

FRIENDS AND TRAITORS

JOHN LAWTON

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AN INSPECTOR TROY NOVEL



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... The only toy he cares for is a box of matches; and up the houses and barns and hayricks go, in crackling flames. That was Burgess's distinguishing mark: the flashing smile of the fire-raiser, full of secret pleasure in mischief and destruction. Even his most loyal friends had no illusion about his favourite toys. Some were affectionate and benevolent people who wanted to help and protect him against this innate viciousness; and some were people who were mischievous and destructive but would not risk their own safety, and found a vicarious gratification in his recklessness.

—Rebecca West, *The New Meaning of Treason*, 1965

A true hero of our time . . . hip before hipsters, Rolling before the Stones, acid-head before LSD. There was not so much a conspiracy gathered round him as just decay and dissolution. It was the end of a class, of a way of life; something that would be written about . . . with wonder and perhaps hilarity, but still tinged with sadness, as all endings are.

—Malcolm Muggeridge, *The Infernal Grove*, 1973

All humanity's misery derives from not being able to sit alone in a quiet room.

—Pascal, *Pensées*, 1670

I

Burgess

§

England: 1958

Someone was following Frederick Troy.

§1

Mimram House, Hertfordshire: July 1935.

He felt foolish. As though he'd rummaged in the dressing-up box and tried on something better suited to his brother.

The damn thing simply didn't fit.

A voice from the doorway. Laconic and softly mocking.

"You look like a twat, bro."

"Sasha, if you can't be helpful, just fuck off will you?"

Just as his mother passed by his door.

"Pourquoi avez-vous appris l'anglais juste pour utiliser tous les gros mots de cette langue?" Why is it that you two learnt English just to use all the worst words it has to offer?

"Il nous reste une demi-heure avant le dîner. Nos invités vont bientôt arriver. S'il vous plaît, les enfants, s'il vous plaît." We have half an hour before dinner. Our guests will be arriving soon. Please, children, please.

With that she was gone. Sasha stayed.

"As I was saying . . ."

"I know I look like a twat. It doesn't fucking fit. I'll be Constable Scarecrow, the laughing stock of Hendon."

“Or worse . . . the mascot.”

Troy was legally too short to be a copper. His father had capitulated to his wish to join the Metropolitan Police Force after much argument, but with good grace, and had pulled strings, of which he had plenty, to get his younger son accepted at Hendon College as a cadet. It had pained him, and pained him doubly. Troy was well aware of that. Eighteen months ago Troy had turned down an Open Exhibition, a lesser form of scholarship, to Christ Church College, Oxford, to work on one of his father’s newspapers as a cub reporter. Like Charles Dickens, he had begun as a court reporter, sitting on the hard benches of magistrates’ courts day after day and recording the fragmentary lives of shoplifters, drunks, and flashers. Then he had graduated to the Old Bailey, to the rank of crime reporter, and after a year of such reporting, his vocation, if such it be, had become apparent to him. He wanted to be a copper. Above all he wanted to be a detective. The uniform was simply a hurdle en route. What he didn’t know was how many hurdles he’d have to jump to get out of uniform.

This one bagged around his ankles, sagged at the arse, and would have accommodated another slim-ish person at the chest without bursting its silver buttons.

“It’ll never fucking fit.”

“Y’know, Freddie . . . it’s nothing a good tailor couldn’t work wonders with. When do you actually start?”

“Monday of week after next.”

“Fine. Whip round to your man in Savile Row and get it tailored.”

“I doubt very much whether Foulkes and Fransham bother with uniforms.”

“Then find another. God knows *somebody* must tailor uniforms. Think of all those RAF pilots, think of all those Guards officers. Do they go around saggy-baggy? Do they, fuck. Anyway, get it off now and get your black tie and togs on. Ma is right, there’ll be a posse of the old man’s oddities knocking back the gin any minute.”

“Then close the door.”

Sasha closed the door.

“I meant from the other side.”

She slumped in a chair and Troy realised that she had been knocking back the gin already, that she had, in fact, been holding a large gin and

It in her hand all the time, concealed by the door frame, and that she might well be more than a bit pissed.

