

Our Reluctant Man in Hungary



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From the Fletcher Memoirs (1956)

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For Jane

Explanatory Note

This third packet from my uncle's memoirs describes the unwilling part he played in the Hungarian uprising of 1956.

He was originally coerced into working for the British Secret Intelligence Service during the Berlin airlift and his talents were also employed in the Korean War. After this, he was actually enjoying his new life as a desk-bound spy in Japan, but this ended when he was sent to Vietnam, where he witnessed the final years of France's struggle in Indochina.

A little over a year later he now turns up in Hungary during the desperate revolt against communist rule. Somewhat surprisingly, throughout all of this time he was also listed as a serving officer in the Royal Air Force and he retained his rank of captain.

I have endeavoured to check the captain's memoirs against the historical record and I have supplied additional notes.

K.D.

A Magyarian maiden

I was feeling pretty pleased with myself back in '56. As you will no doubt be aware, I'd been fortunate enough to escape captivity and death at the hands of the North Koreans and their Chinese allies - and come through the whole nightmare of a war pretty well unscathed. If you are not privy to the pertinent facts, then may I be so humble as to direct you to my earlier memoir – a frightening tale and factually accurate in every detail. You have a gentleman's word on that.

Once I'd been shot of Korea, I had a fine old time in Japan working for His Majesty's Secret Intelligence Service. You see, my time in the 'Land of the Rising Sun' was given over in unequal measure to accumulating useless information on the one hand, and earning notches in my bedpost on the other – and very rewarding it was too.

My fun wasn't to last, of course, and even before our young Queen had taken the reins, I was dragged off to another Godforsaken corner of Asia - that is to say, Vietnam. To be more precise, I was cruelly tricked by a designing female - but I won't go into that just now.

Barely had that nightmare passed me by when one of our ungrateful leaders, Sir Anthony Eden, happily chose to throw your reluctant hero into mortal danger all over again. When he decided he wanted to investigate the rumours of an impending Peasants' War coming out of Hungary, he went straight to Henry Biggins in our intelligence department.

Biggins, as you will know if you have read my memoirs, considered himself to be my superior - when in fact he was more the Lion's Provider, and simply got in the way. Anyway, he was volunteering my services faster than a pimp in a brothel.

When he finally informed me of his kind offer of a trip to Hungary, the alarm bells still failed to ring their warning. But then again, why would they? Hungary may well have been behind the Iron Curtain, but we weren't at war, and as far as I knew these so-called rumours of unrest were just that – rumours.

The communists had a stranglehold over the country and they weren't about to let the local populace cause any trouble, surely? Aye well, if I'd only known what was coming I'd have been on bended-knee, happily begging Sir Anthony to send me back to no-man's-land in Korea.

I blame myself, of course, for listening to Biggins in the first place - but he knew my weaknesses, you see. Not only was I to receive expenses of a healthy nature, but somehow he had also contrived to find an absolute peach with whom I was to make contact upon entering the country. You'd have thought I would've known better, but the vision of me sampling the beguiling charms of a young and beautiful Magyarian maiden was sending me into delirium.

As I stared out from our offices on The Broadway, watching the rain pelt down on St James's Park, I actually started to get excited by the whole idea – fool that I was.

“The young lady's name is Anna Novak. She graduated from university with a first class degree in English and subsequently became a journalist,” explained Biggins.

“At least that will make things a little easier – considering my Hungarian's almost non-existent,” I said, trying to sound as enthusiastic as I could.

"I dare say with your knowledge of Russian you'll get your tongue around the lingo quickly enough," he said, no doubt trying to flatter me and keep me sweet while I was being so obliging.

"How trustworthy is this Anna Novak? Don't take this personally, Biggins, but the last few female contacts you've set me up with weren't all they appeared to be," I said, dragging up some painful memories.

"There's no need to worry on that score. Miss Novak edits an underground newspaper that urges the people of Hungary to rise up against the communists. She's a brave lady. If she ever got caught, Rakosi and his thugs wouldn't take too kindly to what she's up to."

"Rakosi?" I asked.

"Perhaps if you spent less time drinking and fornicating, Fletcher, and more time reading the reports coming across your desk every now and then, you might know the names of the communist leaders in Europe," said Biggins, getting on his high horse.

"You mean Stalin's puppet is still running the show? I thought he'd been replaced by this Nagy chap," I replied, hoping to prove I wasn't totally ignorant - but it failed to impress him.

"If you mean *Imre* Nagy, he was the prime minister briefly, but Rakosi is still the leader of the Communist Party," explained Biggins condescendingly, and making me feel as if I was back in the schoolroom.

"What would Rakosi do to this Anna if he ever got hold of her?"

