

JOHN
LE CARRÉ

*The Pigeon
Tunnel*



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The Pigeon Tunnel

JOHN LE CARRÉ

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Stories from My Life



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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Viking 2016
Published in Penguin Books 2017
Published in Penguin Classics 2022
001

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Set in 10.62/13.16pt Dante MT Pro
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-39637-7

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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Preface

There is scarcely a book of mine that didn't have *The Pigeon Tunnel* at some time or another as its working title. Its origin is easily explained. I was in my mid-teens when my father decided to take me on one of his gambling sprees to Monte Carlo. Close by the old casino stood the sporting club, and at its base lay a stretch of lawn and a shooting range looking out to sea. Under the lawn ran small, parallel tunnels that led in a row to the sea's edge. Into them were inserted live pigeons that had been hatched and trapped on the casino roof. Their job was to flutter their way along the pitch-dark tunnel until they emerged in the Mediterranean sky as targets for well-lunched sporting gentlemen who were standing or lying in wait with their shotguns. Pigeons who were missed or merely winged then did what pigeons do. They returned to the place of their birth on the casino roof, where the same traps awaited them.

Quite why this image has haunted me for so long is something the reader is perhaps better able to judge than I am.

John le Carré,
January 2016

Introduction

I sit at my desk in the basement of the little Swiss chalet that I built with the profits from *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* in a mountain village ninety minutes by train from Bern, the city to which at the age of sixteen I had fled from my English public school and where I had enrolled at Bern University. At weekends a great bunch of us students, boys and girls, mostly Bernese, would flood up to the Oberland, bunk down in mountain huts and ski our hearts out. So far as I ever knew we were the soul of probity: boys one side, girls the other, never the twain shall meet. Or if they did, I was never one of them.

The chalet sits above the village. Through my window, if I take a steep look upwards, I can glimpse the peaks of the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau, and most beautiful of all, the Silberhorn and the Kleines Silberhorn half a step below it: two sweetly pointed cones of ice that periodically succumb to drabness in the warm south wind called the Föhn, only to reappear days later in all their bridal glory.

Among our patron saints we have the ubiquitous composer Mendelssohn – follow the arrows for the Mendelssohn walk – the poet Goethe, though he seems to have made it only as far as the waterfalls of the Lauterbrunnental, and the poet Byron, who made it as far as the Wengernalp and hated it, protesting

that the sight of our storm-ravaged forests ‘reminded me of myself and my family’.

But the patron saint we most revere is undoubtedly one Ernst Gertsch, who brought fame and fortune to the village by inaugurating the Lauberhorn Ski Race in 1930, in which he himself won the slalom. I was once mad enough to take part in it and, by a combination of incompetence and naked fear, came the predictable cropper. My researches tell me that, not content to become the father of ski racing, Ernst went on to give us the steel edges to our skis and steel platforms for our bindings, for which we may all be thankful to him.

The month is May, so we get a whole year’s weather in one week: yesterday a couple of feet of fresh snow and not a single skier to enjoy it; today an unobstructed scorching sun, and the snow nearly gone again and the spring flowers back in business. And now this evening, thunderclouds of Payne’s grey getting ready to march up the Lauterbrunnen valley like Napoleon’s Grande Armée.

And probably in their wake, and because for the last days we have been spared a visit, the Föhn will return and sky, meadows and forests will be drained of colour, and the chalet will creak and fidget, and the wood smoke will roll out of the fireplace on to the carpet we paid too much for on that rainy afternoon in Interlaken in the snowless winter of whenever it was, and every clank and honk coming up from the valley will ring out like a sullen call of protest, and all birds will be confined to their nests for the duration, except for the choughs who take orders from no one. In the Föhn, don’t drive a car, don’t propose marriage. If you’ve got a headache or an urge to kill your neighbour, be consoled. It’s not a hangover, it’s the Föhn.

The chalet has a place in my eighty-four years of life that

is quite disproportionate to its size. In the years before I built it, I came to this village as a boy, first to ski on skis of ash or hickory, using seal skins to climb uphill and leather bindings to come down again, then to walk the mountains in summer with my wise Oxford mentor, Vivian Green, later Rector of Lincoln College, who gave me by his example the inner life of George Smiley.

It's no coincidence that Smiley like Vivian loved his Swiss Alps, or like Vivian found his consolation in landscape, or like myself had a lifelong, unreconciled relationship with the German muse.

It was Vivian who put up with my maunderings about my wayward father, Ronnie; Vivian again who, when Ronnie made one of his more spectacular bankruptcies, found the necessary cash and hauled me back to complete my studies.