"Don't be silly. We've never given toss about nudity."

Indeed, they hadn't, but . . .

"We're not in the nursery any longer."

She sipped, gulped her gin, but didn't move.

She had a point, Troy knew, they had undressed in front of each other and his other sister, Masha, since childhood. They had only one rule . . . never comment on what you see. And he wondered why self-consciousness should become paramount at this moment, and he knew the answer. The uniform. It changed everything.

He stripped down to nothing, Sasha looking at him, then not looking at him, and all the time looking unconcerned, until he reached break point . . . the fastening of the black tie itself.

"Still can't do it on your own, eh?"

She stood behind him, taller even when she was barefoot, but now she almost towered over him in heels, her hands at his throat, peering around him to see them both in the mirror, deftly knotting the bow tie, whispering about a rabbit down a hole.

"Oddities?"

"Eh?"

"You mentioned the old man's oddities . . . his choice of dinner guests. Who's coming?"

"Hmm . . . well. There's Rosamond Lehmann."

"I know that name."

"Novelist. Pretty good one actually. Three or four to her name. She's John's sister . . . you know John. Rod was at Cambridge with him. One of the Trinity bright boys."

"Will John be coming?"

"Yep. And then there's Moura Budberg."

"Again? Weird."

"Dad seems to enjoy her company."

"Ma doesn't. Moura name-drops all the bloody time."

"I think the Baroness Budberg brings a little bit of Russia back to the old man, and, needless to say, Ma doesn't need or want any little bits of old Russia. And Moura makes for a good guessing game. Is she a Soviet spy or isn't she?"

"I can't see any point in the Soviet Union having spies who tell you they're spies over the fucking soup course."

"And then there's Harold Macmillan . . ."

"And weirder."

"Macmillan's a rebel . . . you know how the old man loves trouble-makers. Mac's a charmer. A hopeless charmer, a backbencher with about as much chance of cabinet office as our cat."

Sasha stepped back.

"You're done."

So he was. Troy looked in the mirror and could see *himself* again, something he had not been able to do dressed as a police cadet-cum-clown.

"If you'd asked me when you were thirteen and spotty if you'd ever be handsome only good manners would have restrained me from saying no, but I will say this, our Fred: for a little 'un you're really rather cute."

Troy said nothing.

Sasha reverted to the subject.

"And then there's that new bloke he's got writing book reviews for one magazine or another . . . Burgess, Guy Burgess."

§2

Troy looked around and felt lost. Eighteen guests strung out either side of the table. His father at one end, his mother at the other. His elder brother, Rod, sat at his mother's right hand. Macmillan sat at his father's right, a rather obvious clue that Alex had an agenda of things he meant to say and meant Macmillan to hear.

Troy was slightly closer to his father, off-centre, next to his sister Masha, twin of the now completely sozzled Sasha. He wondered if he'd been placed there to keep an eye on Masha or she on him. She'd not appeared for cocktails, but had emerged from her dressing room looking like Greta Garbo or Anna Karenina . . . black dress, pale skin,

and plenty of cleavage. He wondered who she might be tarting at but could spot no likely candidate.

Centre table was Burgess, on the far side of Masha. She leaned Troy's way, her lips all but touching his ear.

"Who's the new bloke?" she whispered.

"Guy Burgess."

"Hack, novelist, pol?"

"Hack. I gather the old man's taken him on. Rod tells me they overlapped at Cambridge."

"Funny. Never heard Rod mention him."

"Me neither."

"Have you seen his fingernails? Looks as though he scrapes dung off a cow's backside for a living."

"Say it a bit louder and he'll hear you."

"Don't care. I wouldn't let those fingers up me."

"For Christ's sake, Masha."

"Only saying!"

"Only saying what?"

It was Burgess, pricking the illusory bubble that Masha had sought to blow around the two of them.

"That you and Rod were at Cambridge together."

"Oh, yes. Not exactly together. I think Rod came down at the end of my first year. And we never quite mixed in the same circles."

"Rod tells me you were in Russia a while ago?" Troy said, hoping for and getting the desired effect.

