

Reunion

By Clare Langley-Hawthorne

“Resistance to the established government, as I have already observed, is an act of which the moral character depends upon the circumstances of the particular case. In modern times, and in our own country, it has generally been a most foolish, most pernicious, and, therefore, a most wicked thing; but in some cases it has been highly meritorious, in others it has been a not ungenerous error.”

Sir James Fitzjames Stephen. A General View of Criminal Law of England (1863)

PART ONE

The Goldfields of British Guiana, April 1903

When they pulled the body from the gold mine, the sun had already dipped below the horizon and the Mazaruni River became a sleeping black snake beneath the crimson sky. Although the body was bloated after three days in the water and almost impossible to identify, it still fell to him and Smythe to make all the necessary arrangements to ensure the body was “discreetly dealt with.” There would be no official record of this incident, nothing to arouse further talk among the natives, or to get expatriate tongues wagging anymore than they already were. Neither he nor Smythe voiced their suspicions but the poison of doubt had already started to move, hot, thickly sanguineous, through his veins.

The scheme had been to discover gold – to make fortunes that would free them all from obligation, but he should have known that he could never be free of his duty – to family, to country, to the memory of Lizzie Wexcombe who had ripped both faith and love from his heart – now he was here, in these remote reaches of the jungle, with three men so closely tied to the past that he felt he was suffocating. There was McTiernay - the Fenian; Smythe - the naval man; and Bernstorff-Hollweg - the German Count. All were bound together by their years at Oxford. All Balliol men. All fine upstanding chaps. All pretenders to the throne of expectations. It mattered little that he and Smythe were ostensibly here to report on the boundary issue between Venezuela

and Guiana because they both knew the truth – they were being tested, feted for another governmental purpose but following this, with all that had happened, how could he possibly return to England unchanged? After the long months here, amid the heat of greed and death, hadn't they all become traitors in their own hearts?

**Bernstorff-Hollweg Castle, Thuringia,
Germany, December 1911**

He was thinking of how her hair had curled as it wound around his finger, that last time, during that final touch which seemed so bitterly near. He could almost feel the strands now, between his finger tips, soft, silken, catching the firelight so that her auburn hair turned copper in the glow, while the palm of his hand was, in reality, pressed hard against the icy glass of the window pane. He cursed his memories. They were making him careless – slackening his instincts when they needed to be taut – when he needed to be in total control. He gazed down at the courtyard below, taking note of the sleek dark motorcar that arrived and the three men in greatcoats that attended to it. Count Bernstorff-Hollweg may have chosen to live in this remote, precariously perched castle in the Thuringen Mountains but he maintained the façade of

aristocratic gentility nonetheless. Lord Wrotham had counted no fewer than twenty servants already – but it was difficult to tell the domestic help from the Count’s personal bodyguards. Since Guiana the Count has become as careful as he was secretive.

Lord Oliver Wrotham, the Seventh Baron Wrotham, was familiar with all the pretensions of family wealth but, unlike the Count, he had accepted the frugalities necessary to sustain the illusion. The Count continued to delude himself that the family money had not been dissipated by previous generations and pursued the splendor he believed befit his rank. From the recently restored ‘Knights’ Hall’, with its imposing stone fireplace and rich tapestries, to the portrait gallery lining the first floor landing and the impressive collection of medieval weaponry and armor cramming the nooks and passageways of the castle, the Count maintained all the appearances of having money. Lord Wrotham had long since given up such deceptions; his estate by now was perilously close to financial ruin.

There was a low knock on the door to the bedchamber and Archibald James (to the outside world Lord Wrotham’s chauffeur and valet) entered and closed the door swiftly behind him.

“My lord,” he said. His brown eyes regarded Wrotham with a mixture of feigned deference and nonchalance – but then Wrotham suspected he always did attempt to convey a sense of detachment when a mission became more dangerous than he had anticipated.

“James,” Lord Wrotham replied, pulling a silver cigarette case from the inside pocket of his serge wool jacket. “You can drop the pretense in private.”

The lining of his jacket, like his waistcoat, was royal blue and it caught the glare of the electric lamp that was balanced, incongruously, on the elaborately carved, heavy set table in the center of the room. The Count's latest indulgence had been to install electrical wiring and central heating in all the main castle rooms, financed, Lord Wrotham suspected, by the Count's recent foray into the armaments trade. Wrotham stepped away from the window and walked over to the table. He flipped open the silver case and placed the thin white cigarette between his lips. The top of the table was strewn with papers and books, few of which betrayed anything to the amateur eye except an inordinate love of medieval history.