"Who knows? He might put her in prison or have her tortured. Or she might just disappear without a trace, like so many of her fellow countrymen."

"You really know how to encourage a chap, don't you?"

"You've no need to worry, Fletcher, he can't touch you - you're a British citizen," he said, trying to reassure me.

"You'll forgive me if I don't jump for joy, Biggins. If I remember correctly, I was a British citizen when that Russian bastard tried to kill me in Berlin."

"That's all history now," said Biggins, shrugging off my concerns in his usual off-hand manner.

The problem is that history has a nasty habit of repeating itself. As we flew to Vienna to pick up a car so that we could drive to our legation in Budapest, I couldn't help re-living the nightmare betrayals that had nearly cost me my life in Germany and the Far East. To make matters worse, Biggins decided we would make the best use of our time if he briefed me on the situation in Hungary - and mighty boring it was too.

However, as you may be as much in the dark as I was, I feel it incumbent on me to apprise you of some of the details. Please have no fear, I will keep it brief. Which is a damn sight more than Biggins did for me - with the result that I seriously considered suicide as a pleasant alternative on our interminable journey.

* * *

The poor people of Hungary have rarely had a glimpse of freedom from repression or enslavement in their long history, in spite of having introduced a parliamentary government centuries before their neighbours. Budapest had once controlled the vast Austro-Hungarian Empire, but the Treaty signed at Trianon in 1920 had taken most of that, with vast chunks of land being carted off by Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Romania.

In 1938 Hungary's regent, Admiral Nicholas von Horthy, pestered Hitler to invade the Soviet Union, which he eventually did, and when Germany's war machine rolled back on to Hungarian soil, the Russians occupied the country. As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, Stalin made sure communism was the order of the day and he installed his puppet leader, Rakosi, who ran the country with an iron fist.

Unfortunately for Rakosi, Stalin decided to have a stroke in '53 and his Soviet incarnation of Dr Sangrado was too frightened to treat him in case something went wrong. The result was that the Soviet leader died and would have promptly headed for that great communist empire in the sky, if the Reds hadn't been atheists.

While everyone else was screaming hallelujah from the rooftops, Rakosi was soiling himself because he knew full well that any power he'd had flowed from Stalin. Riots started to break out all over Eastern Europe and while things eventually calmed down in Czechoslovakia, the Soviets had to send the tanks into Poland and my old haunt, East Berlin.

You can imagine how nervous our Russian friends were just then. So when thousands of steelworkers in Budapest went on strike, Khrushchev and the rest of Stalin's heirs became frightened of what they called a 'counter-revolution' and blamed Rakosi for driving the country into the ground. As a result, they forced the ugly despot to accept Imre Nagy as the new prime minister. Nagy quickly promised to set Hungary on his proposed 'New Course', but he failed and was eventually forced out of office.

And that was where I came in, as they say. I was feeling pretty relaxed about the whole thing - and why not? With Stalin out of the way, the Soviet grip on the country seemed to be weakening and this Rakosi brute, who had been throwing his weight around like Mezentius, appeared to be receding into the background. Which just goes to show how wrong can you be.

If I could have seen what was lying round the corner, and if I'd only known that the United Nations would be about as much use as King Canute when the sea was lapping around his deck-chair, I would have been doing a hand-brake turn and heading back to Vienna for the last waltz.

I have no time for frivolities

When we arrived at the legation in the Hungarian capital, I was surprised to find that our staunch anti-communist and would-be journalist, Anna Novak, had been asked to meet us there. I knew how our Soviet friends went about things, you see, and getting her to come to us was rather risky, to say the least.

“The trouble with you undercover-types is that you jump at shadows. We don’t have time for all your ridiculous cloak-and-dagger nonsense,” said a British diplomat with a haw-haw voice when we complained. “This makes things so much easier. I can’t see what all the fuss is about.”

He walked off in a huff before we could reply, but it would have been a waste of time – these embassy flunkies think they’re always right. As it turned out, two members of Rakosi’s secret police were happily ensconced in the building opposite taking snapshots of any Hungarian citizens who entered or left the legation. Not that anything as mundane as evidence would have made our desk-jockey see the error of his ways. If we’d been able to point out the ugly thugs with their Box Brownies, he’d have probably just said they were tourists. As they say, the Good Lord sets limits on a man’s wisdom but not on his stupidity.

Not that arrogant pen-pushers were my main concern just then, because I had something else far more interesting to command my attention. We’d been directed to a study at the rear of the building, and seated in a chair in the corner of the room was Anna Novak.

She was strikingly pretty, no doubt about it. I’d been told she was twenty-four years of age, but her long dark hair and large blue eyes made her appear younger. It wasn’t until she spoke that the illusion was shattered and her confident manner marked her out as an intelligent and mature young woman – a proper little Amoret.