No other word would have exploded into the room, slicing through all other dinner chit-chat, quite like "Russia." Facing him were his uncle Nikolai and Baroness Budberg. Within earshot, his father, and, just out of it, his mother. All of them Russian exiles.

Before Burgess could answer Nikolai leapt in.

"When?" he asked simply.

"Last summer. Went Intourist with a Cambridge chum. The quid quotidian—a pound a day to see Moscow. Cheaper than Blackpool or Skegness."

"Ah," said Nikolai. "The fellow travellers' package."

Burgess seemed not to hear the contempt in Nikolai's voice.

"No, actually, I was a fully paid-up member of the Communist Party at the time."

He looked around, well aware that he had taken centre stage, and, as far as Troy could tell, was loving it. Troy could not deny the charm, even as Burgess was uttering such show-stopping lines—bricks cascading down like demolition. If it weren't for the fingernails, and the remnants of the soup course down his shirt-front, Troy might even concede that Burgess had style.

"Such folly," Nikolai gently stabbed.

"Quite," said Burgess. "I resigned last year."

"Ah . . . the visit opened your eyes?"

"Forgive me, Professor Troitsky, if I say that my eyes weren't closed. Let us say that I returned with a different perspective. I did not suffer an overnight conversion to become an anti-Soviet."

"Nor I. But I have been an anti-Soviet since before the USSR existed."

Moura Budberg said something so quietly to Nikolai that Troy did not catch it. All he knew was it was in Russian and sharp of tone.

His father stepped in.

"Nikolai, don't be so hard. Guy has been to Russia, and only a year ago at that. When were any of us last there? I am sure he has things to tell us."

Burgess paused for a few seconds as his audience rearranged their thoughts. A quiet moment broken only by the sound of Macmillan clanking his fish knife. Troy was not at all certain Macmillan had been listening, but then the big, sad eyes looked up as though wondering at the gap in the conversation.

"I came back not so much critical of Russia, that is of the Russian system, as critical of myself, of my own generation. Of all us fellow travellers, if you like. We hitched our wagon to the wrong star. The red star. We fell too readily into the folly, as you put it so aptly, of being starry-eyed utopianists in search of a workers' paradise, and convinced ourselves that the Soviet Union was that paradise. What my visit to Russia taught me was that it may well be a workers' paradise. There is much to admire. But it is a paradise only for Russian workers and only in the context of Russian history. It isn't a model for the West."

"Ah," said Nikolai. "You have seen the future and it *doesn't* work."

Even Troy's mother, a woman who could be fiercely humourless when she tried, laughed at this. It was a twentieth-century classic.

Lincoln Steffens, the American journalist, had summed up the Soviet Union in a single quotable line after his visit in 1919. But that had been the trend . . . the exiles could not return, yet Western intellectuals seemed to descend upon the new country in droves, the publicity value of their visits being immeasurable.

Bernard Shaw, an enthusiast, had visited in 1931 and had vigorously defended the Soviet Union, the Five-Year Plans and the “Workers’ Republic” in the pages of the *Manchester Guardian*. His odd choice of travelling companion had been the Tory MP Nancy Astor, a less-than-enthusiast who had boasted to Alex Troy that she had told Josef Stalin that Churchill was a spent force in English politics.

“You’re wrong,” Alex had replied.

H. G. Wells, lover of the Baroness Budberg, seemed to be in and out of Russia at the drop of a hat . . . but who among living English writers had been quite so troubled by so many dystopias? G. K. Chesterton’s sister-in-law had written about her “Russian Venture,” and the Labour politician Ethel Snowden had published a book with a title like *Across Bolshevik Russia on a Dog Sled* on her return. Troy hadn’t read either. He’d been brought up on the old Russia not the new one. A Russia of fading memories, peeling like the pea-green paint on a decaying dacha. His father had fled in 1905, an escape shrouded in mystery and carpeted with diamonds. His uncle and grandfather had stuck it out until 1910, protected from the Tsar’s secret police by the patronage of the most famous writer in the world, Count Leo Tolstoy. With Tolstoy’s death the protection stopped, and Nikolai had brought the old man to England to live out his days without learning a word of English, and to die at ninety—author of a dozen pamphlets on civil disobedience and numberless letters to *The Times*—without ever seeing Russia again. Troy doubted any of the old ones at table would ever see Russia again. He felt that Burgess had the advantage of him, of them all. Troy was fluent in Russian, but had never been to Russia. Burgess had. Whilst Troy had all but tuned out to muse awhile, he could see that Rod, whose dislike of Burgess was all too apparent, was listening to him intently. He was serving them Russia on a plate, between the fish and the meat, gently oscillating between reservation and endorsement, warning against expecting miracles whilst expecting them himself.