"Rather not, m'lord," James replied and his stance, a rigid reminder of his army days, revealed his true disquiet. "There's too much potential for mistakes."

Lord Wrotham shrugged and offered James a cigarette. "Have it your way then."

James shook his head, declining the proffered item. When Wrotham first met him, James had smoked like a chimney, but a couple of years as a police constable following his discharge from the Finsbury Rifles had changed him. No doubt accompanying a dour sergeant like Harrison through the streets of Whitechapel would change anyone, Wrotham reflected.

Harrison was now a Chief Inspector but both he and James still owed Wrotham their lives. It was a debt James continued to respect despite the fact that it meant he must masquerade as Lord Wrotham's chauffeur. Once again, the British government's perverse sense of humor remained undiminished.

"So," Lord Wrotham said, lighting his cigarette with a flick of his automatic lighter. "Give me the details."

James circled the table, picking up the gold and black fountain pen as he leaned over the spread of papers. He pointed to the castle floor plan that had been carefully drawn in black ink and pencil.

“McTiernay’s already here and he’s brought five men with him. They are all staying in the North tower - here.” He pressed the pen onto the paper and the ink bled out. “No sign of the Count as yet but his quarters remain heavily guarded. I counted three men at the foot of the rear stairs – though the Count has them dressed as footmen, I’d say they are ex-Prussian army. Looks like he’s making his own contingency plans should things become unpleasant. Speaking of which, m’lord,” James inclined his head towards the window. “I see our Serbian friends have already arrived.” His distaste was evident.

Wrotham gave a curt nod. Although he recognized one of the men in the courtyard, a low ranking official from Serbian military intelligence, he suspected the others were members of the Pan-Slavist group *Narodna Odbrana*, and he did not like the implications of this any more than James did.

“Have you heard when the rest are due?” Wrotham asked.

James replaced the lid of the fountain pen and nodded. “Chamber maid – pretty lass by the name of Gretchen – tells me they are planning on ten being here for dinner.”

“So everyone should be arriving today...Keep an eye out downstairs – some of McTiernay’s men might be amenable to some loosening up.”

“I’ll have the whiskey on hand, m’lord,” James replied.

Wrotham ran his fingers through his dark hair, preoccupied by his thoughts.

“Would you care for a glass?” James asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Wrotham growled. “I need my wits about me with this lot.”

“So you keep telling me,” James responded with the barest hint of a frown. “But, if you don’t mind me saying, I thought most of ‘this lot’ were your friends. You went to Oxford with McTiernay didn’t you?”

“That I did,” Wrotham replied coolly.

“And the Count’s your cousin—”

“Second cousin,” Wrotham corrected him.

“But you don’t trust either of them?”

“Would you after Guiana?”

James seemed to consider this for a moment. “All I know is what Admiral Smythe told me...Oh, and the scant details you have been so good as to supply...”

“No need for sarcasm, James.”

“No, m’lord, of course,” James replied without even a twitch of his lips. “But nonetheless, I doubt that if you truly suspected either man that you would have agreed to this meeting and Admiral Smythe did say—“

“Forget what Smythe may have told you!” Wrotham interrupted sharply. “Listen to me now. Trust no one here, do you understand?!”

James raised his eyebrows and Wrotham caught his glance dart across the room to the Webley revolver that lay on the red and gold brocade bedcover. It seemed so innocuous beside Wrotham's neatly folded grey cashmere coat. The monstrous four poster bed with its carved wooden canopy was yet another example of the Count's excessive tastes, but it was the casualness with which Wrotham had displayed the revolver, he realized, that disturbed James. He had never admitted to James he had been armed before.

James patted his black and green chauffeur's jacket which concealed his own firearm and said, "I understand."

"And if things don't go according to plan," Wrotham continued. "If things get, shall we say, unfortunately 'public', you know what to do..."

James circled back around the table and, this time, he refused to meet Wrotham's eye.

Wrotham grabbed his arm. "I need to be sure!"

"I will get Miss Marlow out of England – you have my word," James said but his gaze was still lowered. Meditating that they had little time for such sentimentality, Wrotham ground down what little remained of his cigarette in the bronze ashtray on the table. It had been fashioned to look like an eagle bearing a rat in its talons. The Count's tastes really were as appalling as ever.

"And the rest?" Wrotham demanded as he tried to push aside the image of Ursula that had seeded in his mind. He needed clarity of purpose not the insecurity of yearning that arose whenever he thought of her. He also needed to be sure that James would cover both their tracks. The last thing he wanted was a public scandal and he and Smythe had issued specific orders that

all his books and papers, both at Temple Chambers and the Wrotham estate, be destroyed in the event that the press got wind of this meeting.

