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The Spy

Written by Paulo Coelho

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Translated from the Portuguese by Zöe Perry

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Paulo Coelho

THE SPY

Translated from the Portugese
by Zoë Perry



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O Mary,
conceived without sin,
pray for us who have recourse to You.
Amen.

"When thou goest with thine adversary to the magistrate, as thou art in the way, give diligence that thou mayest be delivered from him; lest he hale thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and the officer cast thee into prison.

"I tell thee, thou shalt not depart thence, till thou hast paid the very last mite."

—LUKE 12:58–59

Based on real events

Prologue



PARIS, OCTOBER 15, 1917—
ANTON FISHERMAN AND HENRY WALES,
FOR THE INTERNATIONAL NEWS SERVICE

Shortly before 5 a.m., a party of eighteen men—most of them officers of the French army—climbed to the second floor of Saint-Lazare, the women's prison in Paris. Guided by a warder carrying a torch to light the lamps, they stopped in front of cell 12.

Nuns were charged with looking after the prison. Sister Leonide opened the door and asked that everyone wait outside as she entered the cell, struck a match against the wall, and lit the lamp inside. Then she called one of the other sisters to help.

With great affection and care, Sister Leonide draped her arm around the sleeping body. The woman struggled to waken, as though disinterested in anything. According to the nun's statement, when she finally awoke, it was as though she emerged from a peaceful slumber. She remained serene when she learned her appeal for clemency, made days earlier to the president of the republic, had been denied. It was impossible to decipher if she felt sadness or a sense of relief that everything was coming to an end.

On Sister Leonide's signal, Father Arbaux entered her cell along with Captain Bouchardon and her lawyer, Maître Clunet. The prisoner handed her lawyer the long letter that she had spent the previous week writing, as well as two manila envelopes containing news clippings.

She drew on black stockings, which seemed grotesque under the circumstances, and stepped into a pair of high-heeled shoes adorned with silk laces. As she rose from the bed, she reached for the hook in the corner of her cell, where a floor-length fur coat hung, its sleeves and collar trimmed with the fur of another animal, possibly fox. She slipped it over the heavy silk kimono in which she had slept.

Her black hair was disheveled. She brushed it carefully, then secured it at the nape of her neck. She perched a felt hat on top of her head and tied it under her chin with a silk ribbon, so the wind would not blow it out of place when she stood in the clearing where she was to be led.

Slowly, she bent down to take a pair of black leather gloves. Then, nonchalantly, she turned to the newcomers and said in a calm voice:

"I am ready."

Everyone departed the Saint-Lazare prison cell and headed toward the automobile that waited, its engine running, to take them to the firing squad.

The car sped through the streets of the sleeping city on its way to the Caserne de Vincennes barracks. A fort had stood there once, before being destroyed by the Germans in 1870.

Twenty minutes later, the automobile stopped and its party descended. Mata Hari was the last to exit.

The soldiers were already lined up for the execution. Twelve Zouaves formed the firing squad. At the end of the group stood an officer, his sword drawn.

Flanked by two nuns, Father Arbaux spoke with the condemned woman until a French lieutenant

approached and held out a white cloth to one of the sisters, saying:

"Blindfold her eyes, please."

"Must I wear that?" asked Mata Hari, as she looked at the cloth.

Maître Clunet turned to the lieutenant questioningly.

"If Madame prefers not to, it is not mandatory," replied the lieutenant.

Mata Hari was neither bound nor blindfolded; she stood, gazing steadfastly at her executioners, as the priest, the nuns, and her lawyer stepped away.

The commander of the firing squad, who had been watching his men attentively to prevent them from examining their rifles—it is customary to always put a blank cartridge in one, so that everyone can claim not to have fired the deadly shot—seemed to relax. Soon the business would be over.

"Ready!"

The twelve men took a rigid stance and placed their rifles at their shoulders.

Mata Hari did not move a muscle.

The officer stood where all the soldiers could see him and raised his sword.

"Aim!"

The woman before them remained impassive, showing no fear.

The officer's sword dropped, slicing through the air in an arc.

"Fire!"

The sun, now rising on the horizon, illuminated the flames and small puffs of smoke issuing from the rifles as a flurry of gunfire rang out with a bang. Immediately after this, the soldiers returned their rifles to the ground in a rhythmic motion.

