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The Whitehall Mandarin

Written by Edward Wilson

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THE WHITEHALL MANDARIN

Edward Wilson



First Clown. 'Tis a quick lie, sir; 'twill away again, from me to you.
Hamlet. What man dost thou dig it for?
First Clown. For no man, sir.
Hamlet. What woman, then?
First Clown. For none, neither.
Hamlet. Who is to be buried in 't?
First Clown. One that was a woman, sir; but, rest her soul, she's dead.

Hamlet, Scene V, Act i

For Julia

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How strange, thought Catesby, that when you look through a telescopic sight and see another human being fixed in the cross-hairs you end up looking at yourself. It doesn't matter whether it's lens reflection or imagination. You try to concentrate on your target but find your eye superimposed over their eyes. Those other eyes, so blissfully unaware of your unblinking predatory stare, are no longer evil. You feel your hate drop away and realise you can't do it. It was Catesby's most shameful secret from the war: he had never been able to pull the trigger. But he had learnt to since.

'I wish,' said Catesby as he adjusted the telephoto lens, 'that this was a sniper rifle instead of a camera.' He wanted to convince the other two, especially Skardon from Five, that he was hard and of their mind. The third man in the cramped roof space under the eaves of the building overlooking St James's Park was Catesby's boss, Henry Bone.

'I thought,' said Bone, 'that you were fond of Cauldwell.'

'Cauldwell's fine. I like him. He's a professional like us. It's the other one I don't like.'

Skardon frowned. 'He's a scumbag.'

'But,' said Catesby, 'you have to admire Cauldwell and the Sovs. The Russians are consummate professionals. Spying is in their blood, like chess and vodka.'

Bone was coughing. The roof space was full of cobwebs, mouse droppings and two centuries of dust.

Catesby turned towards his boss, 'Are you okay, Henry?'

'You talk too much, Catesby. Keep your eye on that park bench.'

'What's the scumbag doing?' asked Skardon

Catesby peered through the eyepiece. 'He's sitting on the bench looking at his watch.'

'But Cauldwell still no show?'

'Not yet. Tyler seems to be getting nervous.'

'That bastard ought to hang,' said Skardon.

'Did you ask for an arrest warrant?'

Skardon coughed and cleared his throat. 'It's dusty in here.'

Bone shook his head. 'You talk too much, Catesby.'

'How well,' said Skardon, 'did you know Cauldwell?'

'It's in my report,' Catesby replied.

'Remind me.'

'I met him in Germany in the early 50s when I was operating under dip cover as a second secretary in the Cultural Attaché's office. Cauldwell was the same rank in the US Embassy so we met at a lot of functions.'

'And you thought he was…'

'Full of contradictions and too bright to… Hang on, here he comes. Have a look.'

Skardon put his eye to the viewfinder and nodded. 'It's him all right – arrogant little sod. You'd better start snapping.'

Catesby slid back behind the camera – there wasn't room even to kneel – and put his index finger on the shutter release.

»»»»»

In St James's Park the daffodils were in full bloom, but it was a cold day. Tyler had told Euan, his boss at the Admiralty, that he was feeling ill and needed fresh air. Euan always indulged him. Tyler had arrived ten minutes early for the rendezvous and was impeccably dressed. When he had worked in Moscow, the Head of Chancery had always singled him out for his 'first-class appearance and manners'.

Dressing well usually gave Tyler self-confidence, but on this occasion he was still nervous. He didn't know what or whom to expect. He had met the American at a louche party in Dolphin Square. He said his name was Nick Seyton but Tyler had taken that with a pinch of salt as aliases were part of the scene. They later exchanged telephone numbers, but when Tyler had tried ringing him the line was dead. He checked with the GPO and found that no such phone number had ever existed. But Tyler

wasn't suspicious. He'd had a lot to drink that evening and must have copied the number incorrectly. Two days later the American telephoned him.

'I tried to ring you,' said Tyler, 'but I couldn't get…'

'Yeah, I know; there's been a problem. Listen, I haven't time to talk. Meet me in St James's Park – tomorrow at eleven o'clock.'

For a second Tyler wondered if he was talking to the same person that he had met at the party. The voice was still American, but crisp and with less Deep South honey.

'That's fine,' said Tyler, 'I'll be there.'

Tyler guessed he would find the American on the Buckingham Palace end of St James's Lake: it was more secluded. He finally spotted him on a park bench partly obscured by a weeping willow. The American was wearing a single-breasted trench coat with a belt, which was casually knotted. Tyler could see that the coat was perfectly cut and expensive.

