

WINSTON'S SPY

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Exordium

Alex was drunk to begin with; not so drunk as to be incapable, for that would have been unseemly, so perhaps “tipsy” would be a better description, but, certainly, his wits were not entirely about him.

The evening had begun well enough. Toby Palmer had thrown a party.

The handsome-but-rebellious son of a former guards' officer had turned his back on the family tradition and joined the Royal Air Force (RAF) as a trainee pilot. In doing so, he incurred the not inconsiderable wrath of his father, which earned him the dubious distinction of being the first Palmer to have been almost disowned by his family. He was celebrating passing out as top of the intake, with the honour of having won the Harold Blackburn Silver Sword, which was a distinction awarded only to the most outstanding trainee pilots. Even so, Toby's father had boycotted his son's passing-out ceremony, along with Toby's two elder brothers, but Toby's sister had been present. Toby was one of those carefree-but-brilliant young men who made friends easily in whatever company he kept. The recent addition of a Ronald Colman style moustache had positively improved his attraction to the female of the species, but, sadly, these characteristics and affectations were neither shared nor admired by his father. Toby's father likened his son's laid-back demeanour to that of a wastrel, and commented that

the facial hair, which Toby thought made himself look dashing, was more suited to a second-rate pimp than an officer in His Majesty's service, even the RAF.

Toby's father was a much-decorated army officer who had served with distinction in the Great War, and who had been pensioned off abruptly shortly afterwards by the regiment that he worshipped. His son's extravagant and hollow life became the channel through which he could vent his considerable frustrations, so poor Toby enjoyed quite an unhappy relationship with his father.

Toby's rebellion against his father's dictatorial natural order had led previously to the dubious choice of career of a practised social butterfly and professional libertine, which exasperated his father even more. His father had insisted that Toby joined the lower echelons of Martin's Bank - it was that or face losing his inheritance. Toby hated the job, and he had no intention of developing it into a profession. Therefore, it was of no great surprise that, when the dark clouds over Europe looked like they were evolving into yet another full-blown tempest of bitter national rivalries manifesting as outright war, Toby was one of the first to step forward seeking to join the ranks of His Majesty's armed forces. However, it was not to his father's former guards regiment that Toby turned, but to the most junior of the services, which was intended - and very much taken - as a slap in the face to his father's hopes and aspirations.

Thus it was that the overindulgences of celebrating Toby's attainment of passing out were the cause of Alex's current poor sobriety.

Alex had intended to take the King's shilling likewise, and it was at the medical examination that Alex had met Toby. They took to each other instantly, and although 'acquaintanceship' would have been a better description of their relationship than

friendship, had circumstances been different, a closer relationship could have undoubtedly blossomed. Toby passed his medical examination as “A”, and King George VI accepted him gratefully into service; Alex, however, had been graded “D”, and had ominously been rejected as unfit for military service.

Unbelievably, the examining doctor had found a problem with his lungs that had not only remained undetected thus far but had never prevented Alex from being a keen cricketer and a competent middle-distance runner at school. Despite Alex’s protestations, the examining doctor, together with a colleague who had been called in to give a second opinion, remained adamant; Alex was both rejected and utterly dejected.

So, in many personal ways, it was an emotional party that Alex attended; Toby was going off to join a training squadron to prepare for almost-certain war, while Alex’s future was much less certain. Even though Alex had accepted the invitation to attend Toby’s send-off at one of London’s more fashionable venues, he could not resist feeling a pang of envy at Toby’s good fortune.

Nevertheless, the party was a jolly occasion and thoroughly enjoyed by all, even though the only other member of Toby’s family in attendance was his twenty-one-year-old sister Theodora. She was known extensively as “Teddy” and was the most like Toby out of his three siblings.

When he arrived at the party, Alex saw Teddy as soon as he walked through the door, and, in that fleeting moment, she noticed Alex. To Alex, Teddy was the most beautiful girl the room; she was certainly not tall, almost what the French would call *petite*, slim and with a mass of natural strawberry-blonde tresses, which she wore unfashionably long and with defiant pride. Nevertheless, to Alex, she looked exquisitely delicate. She was wearing a light-sapphire-blue party frock that was a shade or two darker than her eyes, and,

in appreciating her beauty, Alex's reticence at attending Toby's bash dissipated instantly.

Teddy, having noticed Alex's attention, carefully avoided making eye contact with him for the rest of the evening, so although no conversation existed between them, a subliminal bond was being formed by those sly glances that neither acknowledged.



Consequently, it was not only the mild alcoholic intoxication that supported Alex on his way home after Toby's celebration but contemplative thoughts of how he might engineer a future meeting with Toby's sister.

Accordingly, Alex's mind was elsewhere and his guard was down as he rounded the corner into Onslow Gardens, the quiet square where he lived in one of Chelsea's up-and-coming backwaters. He failed to notice the sleek, black Wolseley motor car parked close to his house, with its engine running, and neither, for that matter, did he spot the dapper gentleman who stepped from the shadows as he approached nor even the gentleman's colleague who emerged from the driver's door of the parked car.

Becoming aware of the others, Alex touched his hat and bade the well-dressed gentleman a cheery, 'Good evening,' as the man was about to pass.

The response, when it came, would typically have caused wariness in Alex, but in his light-headed, exuberant and contemplative state, he failed to see any danger.

'*Dobryy vecher, Aleksander Nikolayevich, kak dela?* [Good evening, Aleksander Nikolayevich, how are you?]' said the man in perfect Russian.

'*Ya khorosho, a ty?* [I'm well, and you?]' replied Alex equally

as fluently in his mother tongue.

Alex's evening deteriorated somewhat from that point, as the dapper gentleman stepped aside to allow his driver, if that is what he was, to rush Alex from behind and, in one swift movement, cover Alex's head with some sort of bag. A sudden tap on the head with a blunt instrument and an insistent push saw Alex sprawling over the rear seat of the Wolseley before being joined by the neat gentleman.

'Pozhaluysta, tovarishch, ne soprotivlyaisya, i vse budet v poryadke, [Please, comrade, do not struggle and everything will be all right,]' the man confirmed.

Alex's earlier nonchalance and light-heartedness evaporated quickly. All he had heard about Russia in the twentieth century – and of how the Bolsheviks dealt with those previously loyal to the tsar – had counted for nothing in the alcoholic haze and intoxicating euphoria of that fabulous evening where he had met a goddess. When confronted by a total stranger, Alex's stupidity, gullibility and carelessness – in responding to the familiar sounds of the private language that he and his mother shared – was palpable.

I only have myself to blame, Alex chastised himself, after everything his mother had said to him – nay, drummed into his head – almost since the day when he could understand the simplest of instructions: 'Do not speak our language outside of our house!' Yet, here he was, seemingly at the tender mercy of one of the bitterest enemies of his family: one of the dreaded and much-feared Bolsheviks. Alex's life started to flash through his mind in the same manner that some believe a condemned man's life flashes through his mind in those precious moments before execution.

These were the thoughts that enveloped this young man's brain as Alex slipped from the conscious world into oblivion.