Troy stopped daydreaming just as Burgess was saying something about encountering a woman on a Moscow tram with a pig under each arm.

“It’s almost impossible to imagine how close contemporary Russia, in the midst of the most directed and planned society on earth, in its urban capital, is to the nineteenth century and to peasantry.”

Nikolai was smiling now. He had no difficulty whatsoever in such a feat of imagination. Macmillan was smiling too.

“I met a chap with an Aberdeen Angus on top of a 38 bus in Bloomsbury once,” he said.

Troy thought his father and brother might die laughing. Burgess too—well, at least he could laugh at himself. No small virtue.

§3

Troy’s mother always liked him to play the piano after dinner. She liked to show him off. Troy’s father always liked him to play the piano after dinner. He liked the Great American Songbook, however indifferent the interpretation.

Troy was partial to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and had only recently seen them dance their way through *The Gay Divorcee*, which had taught him some new Cole Porter songs. His repertoire already included “Love for Sale,” “You Do Something to Me,” and half a dozen others, and after rambling through them he settled on a new one, “Night and Day.”

Much to Troy’s surprise, Burgess pulled up a chair next to the piano stool. Stuck his minute coffee can and his outrageous, bloated brandy balloon, in which he had what looked to be at least a triple shot, on the top of the piano.

“Do you play, Guy?”

“I tinkle. I don’t really think I’m much of a pianist. But you are.”

“I don’t practice enough. Now, before my dad slides over and requests ‘Puttin’ on the Ritz’ or something just as raucous, do you have any requests?”

"Not really. I suppose I like the odd music hall song . . . never quite got to grips with all this American stuff . . . the odd hymn too, you know, sort of thing we used to sing in school assembly . . . And of course one can never get enough Haydn or Mozart."

"Quite," said Troy. "But if I belt out *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, the *nacht* will soon be over."

And a demon whispered in his ear.

"Glorious things of thee are spoken . . ."

And Burgess joined in with the second line:

"Zion, city of our God!"

He had a poor voice, Troy's was not much better, but as long as the same demon whispered they sang it through to the end.

*Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure,
None but Zion's children know.*

And then they both burst out laughing.

His mother appeared at his side.

"*Quoi, t'es devenu complètement fou? L'hymne national allemand?*"
Have you gone completely mad? The German national anthem?

"Maman, it's also an English hymn. Music by Haydn, words by some long-forgotten English poet. Rod and I used to sing it at that very expensive school you sent us to. Apparently they sang it at Eton too, eh Guy?"

"*S'il te plait, Freddie, joue quelque chose anglais.*" Please, Freddie, play something English!

Then she was gone.

"Music hall, you said?" Troy asked.

"Fine by me . . . if you think it will placate your mother."

Troy struck up "My old man said follow the van . . ."

Burgess joined in and they played a version for four hands and two voices:

*My old man said: "Follow the van,
And don't dilly-dally on the way."
Off went the van wiv me 'ome packed in it.*

*I walked be'ind wiv me old cock linnet.
 But I dillied and dallied,
 Dallied and dillied;
 Lost me way and don't know where to roam.
 And you can't trust a "Special"
 Like the old-time copper
 When you can't find your way home . . .*

Across the room his mother glowered at him, and his father raised his glass and grinned.

S4

It occurred to Troy that Burgess was the kind of bloke who'd never leave a party until physically thrown out.