In Bern I had got to know the scion of the oldest family of hotel owners in the Oberland. Without his later influence I would never have been allowed to build the chalet in the first place, for then as now no foreigner may own so much as a square foot of village land.

It was also while I was in Bern that I took my first infant steps for British Intelligence, delivering I knew not what to I knew not whom. I spend a lot of odd moments these days wondering what my life would have looked like if I hadn't bolted from my public school, or if I had bolted in a different direction. It strikes me now that everything that happened later in life was the consequence of that one impulsive adolescent decision to get out of England by the fastest available route and embrace the German muse as a substitute mother.

I wasn't a failure at school, far from it: captain of things, winner of school prizes, potential golden boy. And it was a very discreet bolt. I didn't howl and scream. I just said, 'Father,

you may do with me what you will, I won't go back.' And very probably I blamed the school for my woes – and England along with it – when my real motive was to get out from under my father at all costs, which I could hardly say to him. Since then, of course, I have watched my own children do the same, though more elegantly and with a lot less fuss.

But none of that answers the central question of what direction my life might otherwise have taken. Without Bern, would I have been recruited as a teenaged errand boy of British Intelligence, doing what the trade calls *a little of this and that*? I hadn't read Maugham's *Ashenden* by then, but I had certainly read Kipling's *Kim* and any number of chauvinistic adventure stories by G. A. Henty and his ilk. Dornford Yates, John Buchan and Rider Haggard could do no wrong.

And of course, a mere four years after the war's end I was the greatest British patriot in the hemisphere. At my preparatory school we boys had become expert at identifying German spies in our ranks, and I was counted one of our better counter-espionage operatives. At my public school, our jingoistic fervour was unconfined. We did 'Corps' – military training in full uniform – twice a week. Our young teachers had returned tanned from the war and on Corps days sported their medal ribbons. My German teacher had had a wonderfully mysterious war. Our careers adviser prepared us for a lifetime's service in distant outposts of empire. The Abbey at the heart of our little town was hung with regimental flags shot to shreds in colonial wars in India, South Africa and Sudan, the shreds then restored to glory on fishnet by loving female hands.

It is therefore no sort of surprise when the Great Call came to me in the person of a thirty-something mumsy lady named Wendy from the British Embassy's visa section in Bern, that

the seventeen-year-old English schoolboy punching above his weight at a foreign university should have snapped to attention and said, 'At your service, *Ma'am!*'

More difficult to explain is my wholesale embrace of German literature at a time when for many people the word *German* was synonymous with unparalleled evil. Yet, like my flight to Bern, that embrace has determined the whole later passage of my life. Without it, I would never have visited Germany in 1949 on the insistence of my Jewish refugee German teacher, never seen the flattened cities of the Ruhr, or lain sick as a dog on an old Wehrmacht mattress in a makeshift German field hospital in the Berlin Underground; or visited the concentration camps of Dachau and Bergen-Belsen while the stench still lingered in the huts, thence to return to the unruffled tranquillity of Bern, to my Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse. I would certainly never have been assigned to intelligence duties in occupied Austria for my National Service, or studied German literature and language at Oxford, or gone on to teach them at Eton, or been posted to the British Embassy in Bonn with the cover of a junior diplomat, or written novels with German themes.

The legacy of that early immersion in things German is now pretty clear to me. It gave me my own patch of eclectic territory; it fed my incurable romanticism and my love of lyricism; it instilled in me the notion that a man's journey from cradle to grave was one unending education – hardly an original concept and probably questionable, but nevertheless. And when I came to study the dramas of Goethe, Lenz, Schiller, Kleist and Büchner, I discovered that I related equally to their classic austerity, and to their neurotic excesses. The trick, it seemed to me, was to disguise the one with the other.

★

The chalet is pushing fifty years old. Every winter season as the children grew up, they came here to ski, and this was where we had our best times together. Sometimes we did spring as well. It was here too that for four hilarious weeks in, I think, the winter of 1967 I was cloistered with Sydney Pollack, film director of *Tootsie*, *Out of Africa* and – my favourite – *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* while we thrashed out a screenplay of my novel *A Small Town in Germany*.

The snow that winter was perfect. Sydney had never skied, never been to Switzerland. The sight of happy skiers whizzing nonchalantly past our balcony was simply too much for him. He had to be one of them, and it had to be now. He wanted me to instruct him, but thank Heaven I called up Martin Epp instead: ski teacher, legendary mountain guide and one of a rare breed to have made a solitary ascent of the north face of the Eiger.