James hesitated for a moment before agreeing, “and the rest.”

“And now for your orders for tonight,” Wrotham said. James’ eyebrows raised again, for Wrotham had already briefed him thoroughly before they left England.

“First sign of trouble,” Wrotham said. “You must shoot to kill.”

James looked confused. “Me, that is,” Wrotham continued calmly.

James opened his mouth to protest but Wrotham cut him off. “Those are your orders,” he confirmed, pulling the letter from his top pocket. It was typewritten but Smythe’s distinctively gothic looking signature was clearly visible.

James nodded his jaw tight.

Wrotham walked over to the table and, pulling the lighter from his trouser pocket once more, placed the flame beneath one corner of the letter. Both men watched as the paper started to curl and burn.

“You kill me, then act as if you are Irish Republican Brotherhood,” Wrotham said. “Tell them you suspected me of turning informer. Get them chasing their own shadows.”

“And what about Admiral Smythe?”

“You must have no further contact with him. The money will be waiting for you in Zurich – but you will never be able to step foot in England again.”

“Let us hope it doesn’t come to that, m’lord,” James replied.

Lord Wrotham stared at the floor. He would have echoed those sentiments just a few months ago, when the prospect of happiness had seemed to be finally within reach, but that was before Ursula had refused him – before she had said she could not marry him – not yet. So time was no longer on his side and, though the New Year beckoned, he had little to celebrate. In his current mood he hardly cared whether he fulfilled his mission or not.

An awkward silence slid like a draft across the room.

James approached the bed and pulled a brown leather suitcase up from beneath it. He undid the clasps with meticulous precision, snapping the suitcase open at the hinges. He lifted up Lord Wrotham’s dinner jacket and regarded it with a deadpan expression. “Does m’lord wish to wear the silver or the red cravat this evening?” he asked.

“James, you really know how to irritate a man,” Wrotham replied but at least the melancholy spell over him had been broken.

“I try, m’lord. I try.”

James pulled out a small gilt edged leather pouch and tipped out three sets of cufflinks. Lord Wrotham was just about to request the pair bearing the family crest and motto, *Sequere iustiam et invenias vitam* – follow justice and find life – (a fitting pair as any to be buried in, he thought) – when beyond the door came the sound of gunfire.

Two shots. One cry.

If Wrotham was to guess, a Mauser pistol had just been fired.

He walked swiftly over and grabbed his revolver just as James tore open his jacket and reached for his own. It was like some ridiculous show out of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, Wrotham thought sourly, as James pulled his gun from its holster. They both paused for a moment, listening, before Wrotham signaled James to follow him. Carefully opening the door Wrotham went first, revolver at the ready. James followed, both men silent in their soft soled shoes as they crept down the passageway.

Another shot; another cry rang out.

Wrotham picked up the pace, barely dodging the suits of armor on intrusive display as they hurried along the dimly lit passage. As they came to the end, the narrow corridor gave way to the immense vault of the 'Knights' Hall' with its family portrait gallery. He and James swung around the corner in unison, guns drawn.

On the landing, beneath a massive oil painting of a resplendent German cavalryman atop a white stallion, stood a man with black curls and eyes the color of headstone. He stood over the bodies of two men, pistol still in hand. James quickly moved to the side and peered over the balustrade to the floor below. The grand wooden staircase, ornately carved out of solid oak led down to the main entrance hall but there were no sounds, no signs of people approaching. Blood oozed out beneath the tweed jacket of one of the dead men, pooling in the grooves and whorls of the dark aged wooden floor.

The man with the pistol looked up and lowered his gun.

Wrotham eyes met his.

“Ulster Unionist infiltrators,” the man said and he spat upon the bodies. “I suspected as much on the train.”

“Are there any more?” Wrotham asked, maintaining a level tone, despite the clash of emotions within him. There was no escaping the past now.

McTiernay shook his head. “I can vouch for the others – true patriots.” His voice betrayed his Irish accent now.

Both he and Wrotham remained at a distance, eyeing each other warily, before McTiernay’s gaze dropped first. He shoved the pistol into his belt, stepped over the body and walked over to Wrotham, embracing him in a bear-like hug.

“By God, it’s good to see you once more!” McTiernay said.

Lord Wrotham returned the embrace awkwardly.

McTiernay stepped back and regarded him intently.

“Well old friend, are you ready to usurp King and Country?” he asked, a huge grin forming to reveal a mouthful of uneven, widely spaced, white teeth.

Lord Wrotham stared at him impassively before replying.

“Always,” he said, and the bitter irony of his words was not lost.