Lady Troy was long abed, his father was postmidnight pottering in his study as was his wont, his sisters were in the kitchen giggling their way through the Calvados, he'd no idea where Rod was, and every other guest but Burgess had left at the witching hour. It occurred to Troy that Burgess was probably pissed, but he hardly seemed incapable.

They sat on the west-facing verandah in the last vestiges of summer warmth. Troy often listened to the foxes and the owls this way, but now he was listening to a man, who whilst certainly not without charm, struck him as an endless blabbermouth.

"Your brother tells me you're a copper."

"Cadet. Well, almost. I don't start for a week or so."

"Odd choice, if I may say so."

"You may. You were a cadet yourself, I hear."

"Oh, that was different."

Burgess reached down for the brandy decanter and finding it empty set it back down, the silver tag clinking gently on the Waterford crystal. Troy did not offer to fill it up again.

"That was Dartmouth," Burgess went on.

"I know," Troy said. "There are rumours."

"Oh fuck. Is there anyone in England who hasn't heard? Completely untrue of course. I was not expelled for theft, although I think I'll probably spend the rest of my life denying it."

"What was it?"

"Oh, I dunno. General dissatisfaction, I suppose. Realising before it was too late that a life in uniform wasn't for me. I was good at it. Passed everything with flying colours. I shone . . . that might be the word . . . I always have . . . that's what I do, I pass exams with bugger all effort. I've never really failed at anything."

There was a long, sigh-soaked pause that Troy would rather not shatter.

"Which . . . which is why I find this current feeling so odd. I feel I have not got off the ground since Cambridge. And that tastes remarkably like failure."

"When did you leave Cambridge?"

"Oh, just now. In the spring. I've chased a couple of jobs. Eton wouldn't touch me with a barge pole, and Tory central office passed on a glorious opportunity to hire me. Your father kindly took me on as a reviewer. A couple of other proprietors have been equally generous, and I've enough to live on quite comfortably. And I'm not a fussy man. I'm . . . I'm easily pleased. All I need to be content is wine, books, and the *News of the World*."

Burgess's own joke set him giggling, a high-pitched whine.

"Don't ever let my old man hear you say you like the *News of the World*," Troy said.

Burgess drew breath and continued as though Troy had not spoken.

"But . . . but I always thought my life would have taken off by now. And it hasn't."

"Dreams of flying?"

"We all have them. You too."

"Maybe. I turned down Oxford a couple of years ago."

"Bloody hell. How old are you?"

"Twenty next month."

"Hmm . . . you look fifteen."

"Usually I'm told I look twelve. Glad to make it into the teens."

"And you turned down Oxford?"

"Open Exhibition, Christ Church."

"I bet your old man was furious."

"No. He heard me out, then asked what I might be doing next, as he was rich enough to keep me but did not think it good for my soul to be kept without working. I asked for a job on one of his papers and he sent me to the *Post* as the lowest of the low—court reporter."

"Like Dickens?"

"Giant footsteps to follow in. And that sparked my interest, my taste for crime."

"You want to be a beat bobby?"

"Well, you can't trust a special like the old-time copper."

Burgess giggled.

"No," said Troy. "Of course I don't want to be a beat bobby. I want to be a detective at Scotland Yard. I don't mind being in uniform, but I'd be a damn sight happier if I had one that fitted. I tried it on just before you got here. I look like a weasel lost in a sack of spuds."

"I used to get my Dartmouth cadet togs tailored at Gieves in Old Bond Street. They make uniforms for all our armed forces. Tell you what . . . if you're doing nothing Monday morning, meet me there and I'll introduce you to the old boys who stopped me looking like a weasel in a sack."

\$5

Mayfair, London

They met at Gieves, 21 Old Bond Street, in the heart of what could be termed "a Gentleman's London," a little to the left of Savile Row and Cork Street, a little to the north of the Burlington Arcade, a district with more than its share of gold cufflinks, those stretchy things like dog collars that shorten your sleeves, and old school ties . . . windows full of stripes . . . Repton, Marlborough, Sherborne, Harrow, Eton. Burgess,

Troy observed, wore his old school tie. Troy didn't. He could happily do without a morning reminder in the mirror of what a hellhole school had been.