For a fraction of a second, Mata Hari remained upright. She did not die the way you see in moving pictures after people are shot. She did not plunge forward or backward, and she did not throw her arms up or to the side. She collapsed onto herself, her head still up, her eyes still open. One of the soldiers fainted.

Then her knees buckled and her body fell to the right, legs doubled up beneath the fur coat. And there she lay, motionless, with her face turned toward the heavens.

A third officer drew his revolver from a holster strapped to his chest and, accompanied by a lieutenant, walked toward the motionless body.

Bending over, he placed the muzzle of the re-

volver against the spy's temple, taking care not to touch her skin. Then he pulled the trigger, and the bullet tore through her brain. He turned to all who were present and said in a solemn voice:

"Mata Hari is dead."

Part I



Dear Mr. Clunet,

I do not know what will happen at the end of this week. I have always been an optimistic woman, but time has left me bitter, alone, and sad.

If things turn out as I hope, you will never receive this letter. I'll have been pardoned. After all, I spent my life cultivating influential friends. I will hold on to the letter so that, one day, my only daughter might read it to find out who her mother was.

But if I am wrong, I have little hope that these pages, which have consumed my last week of life on Earth, will be kept. I have always been a realistic woman and I know that, once a case is settled, a lawyer will move on to the next one without a backward glance.

I can imagine what will happen after. You will be a very busy man, having gained notoriety defending a war criminal. You will have many people knocking at your door, begging for your services, for, even defeated, you attracted huge publicity. You will meet journalists interested to hear your version of events, you will dine in the city's most expensive restaurants, and you will be looked upon with respect and envy by your peers. You will know there was never any concrete evidence against me—only documents that had been tampered with—but you will never publicly admit that you allowed an innocent woman to die.

Innocent? Perhaps that is not the right word. I was never innocent, not since I first set foot in this city I love so dearly. I thought I could manipulate those who wanted state secrets. I thought the Germans, French, English, Spanish would never be able to resist me—and yet, in the end, I was the one manipulated. The crimes I did commit, I escaped, the greatest of which was being an emancipated and independent woman in a world ruled by men. I was convicted of espionage even though the only thing concrete I traded was the gossip from high-society salons.

Yes, I turned this gossip into "secrets," because I wanted money and power. But all those who accuse me now know I never revealed anything new.

It's a shame no one will know this. These envelopes will inevitably find their way to a dusty file cabinet, full of documents from other proceedings. Perhaps they will leave when your successor, or your successor's successor, decides to make room and throw out old cases.

By that time, my name will have been long forgotten. But I am not writing to be remembered. I am attempting to understand things myself. Why? How is it that a woman who for so many years got everything she wanted can be condemned to death for so little?

At this moment, I look back at my life and realize that memory is a river, one that always runs backward.

Memories are full of caprice, where images of things we've experienced are still capable of suffocating us through one small detail or insignificant sound. The smell of baking bread wafts up to my cell and reminds me of the days I walked freely in the cafés. This tears me apart more than my fear of death or the solitude in which I now find myself.

Memories bring with them a devil called melancholy—oh, cruel demon that I cannot escape. Hearing a prisoner singing, receiving a small handful of letters from admirers who were never among those who brought me roses and jasmine flowers, picturing a scene from some city I didn't appreciate at the time. Now it's all I have left of this or that country I visited.

The memories always win, and with them comes a demon that is even more terrifying than melancholy: remorse. It's my only companion in this cell, except when the sisters decide to come and chat. They do not speak about God, or condemn me for what society calls my "sins of the flesh." Generally, they say one or two words, and the memories spout from my mouth, as if I wanted to go back in time, plunging into this river that runs backward.

One of them asked me:

"If God gave you a second chance, would you do anything differently?"

I said yes, but really, I do not know. All I know is that my current heart is a ghost town, one populated by passions, enthusiasm, loneliness, shame, pride, betrayal, and sadness. I cannot disentangle

myself from any of it, even when I feel sorry for myself and weep in silence.

I am a woman who was born at the wrong time and nothing can be done to fix this. I don't know if the future will remember me, but if it does, may it never see me as a victim, but as someone who moved forward with courage, fearlessly paying the price she had to pay.