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Opening Extract from...

Patriotic Games

Written by Malcolm Hamer

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A Poolside book

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It is only a few hundred yards from Horse Guards to the Foreign Office, where James Clifton worked, but on this day it took him a great deal longer than the usual few minutes. Most of the muscles in his body were complaining and his legs were trembling. As he limped along Whitehall he reflected that, when he'd agreed to do a bit of part-time spying for his country, no one had mentioned the 'special training' that was in store for him. He was strong and athletic, but he had been unprepared for the battering his body had just received at the hands of his instructor, the formidable Staff Corporal Cowie.

It was the month of July, 1914, and James had been persuaded, by his father of all people, to assist a relatively new organisation called the Secret Service Bureau.

As part of his training for this new role he had been sent for some 'basic instruction in self-defence techniques'. His instructor's view of self-defence was, however, a far cry from what James had learned on the playing fields of Winchester College.

When he had presented himself at the headquarters of the Household Cavalry, he had been met by the Staff Corporal. Cowie was a tall man, strongly-built and with luxuriant whiskers decorating his florid face; he had bustled James along a colonnade, down some stairs and into a large room with some thick matting on the floor. The basic gym equipment included a couple of vaulting horses, wall bars and some ropes dangling from the ceiling in one corner.

'Right, sir,' said Cowie briskly, 'off with your jacket and shirt, and your shoes.' He rummaged in a tin trunk next to the wall and handed James a dingy white vest and some thick woollen socks.

'Now, sir, I'm going to try and teach you a few basic moves which'll keep you out of trouble. Forget yer boxin'. Them Queensberry Rules is suspended if you're in a spot of bother. You've gotta know how to thump the shit out of the other bastard before he thumps you. OK?'

Cowie crouched in front of James. 'Protect yerself the best you can with yer elbows and yer forearms – and remember they're the best form of attack as well, along with yer knees and yer feet. Not yer fists, you'll only hurt 'em, 'specially if you catch 'im on the top of the 'ead. So, you've gotta get in close and get in fast, and then you've a chance of taking the bugger by surprise. A bloody good start is to smash the bastard in the face with your forearm.'

Cowie picked up an oblong leather bag from the floor and handed it to James. 'OK, sir, hold that in front of you and I'll show you how it's done.'

The Staff Corporal suddenly shifted his weight and smashed his right forearm into the stuffed bag. James staggered back several feet under the power of the blow.

'Right, sir, your turn.'

James tried to emulate his instructor, who stood firm and roared at him, 'Come on, sir, yer not dancing with yer lady friend. Make it count. You've got to put this bastard out of the fight, smash his nose in, break his jaw. You want rid of 'im.'

During the next thirty minutes, James learned how to use not only his forearm to disable an opponent, but also the heel of his hand, his elbows, his knees and his feet; he was also shown how to gouge and how to chop someone's windpipe. All of this was accompanied by Staff Corporal Cowie's bloodthirsty demands that he 'made it count' and that his blows were powerful enough 'to make the claret flow'. Cowie also instructed him in the basic technique of disarming a man who was attacking him with a knife.

James was streaming with sweat when Cowie called a halt, handed him a grey scrap of towel from the trunk and some tepid water in a rusty tin mug.

'Of course, sir,' Cowie said, as James got back his breath, 'the best defence of all is to leg it. A fight is a last resort for someone in your situation. I know that you're a sportsman and that you're fitter than most of the men who come here, so leg it if you can and live to fight another day. The sort of scum who might be after you won't catch up with you, sir. I've seen you play football for the Corinthians, down at the Chelsea last year, so I know you're quick on your feet.'

'You like football, Staff Corporal?'

'Yes, sir, played a bit meself. That Wooster who plays for you, now he's a handful, isn't he?'

'Woosnam. Max Woosnam.'

'That's him. He'd always be in my team, sir.'

Next Cowie took him down another flight of stairs into a cellar, which had been converted to a firing range. The instructor unlocked a stout wooden cabinet, looked at a variety of pistols on their hooks and selected two of them.

'The Webley mark four, sir, British Army issue. It's reliable and it's got enough fire-power to stop some fuzzy-topped nigger who's off his head on jungle juice and charging at you with murder in 'is 'eart and a bloody great spear in his mitt. It's quite heavy to handle, though.' He picked up another slightly smaller gun. 'This 'ere's the Luger, just as reliable, but not quite so much biff in it. A good weapon, though.'

James hesitated as he tried to grasp the implications of carrying a gun around London. When he had first met Captain Vernon Kell, who was in charge of the Secret Service Bureau, Kell had described his part-time spying as a little non-confrontational eavesdropping. But now, apparently, he was to be sent out armed to the teeth. If his mother ever found out, heaven help him. Heaven help his father, too, for putting her beloved son in danger. 'Staff Corporal,' he said diffidently, 'I was told to get some instruction in self-defence. Guns are a rather different matter, aren't they?'