The A-list film director from South Bend, Indiana, and the A-list mountaineer from Arosa hit it off at once. Sydney did nothing by halves. Within days, he was a competent skier. He was also seized with a passionate desire to make a movie about Martin Epp, and it soon transcended his desire to make *A Small Town in Germany*. The Eiger would play Destiny. I would write the screenplay, Martin would play himself and Sydney would be harnessed halfway up the Eiger filming him. He called his agent and told him about Martin. He called his analyst and told him about Martin. The snow remained perfect and took its toll of Sydney's energies. Evenings, after a bath, we decided, were our best times for writing. Whether they were or not, neither movie was ever made.

Later, somewhat to my surprise, Sydney lent the chalet to Robert Redford for him to reconnoitre his movie *Downhill Racer*. Alas, I never met him, but for years afterwards, wherever

I went in the village, I wore the cachet of Robert Redford's friend.

These are true stories told from memory – to which you are entitled to ask, what is truth, and what is memory to a creative writer in what we may delicately call the evening of his life? To the lawyer, truth is facts unadorned. Whether such facts are ever findable is another matter. To the creative writer, fact is raw material, not his taskmaster but his instrument, and his job is to make it sing. Real truth lies, if anywhere, not in facts, but in nuance.

Was there ever such a thing as *pure* memory? I doubt it. Even when we convince ourselves that we're being dispassionate, sticking to the bald facts with no self-serving decorations or omissions, pure memory remains as elusive as a bar of wet soap. Or it does for me, after a lifetime of blending experience with imagination.

Here and there, where I thought the story merited it, I have lifted bits of conversation or description from newspaper articles I wrote at the time because their freshness appealed to me, and because later memory didn't deliver the same sharpness: for example, my description of Vadim Bakatin, one-time head of the KGB. In other cases I've left the story pretty much as I wrote it at the time, just tidied it here and there, added the odd grace note to make it clearer or bring it up to date.

I don't wish to presume in my reader a great knowledge of my work – or, for that matter, any knowledge of it at all, hence the odd explanatory passage along the way. But please be assured: nowhere have I consciously falsified an event or a story. Disguised where necessary, yes. Falsified, emphatically not. And wherever my memory is shaky, I have taken care to say so. A recently published account of my life offers thumbnail

versions of one or two of the stories, so it naturally pleases me to reclaim them as my own, tell them in my own voice and invest them as best I can with my own feelings.

Some episodes have acquired a significance I wasn't aware of at the time, perhaps because of the death of a main player. Throughout a long life I kept no diary, just here and there the odd travel note or line of irretrievable dialogue: for instance, from my days with Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the PLO, before his expulsion from Lebanon; and afterwards my abortive visit to his white hotel in Tunis, the same town in which several members of his high command, billeted a few miles down the road from him, were assassinated by an Israeli hit team a few weeks after I left.

Men and women of power drew me because they were there, and because I wanted to know what made them tick. But in their presence all I seem to have done in retrospect was nod wisely, shake my head in the right places, and try a joke or two to ease the strain. Only afterwards, back in my hotel bedroom, did I fish out my mangled notepad and attempt to make sense of what I had heard and seen.

The other scribbles that survive from my travels were made for the most part not by me personally, but by the fictional characters I took along with me for protection when I ventured into the field. It was from their eye-line, not mine, and in their words, that the notes were written. When I found myself cringing in a dugout beside the Mekong River, and for the first time in my life heard bullets smacking into the mud bank above me, it was not my own quivering hand that confided my indignation to a scruffy notebook, but the hand of my courageous fictional hero, the front-line reporter Jerry West-erby, for whom being shot at was part of the daily grind. I used to think I was exceptional in this way until I met a celebrated

war photographer who confessed to me that it was only when he was peering through the lens of his camera that the funk left him.

Well, it never left me. But I know what he was talking about.

If you're ever lucky enough to score an early success as a writer, as happened to me with *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, for the rest of your life there's a before-the-fall and an after-the-fall. You look back at the books you wrote before the searchlight picked you out and they read like the books of your innocence; and the books after it, in your low moments, like the strivings of a man on trial. 'Trying too hard,' the critics cry. I never thought I was trying too hard. I reckoned I owed it to my success to get the best out of myself, and by and large, however good or bad the best was, that was what I did.

And I love writing. I love doing what I'm doing at this moment, scribbling away like a man in hiding at a poky desk on a black-clouded early morning in May, with the mountain rain scuttling down the window and no excuse for tramping down to the railway station under an umbrella because the *International New York Times* doesn't arrive till lunchtime.

I love writing on the hoof, in notebooks on walks, in trains and cafés, then scurrying home to pick over my booty. When I am in Hampstead there is a bench I favour on the Heath, tucked under a spreading tree and set apart from its companions, and that's where I like to scribble. I have only ever written by hand. Arrogantly perhaps, I prefer to remain with the centuries-old tradition of unmechanized writing. The lapsed graphic artist in me actually enjoys drawing the words.