Gieves flaunted no old school ties. They had settled for a window display that was simplicity itself—the dress uniform of a rear admiral, circa 1835, mounted upon a stuffed mannequin, complete with cocked hat, as in “knocked into.”

Burgess had not been vague in describing the tailors as “old boys.” Mr. Tom looked seventy-five, and Mr. Albert old enough to be his father.

They measured Troy all over.

Burgess watched with an appraising eye, though precisely what he might be appraising, Troy was not quite sure. And when it was over, they took his blue-black serge uniform and said softly that it would be ready on Thursday.

“We don't have many police officers among our clients, sir, but we are pleased to say that the chief constables of both Hertfordshire and Kent are amongst them.”

Out in the street Burgess said, “I think they just anointed you.”

“God, I hope not.”

“You're not in any hurry, are you?”

“No. Are you?”

“The life of a freelance hack is much like that of the unemployed. There's never a hurry about anything. Let's adjourn to the Burlington Arms for a snifter.”

“Of course,” said Troy, uneasily uncertain of what about him might make a man of twenty-five or so interested in a “boy” of nineteen.

They stayed in the Burlington on what Troy began to perceive as the Burgess pattern, until chucked out at closing time.

It was odd to be surrounded by midday boozers. Men, scarcely a woman in sight, who had nothing better to do than drink. Men of undetectable means, men in Savile Row suits, men in raggedy sleeves and elbow patches who'd look more at home on a Hertfordshire cabbage patch—all with the time and means to booze away the day in a fog of cigarette smoke and a hubbub of unrestrained gossip. He knew he didn't look like one of them, he knew he didn't look eighteen . . . but then no one was looking in the first place.

Burgess asked a thousand questions.

“Still living at home?”

“Almost. It’s obligatory to live in at Hendon. But when my training’s done, I’ll be posted somewhere in the Met district, to one division or another, so my mother has picked out a small house just off St. Martin’s Lane for me. It’s central. There’s almost nowhere in London I couldn’t get to pretty sharpish.”

“Any preferences when you are posted?”

“I’ve asked for J Division. It covers most of the East End. Stepney, Whitechapel, Limehouse, and so on.”

“Ah . . . the mean streets.”

“If you like.”

“Good luck with that. It sounds like you might have a taste for Chinese opium dens and the odd bit of rough trade.”

“What’s ‘rough trade’?”

Burgess giggled, the same high-pitched snort Troy had heard at Mimram . . . all but choking on his pint of mild.

“My God, Freddie. Are you really such an innocent?”

§6

Church Row, NW3

It was near four in the afternoon when Troy got back to his father’s town house in Hampstead. He still felt tiddly and hoped it didn’t show. He’d no fondness for beer but had been told that a chap doesn’t let a chap drink alone, so he’d drunk what Burgess drank, and to his detriment.

Rod and his father were in the old man’s study. Men there were who held their studies to be hallowed ground. Alex was not among them. His room was open to all and sundry, a hub of activity from which he could retreat regardless of what was taking place right under his nose—and while being far from a model of neatness, he always seemed

to know where everything was. The walls lined with books of every language the old man spoke, every surface littered with souvenirs of his past lives . . . the gun with which he claimed to have shot his way out of Russia . . . the typewriter on which he had recorded Lawrence's entry into Damascus, the signed copy of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* inscribed "Dream on" . . . and the art . . . a life-size bronze copy of Donatello's *David* . . . an original, if small, Van Gogh . . . a South Seas nude by Gauguin . . . half a dozen pale Turner watercolours—so pale, so watery you might look in vain for the colour. As a boy Troy had poked around in every corner, he felt he had got to know his father as much by reading the objects in his life as by listening to him. His father was standing behind his desk now . . . with that look on his face he had when he regretted giving up smoking.

Rod was fuming.

"You've been with that bugger, Burgess!"

"Eh?"

"Sasha saw the two of you together. Swanning up Cork Street. Arm in arm."