'Guns can be very effective, sir,' he said drily. 'I know that you're just doing a bit of nosing around, not startin' a war, but I was told to set you up, just in case. Anyway, the way things

is goin', you'll be firing in earnest at them soddin' Krauts before you're much older. Me too, I 'spect.'

Cowie peered again into the cupboard and pulled out another gun. 'Beretta, sir. It's a lady's gun, really, not very reliable. A bit like those Eye-talians who make it, eh?' He smiled broadly.

That's the likes of Julius Caesar, da Vinci, Michelangelo, Galileo, Dante and Verdi put in their place, James thought, as he smiled back at the Staff Corporal.

After some more tuition about the mechanisms of the pistols, and how to aim and shoot them, James fired the Webley and the Luger at the targets, which were about twenty yards away. The noise was loud in the confined space. He was disappointed to miss the mark several times, although he hit the outer rings and managed one hit on the inner.

'That's not so bad, sir,' Cowie said. 'Remember, these pistols are for close work, so as long as you get a bullet into your target…'

After some deliberation James chose the Luger since it was less bulky, and Cowie told him that it was a good choice.

As the soldier led him to the front of the Horse Guards building he said, 'One other thing, Mister Clifton, when you collect the pistol you'll also get a clasp-knife. In the short run it may be more use to you. As well as the blade, there's a screwdriver that fits into the handle. Good luck, sir, and remember, make that first blow count. Put the bastard out of the game and make sure he's out of it for good.'

That summed it up very succinctly, James thought, as he walked stiffly away along Whitehall. He also thought how he'd like to have Cowie at his back if the need for violent action ever arose. That made him consider the commitments he was about to make. It was one thing to agree to a bit of fraternising with Germans, who might or might not wish harm to his country, and to report their views to Vernon Kell and his colleagues; but the matter suddenly seemed much more serious after the redoubtable Staff Corporal Cowie had shown him how to disable a man with his bare hands – or with his feet, elbows, knees and any other part of his anatomy for that matter.

However, the fact that he was about to be equipped with a pistol and a knife took the whole business to yet another level of potential danger. He realised that, if these Germans really were spies, they would be dangerous men, men like Cowie, who would know that their exposure meant only one thing: death by firing squad. They would fight for their lives.

* * *

Less than three weeks ago James had been leading the settled life that a man with his education and upbringing would have expected. Apart from his interesting, if undemanding, job at the Foreign Office, he led a full social life and had numerous opportunities to indulge his love of sport during the seemingly endless sunny days that marked that summer of 1914.

The Huntercombe House cricket week, presided over by its patron, Lord Fitzsimon, was one of James's favourite occasions. It was now drawing to its close and the final match was subsiding gently into an easy victory for the home side. The fall of the final wicket was the signal for some languid applause from the few dozen spectators, who then moved with restrained eagerness towards the terrace in front of the pavilion where bottles of champagne and jugs of lemonade were lined up.

Huntercombe House itself towered above, a pseudo-Gothic extravaganza which would have looked spectacular perched on a bluff above the Danube or the Loire, but was unsuited to the placid eastern edge of Dorset. The cricket ground sat on a ledge below the terrace and beyond lay a stretch of undulating parkland which meandered towards the scattered houses of the village, and then the sea.

James Clifton, who had been left stranded on a score of 48 when the final MCC wicket fell, was greeted by his team-mate and friend, Richard Hildreth, at the pavilion door.

'Bad luck, James, you deserved your fifty.'

'Thanks, but that fellow Price is the very devil to play.'

'Of course he is. He's Fitzsimon's professional. After all, he used to play for Derbyshire.'

'And should've played for England, so they say. Mind you, I'm sure the wicket's prepared specially for him. There are some bumpy patches just short of a length.'

Hildreth laughed. '"A bumping pitch and a blinding light, an hour to play and the last man in".'

'Not quite that dramatic,' James replied, 'come on, let's have some fizz. I'll change later.'

They strolled towards the terrace where the tables, covered with white linen cloths, were laden with plates of game pie, legs of chicken, tiny lamb cutlets, smoked salmon sandwiches, heavy slabs of fruit cake and festoons of chocolate éclairs.

As the two men approached the first table, they were intercepted by Lord Fitzsimon himself, a tall and grey-haired man whose long and fleshy face was notable for its flattened nose. The story, neither confirmed nor contradicted by the noble lord, was that it had been broken in his youth during a brawl with a pimp outside a house of ill repute in San Francisco. He was now immensely wealthy; as well as being the chairman of a prestigious bank, he was known to have interests in mining and agriculture in many parts of the world.

Fitzsimon shook James by the hand. 'A capital innings, Clifton. Well played.'