I love best the *privacy* of writing, which is why I don't do literary festivals and, as much as I can, stay away from

interviews, even if the record doesn't look that way. There are times, usually at night, when I wish I'd never given an interview at all. First, you invent yourself, then you get to believe your invention. That is not a process that is compatible with self-knowledge.

On research trips I am partially protected by having a different name in real life. I can sign into hotels without anxiously wondering whether my name will be recognized: then when it isn't, anxiously wondering why not. When I'm obliged to come clean with the people whose experience I want to tap, results vary. One person refuses to trust me another inch, the next promotes me to Chief of the Secret Service and, over my protestations that I was only ever the lowest form of secret life, replies that I would say that, wouldn't I? After which, he proceeds to ply me with confidences I don't want, can't use and won't remember, on the mistaken assumption that I will pass them on to We Know Who. I have given a couple of examples of this serio-comic dilemma.

But the majority of the luckless souls I've bombarded in this way over the last fifty years – from middle-ranking executives in the pharmaceutical industry to bankers, mercenaries and various shades of spy – have shown me forbearance and generosity. The most generous were the war reporters and foreign correspondents who took the parasitic novelist under their wing, credited him with courage he didn't possess and allowed him to tag along.

I can't imagine setting out on my forays in South-east Asia and the Middle East without the advice and companionship of David Greenway, the much decorated South-east Asia correspondent of *Time* magazine, the *Washington Post* and the *Boston Globe*. No timid neophyte can ever have hitched his wagon to such a faithful star. On a snowy morning in 1975, he was sitting

at our breakfast table here in the chalet, enjoying a brief respite from the battlefield, when his office in Washington called to tell him that the besieged city of Phnom Penh was about to fall to the Khmer Rouge. There's no road down to the valley from our village, just a little train that takes you to a bigger train that takes you to a bigger train still, and thence to Zurich airport. In a trice he had changed out of his alpine gear into a war correspondent's tacky drills and old suede shoes, kissed his wife and daughters farewell, and was pelting down the hill to the station. I pelted after him with his passport.

Famously, Greenway was one of the last US journalists to be airlifted off the roof of the besieged US Embassy in Phnom Penh. In 1981, when I was seized with dysentery at the Allenby Bridge, which connects the West Bank with Jordan, Greenway manhandled me through the mass of impatient travellers waiting to be processed, talked us through the checkpoint by sheer willpower and delivered me across the bridge.

Rereading some of the episodes I have described, I realize that either out of egotism or for the sake of a sharper story I have omitted to mention who else was in the room at the time.

I think of my conversation with the Russian physicist and political prisoner Andrei Sakharov and his wife Elena Bonner, which took place in a restaurant in what was still Leningrad, under the aegis of Human Rights Watch, three of whose members sat at the table with us, and suffered the same childish intrusions from the KGB's troop of fake photo-journalists who paraded in a ring around us, firing their old-style flashbulb cameras in our faces. Elsewhere, I hope, others of our party have written their own accounts of that historic day.

I think back to Nicholas Elliott, the longstanding friend and colleague of the double agent Kim Philby, stalking the drawing

room of our London house with a glass of brandy in his hand, and I remember too late that my wife was just as present as I was, sitting in an armchair opposite me, and just as spell-bound.

And I remember, even as I write this, the evening when Elliott brought his wife Elizabeth to dinner, and we had a loved Iranian guest who spoke immaculate English with a small, rather becoming speech defect. As our Iranian guest departed, Elizabeth turned to Nicholas with a sparkle in her eyes and said excitedly:

‘Did you notice his stammer, darling? *Just* like Kim!’

The long chapter about my father Ronnie goes to the back of the book rather than the beginning because, much as he would like to, I didn’t want him elbowing his way to the top of the bill. For all the hours I have spent agonizing about him, he remains as much of a mystery to me as does my mother. Unless I have indicated otherwise the stories are fresh from the mint. When I saw a need, I changed a name. The main player may be dead, but his heirs and assigns may not see the joke. I have tried to strike an orderly path through my life in the thematic, if not the chronological sense, but rather like life itself the path widened into incoherence and some stories simply became what they remain to me: stand-alone incidents, sufficient to themselves, pointing in no direction I’m aware of, told for what they have come to mean to me and because they alarm or scare or touch me, or wake me up in the middle of the night and make me laugh out loud.

With the passing of time some of the encounters I describe have acquired to my eye the status of tiny bits of history caught *in flagrante*, which I suppose is what all older people feel. Rereading them in the whole, farce to tragedy and back again, I find them mildly irresponsible, and I’m not sure why.

