the threshold of a respectable career.

Hope in my face and nothing in my heart, she said. A wiser woman might have kept such observations to herself, it has always seemed to me. Sometimes the truth is by way of being a self-indulgence. 'Then why do you pursue a hopeless case?' I would protest to her. 'If the patient is dead, why keep trying to revive him?'

Because she was a woman, seemed to be the answer. Because she believed in the redemption of male souls. Because I had not paid enough for being inadequate.

But I have paid now, believe me.

It is because of Hannah that I walk the secret corridors to this day, calling my cowardice duty and my weakness sacrifice.

It is because of Hannah that I sit here late at night, in my grey box of an office with *LEGAL* on the door, files and tapes and films stacked around me like the case of *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce* without the pink string, while I draft our official whitewash of the operation we called the Bluebird and of its protagonist, Bartholomew, alias Barley, Scott Blair.

It is because of Hannah also that even while he scribbles at his exculpation this old Palfrey now and then puts down his pen and lifts his head and dreams.

Niki Landau's recall to the British colours, if he had ever seriously abandoned them, took place exactly forty-eight hours after the notebooks hit Ned's desk. Ever since his miserable passage through Whitehall, Landau had been sick with anger and mortification. He hadn't gone to work, he hadn't bothered with his little flat in Golders Green which he normally

buffed and pampered as if it were the lantern of his life. Not even Lydia could rouse him from his melancholy. I myself had hastily arranged the Home Office warrant to tap his phone. When she telephoned, we listened to him putting her off. And when she made a tragic appearance at his front door, our watchers reported that he let her stay for a cup of tea and then dismissed her.

‘I don’t know what I’ve done wrong but whatever it is, I’m sorry,’ they heard her remark sadly as she left.

She was hardly in the street before Ned rang. Afterwards Landau shrewdly wondered to me whether that was a coincidence.

‘Niki Landau?’ Ned enquired in a voice you didn’t feel like fooling with.

‘I could be,’ said Landau, sitting up straight.

‘My name’s Ned. I think we have a mutual friend. No need to mention names. You kindly dropped a letter in for him the other day. Rather against the odds, I’m afraid. A package too.’

Landau thrilled to the voice immediately. Capable and commanding. The voice of a good officer, not a cynic, Harry.

‘Well, yes, I did,’ he said, but Ned was already talking again.

‘I don’t think we need to go into a lot of details over the telephone, but I do think you and I need to have a long chat and I think we need to shake your hand. Rather soon. When can we do that?’

‘Whenever you say,’ said Landau. And had to stop himself from saying ‘sir’.

‘I always think now’s a good time. How do you feel about that?’

'I feel a whole lot better, Ned,' said Landau with a grin in his voice.

'I'm going to send a car for you. Won't be at all long, so perhaps you'd just stay where you are and wait for your front doorbell to ring. It's a green Rover, B registration. The driver's name is Sam. If you're worried, ask him to show you his card. If you're still worried, phone the number on it. Think you'll manage?'

'Our friend's all right, is he?' said Landau, unable to resist asking, but Ned had rung off.

The doorbell pealed a couple of minutes afterwards. They had the car waiting round the corner, thought Landau as he floated downstairs in a dream. This is it. I'm in the hands of the professionals. The house was in smart Belgravia, one of a terrace recently restored. Its newly painted white front glistened wholesomely at him in the evening sun. A palace of excellence, a shrine to the secret powers that rule our lives. A polished-brass sign on the pillared doorway said FOREIGN LIAISON STAFF. The door was already opening as Landau climbed the steps. And as the uniformed janitor closed it behind him Landau saw a slender, straight-built man in his early forties advance towards him through the sunbeams, first the trim silhouette, then the no-nonsense handsome healthy features, then the handshake: discreet but loyal as a naval salute.

'Well done, Niki. Come on in.'

Good voices do not always belong to good faces, but Ned's did. As Landau followed him into the oval study, he felt he could say anything in the world to him, and Ned would still be on his side. Landau in fact saw a whole lot of things in Ned that he liked at once, which was Ned's Pied Piper gift: the careful charm, the restrained good looks, the power of

quiet leadership and the ‘Come on in.’ Landau also sniffed the polyglot in him, for he was one himself. He had only to drop a Russian name or phrase for Ned to reach out for it and smile, and match it with a phrase of his own. He was one of us, Harry. If you had a secret, this was the man to tell it to, not that flunkey in the Foreign Office.

But then Landau had not realised, until he began talking, how desperately he had been needing to confide. He opened his mouth, he was away. All he could do from then on was listen to himself in amazement, because he wasn’t just talking about Katya and the notebooks, and why he had accepted them, and how he had hidden them, but about his whole life till now, his confusions about being a Slav, his love of Russia despite everything, and his feeling of being suspended between two cultures. Yet Ned did not lead him or check him in any way. He was a born listener. He hardly stirred except to write himself neat notes on bits of card, and if he interrupted, it was only to clear up a rare point of detail – the moment at Sheremetyevo, for example, when Landau was waved through to the departure lounge without a glance.

‘Now did all your group receive that treatment or only you?’

‘The lot of us. One nod, we were through.’

‘You didn’t feel singled out in any way?’

‘What for?’

‘You didn’t have the impression you might be getting a different kind of treatment from other people? A better one, for instance?’

‘We went through like a bunch of sheep. A flock,’ Landau corrected himself. ‘We handed in our visas, that was it.’

‘Were other groups going through at the same rate, did you notice?’