'Thank you, sir. It was a treat to play on such a superb wicket. As always.'

'You're very kind.' Fitzsimon waved a meaty hand towards the tables and at once a servant appeared at his side with glasses of champagne for James and Richard. 'Enjoy yourselves. Drinks in the drawing room at eight, dinner at nine. Now, if you'll excuse me.' He swept off to join another group of guests.

The two men took several sips of champagne and, seconds later, a servant glided up to them and topped up their glasses. 'This is damned good stuff,' said Richard.

'The noble lord can afford the best.'

'He certainly can. I wonder how he accumulated his riches?'

'It's a mystery,' James replied. 'Who said that behind every great fortune there lies a great crime?'

'I can't remember, but that's a bit cynical, James, isn't it?'

'Yes. And anyway, he enjoys the good things in life and that's a great virtue. Talking of good things, where's your lovely sister?' Richard's sister had rarely shown the slightest interest in sport, but James was nevertheless disappointed that he had not managed to reach his fifty while she was watching.

'Oh, Emily's probably lecturing some poor devil about votes for women. It's all she thinks of these days.'

'Or the rights of the poor and down-trodden working man.'

Richard, who was an inch or two above six feet in height, craned his neck and peered over the crowd. 'Over there, James, shall we rescue the poor souls she's trying to convert?'

In his more reflective moments James thought that he probably did adore Emily. She was beautiful, but not distant; she was elegant, but not fussy; and she had interesting views, which she was determined to express, rather than settling for the platitudes that masqueraded as conversation in the circles in which they both moved. Emily was formidable and that probably explained why, in her mid-twenties, she was unmarried and had not, to James's knowledge, ever had a serious suitor. Even he, who had known her since they were children, sometimes felt intimidated by her; that was perhaps why he had never seriously considered trying to initiate a courtship. Or was it because he thought of her almost as a sister?

As he and Richard approached, Emily was talking animatedly to three other guests. James eyed her slim frame, enclosed in a light blue dress overlaid with lace; her dark blue shoes peeped out from beneath her skirt.

Handshakes and half-bows were exchanged and Emily said, 'Jeremy was asking me if I would be at Lord's for the Gentlemen versus Players match and I was explaining that, much as I like the rituals of cricket, one game watched a month is more than enough excitement for any woman.'

Emily's gentle sarcasm escaped Jeremy and he asked her eagerly, 'What about Glorious Goodwood? Surely you'll be there?'

Jeremy Lascelles had been at Eton with Richard and, like Lord Fitzsimon, was a banker in the City of London. However, his many social obligations had a much higher priority in his life than his career in finance.

Richard tried to head him off. 'My sister isn't very sporting, Jeremy. She's more interested in books and the arts, aren't you, Emily.'

'Good Lord, novels and plays and things like that?' Lascelles blurted out.

James saw Emily's eyes turn upwards; he could not decide whether in despair or in supplication to some higher and more charitable power. 'Shaw and James Joyce and Eliot and Wyndham Lewis have some interesting things to say,' she stated patiently.

'Odd, that Shaw feller, isn't he? A socialist, eh? Doesn't eat meat. I like musicals myself.'

'We're going to see *Hullo Ragtime* soon,' Richard said quickly. 'Looking forward to it.'

'Ah, I need to talk to you both about the arrangements,' said Emily. She smiled at Jeremy Lascelles and his two companions. 'Please excuse us.' She led Richard and James to a corner of the terrace and murmured, 'Dear God, has that man ever said anything interesting in his whole life?'

'Oh, he's not that bad,' her brother replied. 'And he is very rich.'

'Not bad,' Emily said sarcastically. 'He's like virtually every other man I've met in London during the last three years. I shall ignore your remark about how rich he is.'

'Perhaps your standards are too high,' James suggested with a laugh.

'Impossibly high,' said her brother.

'You may be right,' his sister replied and James detected a hint of sadness in her voice.

He decided to change the subject. 'Richard, are you going on this trip to Brazil? It sounds fun, but the boat leaves on the first day of August, which isn't far away, so the chairman has been on to me to make a decision.'

'Football in Brazil,' Richard sighed. 'It sounds wonderful and I did of course miss the Corinthians' trip four years ago. How nice of the Brazilians to name a football club after us.'

'Yes. The Corinthians of Sao Paulo. It certainly has a ring to it.'

They all paused as a waiter re-filled their glasses with champagne and Richard continued. 'But it may be difficult for me. It's Mother. We've got some business problems to resolve, nothing serious…'

'Mama needs our support,' Emily interrupted. 'But more than that, how can you two talk about gadding off to Brazil with this country and the rest of Europe in such a state. Even here in Britain we're on the brink of civil war in Ireland, Carson and his gangsters are arming themselves for conflict…'

'The northern Irish would never fire on British soldiers,' James said, 'and somehow Asquith and the government will force through home rule.'