The American didn't look up as Tyler approached. He didn't even make eye contact when Tyler sat down on the bench next to him. There was a long awkward pause as the American looked out across the lake, his eyes squinting against the lowering sun. Finally, he gave a twisted smile, as if he were inwardly laughing at an unspoken joke. When the words came they were a velvet whisper.

'Did anyone ever tell you that you were pretty when you were a little girl?' The American spoke in the same honeyed accent, a purr of lazy diphthongs, that Tyler remembered from the party. It was the languid Southern drawl of a plantation owner ordering a slave to strip.

Tyler stared across the lake and stayed silent.

'So no one ever told you that?'

Tyler laughed nervously. 'No.'

'Not even your mother?'

'No.'

'What a pity. All little girls should be told they're pretty, even if they're not.' The American paused and gave an inward smile. 'But, of course, John, you are pretty. And I'm sure you want to be.'

Tyler was surprised to hear his proper name. The Dolphin Square gang called him 'Babs'.

'Why,' asked the American, 'do you think I asked you to come here?'

'I think you're playing some sort of game – and not a very pleasant one.'

'Unh, uh.' The American gave a lopsided laugh. 'Oh dear, you sound ever so proper British when you get indignant. Can you do it again?'

'Please don't mock me.'

'I apologise, John. Do you forgive me?'

'Sure.' Tyler paused. 'Now that you know my real name, can you tell me yours?'

The American laughed. 'I don't have a real name. I'm surprised you didn't know that.'

Tyler nodded. 'Okay.'

'Let's get down to business.' The American slipped a hand inside his trench coat and took out a brown eight-by-ten envelope. 'Did you, uh, enjoy your posting in Moscow?'

Tyler stared at the envelope without answering.

'Maybe you can't remember.' The American opened the envelope and slid out the first photo. 'But it certainly looks like you enjoyed yourself – and gave joy to a few others too. Would you like to see the rest of the photos?'

Tyler looked away and shook his head.

'You're lucky, John.'

'How?'

'That it was our guys who were running Mikhailski.'

Tyler knew he had been reckless that evening, but thought he would be safe with Mikhailski because his new friend was a Pole, not a Russian. It seemed at the time, especially after all the vodka, that as they were foreigners, they could do what they wanted and nobody would know. Then later, when a couple of Russians joined in, Tyler was past caring.

'Thank you,' said Tyler.

'I don't understand why you're thanking me.' The American smiled and tapped a finger on the photos. 'You think that I'm

just giving you a friendly warning to be more careful in the future?'

Tyler shook his head.

'How's your mother? Does she like the new vicarage?'

'Don't…'

'Maybe she wouldn't mind. She must know what you're like.'

'Keep her out of it … please.'

'Or there's Euan, your boss. He trusts you so much he lets you call him by his first name. I've heard that you keep a photograph of Euan in his naval officer's uniform in a silver frame on your desk.'

'What do you want?'

'I want you to accept this present.' The American slid a small solid object into Tyler's overcoat pocket. 'It's a Praktina, bigger than the Minox, but I prefer them. Don't let Euan see it.'

Tyler surreptitiously touched the camera. The metal was still warm from the American's touch. 'Why are you giving this to me?'

'Don't be naive.'

Tyler ran his fingers over the camera. 'You said it's a Praktina. That's an East German camera. Why have you given me one of those?'

'They're better quality than ours. And I'm sure you remember how to photo documents from your RAF days. You were trained.'

'What do you want?'

'At first: radar, torpedoes and anti-submarine equipment.'

Tyler felt the Praktina was biting his fingers, as if the camera had turned into a serpent. He looked out across the lake. The water mirrored a shaky reflection of Buckingham Palace. For a second Tyler wasn't sure what he was going to do. Maybe, he thought, it was best to confess everything to Euan. No one would want a diplomatic row with the Americans. There would be a cover-up – and he would receive a quiet reprimand. And what was the point of this spying? Tyler assumed that the Admiralty shared technical information with the Americans as a matter of course.

'I've got another present for you,' said the American. He passed over a bulging envelope. 'Don't worry. The only pictures

you'll find in this one are of Ulysses S. Grant and Benjamin Franklin.'

Tyler slipped the money into an inner coat pocket. He was surprised how quickly and thoughtlessly he had done it.

'You like nice clothes, don't you, John?'

'And so do you. It's not a crime to dress well.'

'May I recommend a shirt-maker? His name is Youseff and he's got a shop just off Bond Street. He's a Syrian. You'll find his card with the dollar bills. Youseff is also a good way to find me – and I'm sure you will want to.'