Perhaps it's my own life that I find irresponsible. But it's too late to do anything about that now.

There are many things I am disinclined to write about ever, just as there are in anyone's life. I have had two immensely loyal and devoted wives, and I owe immeasurable thanks to both, and not a few apologies. I have been neither a model husband nor a model father, and am not interested in appearing that way. Love came to me late, after many missteps. I owe my ethical education to my four sons. Of my work for British Intelligence, performed mostly in Germany, I wish to add nothing to what is already reported by others, inaccurately, elsewhere. In this I am bound by vestiges of old-fashioned loyalty to my former Services, but also by undertakings I gave to the men and women who agreed to collaborate with me. It was understood between us that the promise of confidentiality would be subject to no time limit, but extend to their children and beyond. The work we engaged in was neither perilous nor dramatic, but it involved painful soul-searching on the part of those who signed up to it. Whether today these people are alive or dead, the promise of confidentiality holds.

Spying was forced on me from birth much in the way, I suppose, that the sea was forced on C. S. Forester, or India on Paul Scott. Out of the secret world I once knew I have tried to make a theatre for the larger worlds we inhabit. First comes the imagining, then the search for the reality. Then back to the imagining, and to the desk where I'm sitting now.

I

Don't be beastly to your Secret Service

'I know what you are,' cries Denis Healey, a former British Defence Secretary in the Labour interest, at a private party to which we have both been invited, his hand outstretched as he wades towards me from the doorway. 'You're a communist spy, that's what you are, admit it.'

So I admit it, as good chaps admit everything in these cases. And everybody laughs, my slightly startled host included. And I laugh too, because I'm a good chap and can take a joke as well as the next man, and because Denis Healey may be a Big Beast in the Labour Party and a political brawler, but he's also a considerable scholar and humanist, I admire him, and he's a couple of drinks ahead of me.

'You *bastard*, Cornwell,' a middle-aged MI6 officer, once my colleague, yells down the room at me as a bunch of Washington insiders gather for a diplomatic reception hosted by the British Ambassador. 'You *utter* bastard.' He wasn't expecting to meet me, but now he has done he's glad of the opportunity to tell me what he thinks of me for insulting the honour of the Service – *our* fucking Service, for fuck's sake! – and for making clowns of men and women who love their country and can't answer back. He is standing in front of me in the

hunched position of a man about to let fly, and if diplomatic hands hadn't gentled him back a step the next morning's press would have had a field day.

The cocktail chatter gradually picks up again. But not before I have established that the book that has got under his skin is not *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, but its successor *The Looking Glass War*, which tells a bleak story of a British-Polish agent sent on a mission into East Germany and left to rot. Unhappily, East Germany had been part of my accuser's parish in the days when we had worked together. It crosses my mind to tell him that Allen Dulles, recently retired Director of the CIA, has declared the book to be a lot closer to reality than its predecessor, but I fear that will only compound his fury.

'Heartless, aren't we? Heartless incompetents! Thanks a million!'

My furious ex-colleague is not the only one. In less fiery tones the same reproach has been made to me repeatedly over the last five decades, not as any sinister or concerted effort, but as the refrain of hurt men and women who consider they are doing a necessary job.

'Why pick on us? You know how we are *really*.' Or more nastily: 'Now that you've made your pile out of us, perhaps you'll give us a rest for a bit.'

And always, somewhere, the hangdog reminder that the Service can't answer back; that it is defenceless against bad propaganda; that its successes must go unsung; that it can be known only by its failures.

'We are definitely not as our host here describes us,' says Sir Maurice Oldfield severely to Sir Alec Guinness over lunch.

Oldfield is a former Chief of the Secret Service who was later hung out to dry by Margaret Thatcher, but at the time of our meeting he is just another old spy in retirement.

'I've always wanted to meet Sir Alec,' he told me in his homey, north-country voice when I invited him. 'Ever since I sat opposite him on the train going up from Winchester. I'd have got into conversation with him if I'd had the nerve.'

Guinness is about to play my secret agent George Smiley in the BBC's television adaptation of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, and wishes to savour the company of a real old spy. But the lunch does not proceed as smoothly as I had hoped. Over the hors d'oeuvres, Oldfield extols the ethical standards of his old Service and implies, in the nicest way, that 'young David here' has besmirched its good name. Guinness, a former naval officer, who from the moment of meeting Oldfield has appointed himself to the upper echelons of the Secret Service, can only shake his head sagely and agree. Over the Dover sole, Oldfield takes his thesis a step further:

'It's young David and his like,' he declares across the table to Guinness while ignoring me sitting beside him, 'that make it that much harder for the Service to recruit decent officers and sources. They read his books and they're put off. It's only natural.'