'Damned Irish', said Richard bitterly. 'Nothing but trouble.'

James braced himself for another wrangle between brother and sister about the rights and wrongs of their family owning nearly a hundred thousand acres of prime agricultural land in Ireland; their brother, Adam, ran the estates and did it very well.

'Our family has earned lots of money from Ireland and still does. You call that trouble, Richard? I suppose the Irish should be like women and children, seen and not heard,' Emily said forcefully.

'Please don't lecture me, Emily. Anyway, if you and your suffragettes made a little less noise, you might make more progress.'

'We will keep on until we get the vote. However, it may become a minor issue,' she said gravely. 'Europe is in chaos. The Germans are re-arming and so are the Russians.'

'So what,' her brother responded. 'Let them get on with it. Why should we get involved?'

'Because the Germans want a dominant position in northern Europe. Their real target is France and they'll trample on the Belgians to get there,' James said.

'So we'll be dragged into it,' Emily said triumphantly, 'because

for one thing we have a treaty with Belgium and honour will demand that we defend an ally.'

'You are all looking far too serious.' The deep tones announced the arrival of Rupert Wavell at Emily's side. He seized her hand and kissed it with mock-reverence, and then brushed his dark hair back into place as he straightened. He was wearing the vividly-coloured blazer of the I Zingari Cricket Club and a cravat to match. James noticed his glance flicker briefly, almost dismissively, over Emily and then Wavell turned to her brother.

'Why so solemn on such a lovely day?' Wavell asked. 'Oh, and well played, James, such a straight and steady bat. In the true Corinthian spirit.'

'Thanks, Rupert. We were talking about the trip to Brazil. I'm told you're going.' James knew that Wavell had few constraints on his time, though his nominal occupation was as a director of one of his father's trading companies, which imported raw materials such as cotton, sugar and timber from the colonies and turned them into products that were sold back to the world's eager markets. His good looks and charm made him a great favourite among the many predatory mothers, who during the 'season' were on the hunt for rich and well-connected husbands for their daughters.

'Yes, I wouldn't miss such an expedition. Brazil sounds fascinating and my father has business interests there.'

'Oh, really,' said Richard. 'For instance?'

'Coffee, of course, rubber, sugar, cattle, that sort of thing,' Wavell said vaguely.

He's really got his finger firmly on the pulse of the family business, James thought nastily.

'And what will you do if a European war breaks out while you're in Brazil?' Emily asked tartly.

'We'll get back to England and help to knock the enemy for six,' laughed Wavell. 'Anyway, Emily, you shouldn't worry your lovely self about such matters. They're for the men to sort out, and sort them out we will.'

'Perhaps it's a pity that you men don't apply the sort of commonsense that women would bring to such matters. War is not a game of cricket, played to strict rules in a jolly sporting atmosphere, with tea and cakes during the interval and three cheers for the winners at the end.'

'Emily, please…' said her brother.

'Let me finish, Richard. I just want to point out that war is about fear and despair, torture and death. It's about children losing their fathers, women losing their husbands and their sons and their brothers. It's certainly not a game.' The fierce sadness in her voice reduced those around her to silence.

Emily paused and her brother said, 'This is neither the time nor the place for another lecture.'

'Where is the place for it? Do you think I want to wave you off to war and wonder if I'll ever see you again? The way I waved off Papa when we were children.'

Richard took his sister gently by the arm as the tears filmed her eyes. 'Come on, we'll go inside out of the sun. It's been a long day.' They walked away towards the house.

'Oh dear, what brought that on?' asked Wavell.

'Her father was killed during the Boer War,' James replied, 'and like many women and many men for that matter she can't bear the thought of another conflict.'

The two men chatted about the cricket and the forthcoming football trip to Brazil and after a few minutes Richard rejoined them. Soon afterwards Wavell strolled off to talk to a gaggle of other guests.

'Rupert isn't the cleverest of men, is he?' Richard stated.

'He was considered clever at Repton.' James replied.

'Quite. I rest my case.'

'Really, Richard, how effortlessly you convey the intellectual superiority of an Old Etonian.'

'Thank you,' he said smugly. 'Anyway, what does it matter? Rupert is rich and rather dashing. It's said that the ladies like him.'

'The ladies?'

'Yes, you're not suggesting…'

'Certainly not. And he's a superb footballer,' James said swiftly.

'A great asset to the Corinthians. Quick, elusive.'

'Elusive. Yes, that's a very good description of Rupert Wavell,' James said with a quiet smile.

* * *

While the cricket match was taking place at Huntercombe House, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and his wife were assassinated in Sarajevo by a Bosnian extremist called Gavrillo Princip.

Within eight days the Kaiser of Germany, Wilhelm II, had declared his support for Austria. The seeds of the First World War had been sown and were to have a rapid growth.