"We were most certainly not arm in arm, and I haven't a clue what you mean by swanning."

"Freddie, are you completely bloody naïve? You're courting the company of one of the most notorious buggers in London!"

"Ah. Sorry. When you called him a bugger just now I thought you were just being coarse, I didn't take it literally."

Alex intervened.

"Boys. Stop. This is hardly the point."

Rod turned on him, puffed up in self-righteousness like a squawking pigeon.

"I rather think it is. Freddie, if 'bugger' is too ambiguous for you, how about arse bandit?"

"Something new every day if not every hour. I've only just learnt 'rough trade.'"

The booze swam north and bumped into Troy's head. He sat down on the nearest chair and burped softly into a clenched fist.

"But, yes. I think I understand you," he all but whispered. "I had begun to wonder."

"To wonder? He's as queer as a coot."

Alex spoke up again, more forcibly.

"I say again, this is not the point, and if you do not permit me to get to the point we'll still be here at midnight. Now, do as your brother has done. Sit down and hear me out."

With bad graces and a sour face, Rod took the armchair next to Troy.

"Freddie, I cannot tell you how to choose your friends. Everything Rod has told you is true . . ."

"Everything? It amounts to one prejudicial opinion that might be a fact."

"Hear me out, my boy. Burgess is a homosexual. I knew that when I hired him. It doesn't matter. He is also a Soviet agent and that does matter."

Rod and Troy looked at each other. Silent and wide-eyed.

"And I did not know that when I hired him."

"How can you be sure?" Rod asked. "I know he was in the Communist Party when we were at Cambridge. He makes no bones about it, even admitted it at dinner the other night. Dozens of blokes were. It hardly amounts to more than being in the Boy Scouts. A phase some of us have to go through."

"I would agree with that. But Nikolai does not. Nikolai says the inherent contradictions in Burgess's arguments smack of a man told to disassociate himself."

Troy said, "Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

"Exactly. Burgess is burrowing like a badger."

"Mole," said Troy. "Like a mole."

"As you wish. He's stopped fighting England because he's been told to join it. He's reinventing himself with every word he utters."

"All this from one conversation?" said Rod.

"No. Nikolai has his sources. I do not ask what they are. Links to the old country I'd rather not know about."

"So what are you going to do? Sack him?"

"No. He's rather good at what he does. I see no reason to sack him."

"Then why are we sitting here? Why did you tell me to get Freddie in here as soon as he got home?"

Troy said, "Surely just to give you the opportunity to tell me not to consort with queers? Or what was it you called him? A bum bandit?"

"Fuck off."

"Boys, please. That is but a fraction of the truth. The bigger picture is this. As long as we know what Burgess is, we can and must be careful. We are vulnerable. We have been since the day we landed in this country twenty-five years ago. Every Russian, however well-received, is an object of suspicion. They buy my newspapers, they read my books, they pile on the honours . . . I can lunch at the Garrick, prop up the bar at the RAC club, I can consort with Churchill, with Macmillan, with Eden . . . but if I, if any of us, consort with a Russian spy we can never forget that he is a Russian spy and that we as a family are at risk from both sides."

Eventually Rod broke a silence that Troy never would.

"You believe Nikolai?"

"Of course."

"Then one question remains. Who do we tell?"

"Rod, we have no idea what is going to happen in the next five years. The map of the world might rearrange itself. Or Hitler might rearrange it personally. We do not know what side Russia will take . . . what deals Stalin might make . . ."

"I say again. Who do we tell?"

"Tell? We tell no one."

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In the absence of a verandah Troy took to the back garden. Not so much the London pocket handkerchief as the London tablecloth. Hollyhocks instead of willows. A lone hooting owl, a visitor from the nearby churchyard, where he no doubt feasted on London's abundant rats, instead of the competitive barking of Hertfordshire foxes. A warm August dusk. He'd sat here countless times. It might even be part of his first memory, and it was certainly part of a thousand subsequent childhood memories. A sickly child, wrapped up like a railway parcel awaiting collection by the porter, blanketed and cushioned while his grandfather read Russian folk tales aloud to him.