To which Guinness lowers his eyelids and shakes his head in a deploring sort of way, while I pay the bill.

'You should join the Athenaeum, David,' Oldfield says kindly, implying that the Athenaeum will somehow make a better person of me. 'I'll sponsor you myself. There. You'd like that, wouldn't you?' And to Guinness, as the three of us stand on the threshold of the restaurant: 'A pleasure indeed, Alec. An honour, I must say. We shall be in touch very shortly, I'm sure.'

'We shall indeed,' Guinness replies devoutly, as the two old spies shake hands.

Unable apparently to get enough of our departing guest, Guinness gazes fondly after him as he pounds off down the

pavement: a small, vigorous gentleman of purpose, striding along with his umbrella thrust ahead of him as he disappears into the crowd.

‘How about another cognac for the road?’ Guinness suggests, and we have hardly resumed our places before the interrogation begins:

‘Those very vulgar cufflinks. Do *all* our spies wear them?’
No, Alec, I think Maurice just likes vulgar cufflinks.

‘And those loud orange suede boots with crêpe soles. Are they for stealth?’

I think they’re just for comfort actually, Alec. Crêpe squeaks.

‘Then tell me this.’ He has grabbed an empty tumbler. Tipping it to an angle, he flicks at it with his thick fingertip. ‘I’ve seen people do *this* before’ – making a show of peering meditatively into the tumbler while he continues to flick it – ‘and I’ve seen people do *this*’ – now rotating the finger round the rim in the same contemplative vein. ‘But I’ve never seen people do *this* before’ – inserting his finger into the tumbler and passing it round the inside. ‘Do you think he’s looking for dregs of poison?’

Is he being serious? The child in Guinness has never been more serious in its life. Well, I suppose if it was dregs he was looking for, he’d have drunk the poison by then, I suggest. But he prefers to ignore me.

It is a matter of entertainment history that Oldfield’s suede boots, crêpe-soled or other, and his rolled umbrella thrust forward to feel out the path ahead, became essential properties for Guinness’ portrayal of George Smiley, old spy in a hurry. I haven’t checked on the cufflinks recently, but I have a memory that our director thought them a little overdone and persuaded Guinness to trade them in for something less flashy.

The other legacy of our lunch was less enjoyable, if

artistically more creative. Oldfield's distaste for my work – and, I suspect, for myself – struck deep root in Guinness' thespian soul, and he was not above reminding me of it when he felt the need to rack up George Smiley's sense of personal guilt; or, as he liked to imply, mine.

For the last hundred years and more, our British spies have conducted a distraught and sometimes hilarious love-hate affair with their obstreperous novelists. Like the novelists themselves they want the image, they want the glamour, but don't ask them to put up with derision or negative reviews. In the early 1900s, spy writers ranging in quality from Erskine Childers to William Le Queux and E. Phillips Oppenheim whipped up such an anti-German furore that they may fairly claim to have assisted at the birth of an established security service in the first place. Until then gentlemen supposedly did not read other gentlemen's letters; even if in reality a lot of gentlemen did. With the war of 1914–18 came the novelist Somerset Maugham, British secret agent, and by most accounts not a very good one. When Winston Churchill complained that his *Ashenden* broke the Official Secrets Act,* Maugham, with the threat of a homosexual scandal hanging over him, burned fourteen unpublished stories and held off publication of the rest till 1928.

Compton Mackenzie, novelist, biographer and Scottish nationalist, was less easily cowed. Invalided out of the army in the First World War, he transferred to MI6 and became a competent head of British counter-intelligence in neutral Greece. However, he too often found his orders and superiors absurd and, as writers will, he had his fun of them. In 1932 he was

* Acknowledgements to Christopher Andrew's *Secret Service*, published in 1985 by William Heinemann.

prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act and fined £100 for his autobiographical *Greek Memories*, a book that was indeed stuffed with outrageous indiscretions. Far from learning his lesson, he wreaked his vengeance a year later with the satirical *Water on the Brain*. I have heard that in Mackenzie's file at MI5 there is a letter in enormous type addressed to the Director General and signed in the traditional green ink of the Chief of the Secret Service.

'Worst of all,' writes the Chief to his brother-in-arms on the other side of St James's Park, 'Mackenzie has revealed the actual symbols employed in Secret Service correspondence,* *some of which are still in use.*' Mackenzie's ghost must be rubbing his hands in glee.