The American got up. He towered over Tyler. His tall body blocked the sun. He stared at the Englishman and smiled – then a second later he was gone.

Meanwhile, a second photographer on the top floor of another building overlooking St James's Park was aiming a long heavy telephoto lens for the last few shots.

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Catesby and Bone were walking alone on Birdcage Walk. They were dressed in overalls and carrying long canvas tool bags. They had posed as heating engineers to get access to the roof space.

'Skardon,' said Catesby, 'didn't hang around long.'

'He's in a hurry to get the film developed – and a bit annoyed that he had to use us to get the photos.' Bone was referring to the fact that Skardon's service , MI5, was responsible for surveillance within the UK. SIS were limited by law to snooping abroad.

'Did he argue the case?'

'Vigorously and loudly. But C overruled him on a need-to-know basis. SIS uncovered Cauldwell and we don't want to share the details with the bumbling plods at Five. There are sensitive issues that the retired colonial police inspectors at Leconfield House might not grasp.'

Catesby smiled. Bone's contempt for MI5 was well known in the service: *They're not gentlemen, so you can't expect them to behave like gentlemen*. Catesby looked closely at his boss. 'By the way, Henry, how did we uncover Cauldwell?'

'That, Catesby, is something you don't need to know. Why are you looking at me that way?'

'Because I was thinking how much you look the part in your flat cap and overalls. With elocution lessons, you could pass for a site foreman – or one of those skilled craftsmen who restore the squiggly bits on Georgian ceilings.'

'Actually, Catesby, I have done just that for a friend who has a rather grand place in Suffolk. The fluted cavetto cornices were the most difficult.'

'Who is this friend?'

'You don't need to know that either.'

»»»»»

It was a busy day for Jeffers Cauldwell and his aliases. For over a year he had been Cultural Attaché at the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square. As a wealthy dandy from the American South, Cauldwell was an unlikely Communist spy – which was why it had been so easy to dupe Tyler and some of the others with the 'false flag' ploy. It was an op whereby a spy pretends to be working for a less toxic intelligence agency, usually an ally's. They thought Cauldwell was a Washington spook, but they were wrong. Cauldwell was a fearless and ideologically committed Communist.

It was a busy day indeed. Cauldwell had a number of chores involving various agents. His next stop was a bench in Green Park. The agent was a Tory cabinet minister who had been spectacularly compromised. The evidence was a Polaroid photo that had come into Cauldwell's possession via an American actor. The photo did not reveal anything illegal, but if made public would ruin the minister's career. The minister was careful not to provide classified information to Cauldwell that would have breached the Official Secrets Act. Instead, he kept the Polaroid out of circulation by providing personal secrets about his colleagues and the upper-class elite. Cauldwell treasured those revelations more than a NATO codebook. He knew that personal secrets were the blackmail levers that could pry open the doors of the Secret State. The bedrooms of Knightsbridge and other

posh parts of SW3 were more valuable to a foreign spy than a hidden microphone in 10 Downing Street.

The one thing that Cauldwell had learned during his posting in England was that upper-class society was a sexual circus. The circus hosted a diverse and imaginative variety of acts, which were always performed with aplomb. In fact, participants seemed to prefer performing if an audience was involved. They liked dressing up and showing off. The textbook term was autagonistophilia. Arousal and satisfaction were achieved by displaying oneself as part of a live show or on camera – and probably explained the Polaroid. The lady involved had become sexually voracious after falling down a lift shaft while visiting her Harley Street gynaecologist. But her having the camera in the first place was more interesting than the sex act she recorded with it. At the time the snap was taken, the mid-1950s, the only Polaroid cameras in Britain belonged to the Security Services and the Ministry of Defence

The cabinet minister sent signals to Cauldwell by sticking drawing pins into the park bench. A red pin meant come back in a fortnight; yellow meant they could talk using public phone kiosks; green meant a face to face meeting at rush hour under the clock at Charing Cross. Some agents liked to use drawing pins stuck on the bottom side of the shelf in a phone kiosk as a rendezvous signal, but the pins often ended up covered in chewing gum – and Cauldwell didn't like having to peel off macerated gum. The problem with park benches, as well as public phones, was someone else using them when you wanted to make a rendezvous check. But this time, at least, the bench was empty – and the pin was yellow.

The important thing about telephone rendezvous was split-second timing. You don't dial the number of the other public phone until the person is in place and waiting with phone in hand and finger depressing the cradle. Cauldwell checked his watch and slowly walked to Piccadilly to find an unoccupied kiosk. At the precise second, he dialled the number and the other phone answered immediately with the code name, 'Sholto here.'