But the most impressive of MI6's literary defectors must surely be Graham Greene, though I doubt whether he knew quite how close he came to following Mackenzie to the Old Bailey. One of my fondest memories of the late fifties is sharing a coffee with the MI5 lawyer in the Security Service's excellent canteen. He was a benign, pipe-smoking fellow, more family solicitor than bureaucrat, but that morning he was deeply troubled. An advance copy of *Our Man in Havana* had arrived on his desk, and he was halfway into it. When I said I envied him his luck, he sighed and shook his head. That fellow Greene, he said, would have to be prosecuted. Using information gained as a wartime officer of MI6, he had accurately portrayed the relationship between a head of station in a British Embassy and an agent in the field. He would have to go to jail.

* Such correspondence traditionally started with a three-letter code for the MI6 station, followed by a number to denote the station member.

‘And it’s a good book,’ he complained. ‘It’s a *damned* good book. And that’s the whole trouble.’

I combed the newspapers for news of Greene’s arrest, but he remained at large. Perhaps MI5’s barons had decided after all that it was better to laugh than cry. For their act of clemency, Greene rewarded them twenty years later with *The Human Factor*, which portrayed them not merely as boobies but as murderers. But MI6 must have sent a warning shot across his bows. In the foreword to *The Human Factor* he is careful to assure us that he has not infringed the Official Secrets Act. Dig out an early copy of *Our Man in Havana* and you will find a similar disclaimer.

But history suggests that our sins are eventually forgotten. Mackenzie ended his days with a knighthood, Greene with the Order of Merit.

‘In your new novel, sir,’ an earnest American journalist asks me, ‘you have a man saying of your central character that he would not have become a traitor if he had been able to write. Can you tell me, please, what would have become of *you*, if *you* had not been able to write?’

Searching for a safe answer to this dangerous question, I wonder whether our secret services should not be grateful to their literary defectors after all. Compared with the hell we might have raised by other means, writing was as harmless as playing with our bricks. How much our poor beleaguered spies must be wishing that Edward Snowden had done the novel instead.

So what should I have replied to my enraged ex-colleague at the diplomatic party who looked as if he was about to knock me down? No good pointing out that in some books I have painted British Intelligence as a more competent organization

than I had ever known it to be in real life. Or that one of its most senior officers described *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* as 'the only bloody double-agent operation that ever worked'. Or that, in describing the nostalgic war games of an isolated British department in the novel that so angered him, I might have been attempting something a bit more ambitious than a crude assault on his Service. And Heaven help me were I to maintain that if you are a novelist struggling to explore a nation's psyche, its Secret Service is not an unreasonable place to look. I would be flat on my back before I came to the main verb.

As to his Service being unable to answer back, well I would guess there is not a spy agency anywhere in the Western world that has enjoyed more mollycoddling from its domestic media than ours. *Embedded* scarcely covers it. Our systems of censorship, whether voluntary or imposed by vague and draconian legislation, our skills in artful befriending and the British public's collective submission to wholesale surveillance of dubious legality are the envy of every spook in the free and unfree world.

No good either my pointing to the many 'approved' memoirs of former members that portray the Service in the clothes in which it likes to be admired; or to the 'official histories' that draw such a forgiving veil over its more heinous misdeeds; or to the numberless cooked-up articles in our national newspapers that result from much cosier luncheons than the one I enjoyed with Maurice Oldfield.

Or how about suggesting to my furious friend that a writer who treats professional spies as fallible human beings like the rest of us is performing a modest social service – even, God help us, a democratic function, since in Britain our secret services are still, for better or worse, the spiritual home of our political, social and industrial elite?

For that, dear former colleague, is the limit of my disloyalty. And that, dear departed Lord Healey, is the limit of my communism which, come to think of it, can't be said of you in your younger days.

It's hard to convey, half a century on, the atmosphere of mistrust that pervaded Whitehall's corridors of secret power in the late fifties and early sixties. I was twenty-five when, in 1956, I was formally inducted into MI5 as a junior officer. Any younger, they told me, and I wouldn't have been eligible. Five, as we called it, prided itself on its maturity. Alas, no amount of maturity protected it from recruiting such luminaries as Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt and the other sad traitors of that period whose names linger like half-forgotten football stars in the British public memory.

I had entered the Service with high expectations. My intelligence exploits to date, trivial as they were, had left me with an appetite for more. My case officers had been uniformly agreeable, efficient and considerate. They had spoken to my sense of calling and revived my lapsed public schoolboy's duty of pain. As a National Service intelligence officer in Austria, I had lived in awe of the shadowy civilians who periodically descended on our humdrum encampment in Graz and invested it with a mystique it otherwise sadly lacked. It was only when I entered their citadel that I came smartly to earth.

Spying on a decaying British Communist Party twenty-five thousand strong that had to be held together by MI5 informants did not meet my aspirations. Neither did the double standards by which the Service nurtured its own. MI5, for better or worse, was the moral arbiter of the private lives of Britain's civil servants and scientists. Under the vetting procedures of the day, homosexuals and other perceived deviants were

held to be vulnerable to blackmail, and consequently debarred from secret work. But the Service seemed quite content to ignore the homosexuals in its own ranks, and its Director General openly cohabiting with his secretary during the week and his wife at weekends, even to the point of leaving written instructions for the night duty officer in case his wife called up wanting to know where he was. Yet God help the registry typist whose skirt was deemed too short or too tight, or the married desk officer who gave her the eye.

While the upper echelons of the Service were staffed by ageing survivors of the glory days of 1939–45, its middle order comprised former colonial police and district officers left over from Britain's dwindling empire. Experienced as they might be in quelling unruly natives who had the temerity to want their countries back, they were less at ease when it came to guarding the mother country they barely knew. The British working classes were as volatile and unknowable to them as were once the rioting Dervishes. Trade unions in their eyes were nothing but communist front organizations.

Meanwhile, young spy hunters such as myself, thirsting for stronger fare, were ordered not to waste their time looking for Soviet-controlled 'illegals', since it was known on unassailable authority that no such spies were operating on British soil. Known to whom, by whom, I never learned. Four years were enough. In 1960 I applied for a transfer to MI6 or, as my disgruntled employers had it, to 'those shits across the park'.

But let me in parting acknowledge one debt of gratitude to MI5 that I can never sufficiently repay. The most rigorous instruction in prose writing that I ever received came, not from any schoolteacher or university tutor, least of all from a writing school. It came from the classically educated senior officers on the top floor of MI5's headquarters in Curzon Street,

Mayfair, who seized on my reports with gleeful pedantry, heaping contempt on my dangling clauses and gratuitous adverbs, scoring the margins of my deathless prose with such comments as *redundant – omit – justify – sloppy – do you really mean this?* No editor I have since encountered was so exacting, or so right.

By the spring of 1961 I had completed the MI6 initiation course, which equipped me with skills I never needed and quickly forgot. At the concluding ceremony the Service's head of training, a rugged, pink-faced veteran in tweeds, told us with tears in his eyes that we were to go home and await orders. They might take some time. The reason – which he vowed he had never dreamed he would have to utter – was that a longstanding officer of the Service, who had enjoyed its unstinted trust, had been unmasked as a Soviet double agent. His name was George Blake.

The scale of Blake's betrayal remains, even by the standards of the period, monumental: literally hundreds of British agents – Blake himself could no longer calculate how many – betrayed; covert audio operations deemed vital to the national security, such as, but not exclusively, the Berlin audio tunnel, blown before they were launched; and the entire breakdown of MI6's personnel, safe houses, order of battle and outstations across the globe. Blake, a most capable field agent in both interests, was also a God-seeker, who by the time of his unmasking had espoused Christianity, Judaism and communism in that order. Imprisoned at Wormwood Scrubs, from which he later famously escaped, he gave lessons to his fellow inmates in the Holy Koran.

Two years after receiving the unsettling news of George Blake's treachery, I was serving as a Second Secretary (Political) at the British Embassy in Bonn. Summoning me to his office

late one evening, my Head of Station informed me, strictly for my own information, of what every Englishman would be reading in his evening newspaper the next day: that Kim Philby, MI6's brilliant former head of counter-intelligence, once tipped to become Chief of the Service, was also a Russian spy and, as we were only gradually allowed to know, had been one since 1937.

Later in this book you will read an account by Nicholas Elliott, Philby's friend, confidant and colleague in war and peace, of their final encounter in Beirut that led to Philby's partial confession. And it may cross your mind that Elliott's account is mysteriously short on outrage or even indignation. The reason is very simple. Spies are not policemen, neither are they quite the moral realists they like to think they are. If your mission in life is to win over traitors to your cause, you can hardly complain when one of your own, even if you loved him as a brother and cherished colleague, and shared every aspect of your secret work with him, turns out to have been obtained by someone else. It was a lesson I had taken to heart by the time I wrote *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. And when I came to write *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, it was Kim Philby's murky lamp that lit my path.

Spying and novel writing are made for each other. Both call for a ready eye for human transgression and the many routes to betrayal. Those of us who have been inside the secret tent never really leave it. If we didn't share its habits before we entered it, we will share them ever after. For proof of this we need look no further than Graham Greene, and the anecdotal account of his self-imposed game of foxes with the FBI. Perhaps it is recorded by one of his disobliging biographers, but better not to look.

All through his later life, Greene, the novelist and former