Cauldwell gave the verification answer: 'Did you place the bet?'

'Lady Somers is a real runner for the Deputy PUS stakes at Cannon Fodder. The filly has an interesting history.'

'She didn't fall down an elevator shaft by any chance?'

The minister laughed. 'No, you're confusing her with someone else. But I would say that Lady Somers has even *more* interesting history.'

Cauldwell sensed that the minister enjoyed passing on gossip and that the threat of blackmail gave him carte blanche to do it. 'Please tell me more; don't be a tease.'

'No.' The minister brayed an even louder laugh and the line went dead.

Cauldwell hung up and hailed a taxi. He told the driver to take him to 30 Queen's Gate Mews, but that wasn't where he was going. You never tell taxi drivers your exact destination in case the Security Services question them about a curious fare, but it was near enough. Cauldwell settled into his seat and watched London flash past as he worked out the minister's cryptic message. PUS was an acronym for Permanent Under-secretary of State, the highest-ranking civil service mandarin in a Whitehall department. So a deputy PUS would be second in rank to the PUS. 'Cannon Fodder' was easy – the War Office. Cauldwell had vaguely heard of Lady Somers. He wondered if she was one of *les grandes horizontales sapphiques* that his cabinet minister sometimes talked about. In any case, Lady Somers, *sapphique* or not, seemed lined up for a pretty big job at War. But what was her 'interesting history'?

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It was a quick walk from Queen's Gate Mews to the Hereford Arms on Gloucester Road. Cauldwell used to meet the agent at the Bunch of Grapes on Old Brompton Road, but too many Sovs had started to hang around the Grapes – and that meant MI5 had put the pub under surveillance. But the Sovs were the clever ones. They knew that if you frequented a place, it wouldn't be long before 'watchers' from Five would flock there like wasps to

rotten apples. By deflecting surveillance manpower, you could rendezvous more safely at other places.

The Hereford Arms agent was a scientist. He was a difficult agent to run because he was so frightened and fucked up. Cauldwell didn't like meeting him face to face, but there was no other way because the scientist refused to use DLBs – dead letter boxes – or to get the hang of clandestine telephone calls. He also needed a lot of personal support, which was tiresome. The scientist wasn't upper-class – far from it – but he did have his own niche kink. It wasn't, in fact, one that toffs – as far as Cauldwell knew – ever practised. The scientist's kink was paraphilic infantilism, also known as adult baby syndrome. He liked to be dressed up in diapers and to be bathed, powdered and changed. The proclivities split up his marriage. The scientist was talent spotted by the KGB *Rezident* at the Soviet Embassy and his file passed on to Cauldwell – who wondered whether he was worth the bother and risk. He taught at Imperial College and was a specialist in aerodynamics, but his research was inferior to that being carried out by Sov scientists. So what was the point of using him? The point wasn't *what* he knew, but *who* he knew. The scientist was part of the RAF research establishment and also had contacts in the Admiralty Underwater Weapons Establishment at Portland in Dorset. The latter was what really interested Cauldwell.

The Hereford Arms was a Victorian pub painted purple black. It was famous for having been the local of Arthur Conan Doyle – and there were rumours that Jack the Ripper used to drink there too. The current lunchtime crowd was also a bit odd. There were naturalists from the Natural History Museum and arty curator types from the V&A. This worried Cauldwell. He was afraid that one of the V&A crowd might recognise him from his CultAt post. As he ordered a gin and tonic, one of them winked at him. Cauldwell hoped it was flirtation and not recognition. At that moment, the scientist walked in and came to the bar.

'What are you having?'

'A pint of Fuller's.'

Cauldwell ordered the beer and whispered to the scientist: 'Pretend we're a couple of boys about to do something naughty.'

'I don't like that sort of thing. It's disgusting.'

'Not as disgusting as what you do like.' Cauldwell had shifted his voice from American to London spiv. He didn't want to attract attention. 'Sit in the corner, sweetheart, and keep up the act. We need an excuse for talking in whispers.'

Cauldwell took the chair with his back to the bar and the lunchtime crowd. The scientist fidgeted nervously. 'They're staring at us.'

'They're staring at me. You're too dull and boring. Maybe that's why your wife left you, nothing to do with soiled nappies.'

'You're a nasty piece of business, aren't you?'

Cauldwell smiled. 'We all have our faults. Mine is being a completely evil bastard.'

'And that's the reason why I want out now. I've decided to confess.'

'They'll love you at Wormwood Scrubs. Nice fresh boy like you. As soon as they see your face in the newspapers, they'll get out their tubes of Vaseline and warm them on the radiators.'

The scientist turned pale and sipped his beer. 'I still want out.'

'How are you for dosh?' Cauldwell knew that the divorce had cost the scientist a lot of money.

'That's another thing I want to talk about.'

'We can give you more money, but we'll want something in return.'

'But I've already given you everything I had access to when I was at Boscombe Down.' The scientist was referring to an RAF R&D project he had worked on. The information he had passed over was of little value, but the purpose of the op had been to entrap the scientist for the future. And the future was now.

'I don't want information. I want an introduction to your friend from Portland Bill.'

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Three days later, Cauldwell was on the last train from Waterloo to Weymouth. The train was nearly empty and the two

men were alone in the compartment. Cauldwell was reading a newspaper. The naval officer was in civilian clothes and looked slightly drunk, but not so drunk that he had forgotten his lines.

'I say, is that the evening edition?'

'Yes, it is.'

'Would you mind if I have a look when you're finished? I want to check the racing results.'

'You can have it now.' Cauldwell smiled and handed him the paper.

When the naval officer looked at the sports page, he found the racing results were excellent. A hundred pounds in used notes was pinned to the page – enough to buy the new car he needed.

'And there's more where that came from,' said Cauldwell.

The naval officer needed the money. Booze, women and gambling had drained him. 'We must meet more often, Mr…'

'Hood, just like your battleship.'

'Actually, she was a battle*cruiser*.'

'I should have known that. There's a lot more you can teach me.' Cauldwell could see that the naval officer was going to be a straightforward agent to run. Greed was always easy. But Cauldwell knew he was taking a big risk. The Admiralty Underwater Weapons Establishment at Portland was not his patch. Vasili, his KGB London control, had warned him off it before.

The naval officer slipped the bank notes into his pocket and winked at Cauldwell. 'I'm glad we've met, Mr…'

'Hood.'

'Silly me, memory like a sieve.' The naval officer's voice was now slurred. 'Actually, I was expecting to meet someone else. Have you a colleague called Gordon?'

Cauldwell gave a weary smile. 'There's been a bit of a problem with Gordon, but I can't give you the details.'

'Just a little clue?'

Cauldwell shook his head, then whispered, 'Have you got suspicions about him?'

'I just want to be careful.'

'And this is how you can be careful. If Gordon approaches you, have nothing to do with him. Don't even give him the time of day.'

The naval officer gave a knowing smile. 'He's a nark.'

Cauldwell kept a straight face. 'I'm not saying anything more.'

'*Capisco*.'

Cauldwell stared out the train window into the damp night. He feared he had gone too far. It seemed that Konon Molody, aka Gordon Lonsdale, was already running the naval officer. Portland belonged to Molody – the best Soviet spy in the UK – and messing about with Portland was the most dangerous thing that Cauldwell had ever done. Molody could report him back to Moscow if he heard.

'Bloody hell,' said the naval officer, 'I'm dying for a piss.'

'That's the problem with these trains.' They were in a no-corridor carriage with full-width compartments.

'Yeah, but they're jolly good for having a shag. But I'm bursting.'

'I'll hold the door open for you.'

'Thanks.' The naval officer wagged his finger. 'But promise not to look.'

'Of course not.'

It wasn't unusual for drunken passengers to fall to their death when peeing from such trains. Cauldwell left the empty compartment at the next station.

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The next day in London was creepy, dead creepy. Cauldwell had itchy feet and knew something was wrong. He worked late at the embassy doing Cultural Attaché stuff, largely preparing a press pack about Elvis Presley being declared 1A and eligible for US military draft, and keeping a low profile. He took counter-surveillance measures on the way back to his flat that evening but Cauldwell knew something was wrong even before he saw the van. He had just come out of Pimlico underground station. It was a sixth sense, a feeling of eyes boring into the back – and then the tradesman's van at a time of night when no tradesmen would be working. Cauldwell turned into Moreton Street. As soon as the van pulled up beside him, he reached for the Smith & Wesson in his Mackintosh pocket. If there was only one of

them, he would put a bullet in the driver and take the van. If there were several, he would empty the clip and run back to the underground station – assuming no one could follow him. The passenger door swung open and Cauldwell aimed at the shadow. And the shadow called out in a hoarse whisper: 'Put that away, Jeffers, and get in. You've been busted.' He recognised the hoarse voice. It was Youseff, the Syrian shirt-maker.