“Are you the men from London who I was told I could speak to?” she asked in English with barely a trace of an accent, and it was the sort of soft and lilting voice I could have listened to all day long.

“Yes,” said Biggins, taking the lead. “My name is Mr. Biggins and this is Captain Fletcher.”

“I hope that now you are here you will see how desperate things are for the people of Hungary. We are thoroughly sick of communism, but we need the help of the West if we are to throw off the shackles of the Soviet Union,” she said, skipping any polite chitchat and acting as if she was making some sort of political speech

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Miss Novak,” warned Biggins, and he gave a little laugh in an effort to lighten the moment - but she didn’t mind him.

“But you have to help us,” she insisted, standing up - and her raincoat, tied at the waist with a belt, showed off the curves of her figure wonderfully.

I took the opportunity to appraise the well-turned calves of her legs as she crossed the room. She caught me in the act and if looks could kill, I would have been pushing up the daisies before I’d barely set foot in her blasted country.

“Are you sure you are the people I’m supposed to meet?” she asked suspiciously, and she gave me a quizzical look. “I was told you were sent here by the British prime minister.”

“I can assure you, Miss Novak, that we are here to find out exactly what is going on in Hungary and we will be reporting back to Sir Anthony in person,” explained Biggins, trying to reassure her.

“It is just that I am a very busy woman and I have no time for ... frivolities,” she said, looking down her pretty nose at me.

“In that case, why don’t we meet for lunch and we can discuss how we will get to the bottom of things as quickly as possible,” suggested Biggins, trying to smooth things over in his usual diplomatic style.

“Well, if you are sure...” she began, and I spoke for the first time.

“It’s the least we can do, Miss Novak - especially after receiving such a warm welcome.”

Her full red lips gave the ghost of a smile, and suddenly life behind the Iron Curtain didn’t seem quite so gloomy after all.

I have syphilis and TB

“My mother was raped by Russian soldiers and when my grandmother tried to stop them, they gunned her down. Even though I was only a young girl, some of them turned on me and I yelled the only Russian words my mother had taught me.”

My God, I thought, if this is a foretaste of the dinner conversation we’ve got to look forward to, it’s going to put me right off my cabbage and potatoes. But I thought it only polite to look as if I was paying attention.

“What on earth did you say?” I asked.

“I told them I had syphilis and TB,” she announced, watching to gauge our reaction.

“Did it work?” I asked.

For the first time, her pretty blue eyes welled up with tears as she spoke.

“It worked long enough for me to run away. I left with the sound of my mother’s screams in my ears. I never saw her again.”

She was staring down at her plate of food, which she had hardly touched, and I glanced across at Biggins who was looking mighty uncomfortable, what with our beauty making Hungary sound like Gehenna. I tried to lead the conversation towards a brighter note, but I might as well have not bothered.

“Is your father still alive?”

“My father was arrested by the Hungarian fascists for plotting against the Germans. He was sentenced to death, but when the Russians came he managed to escape. Unfortunately he had also fought against the communists and so the Soviets took him away to Siberia. I did not see him for ten years until he was released five months ago.”

“Well, that is something, at least,” I said, desperate to find some small mercy so that we could turn to a more pleasant topic.

“Do you think so? When my father was taken away he was a good and kind man. I do not know what the Russians did to him during those years in Siberia, but when he returned he had changed. He beat me and yelled and screamed, insisting I wasn’t his daughter. So, to answer your question – yes, he is still alive, but to me the father I once knew is dead,” said our little Perdita solemnly.

“Well, Miss Novak, I can certainly see why you want to be rid of the communists,” said Biggins, shifting uneasily in his chair.

“Why did we let these Russians take over our country? They were nothing but peasants. They thought that tooth paste was some kind of food and spread it on their bread. They drank eau-de-Cologne. If the telephone rang it frightened them and they would shoot at it. They did not know what a bathtub was for and they would wash in the toilet.”

“Yes, we have a similar problem in Wales,” I said, trying to inject a little humour into the proceedings before we started reaching for the razor blades. She just gave me another one of her withering looks.

“The point is, how can we in the West help Hungary today, Miss Novak?” asked Biggins, giving her one of his cherubic smiles.

I reckoned the randy little devil realised I'd rather spoiled my own chances with the delectable Miss Novak, and he was playing the part of a concerned friend to get into her good books. Perhaps I was being uncharitable, but I doubt it. She was his Belamour and no mistake. As she looked away, I noticed him salivating at the sight of her pert bumpers, threatening to throw our crockery to the four winds whenever she turned in her chair.

"I will introduce you to people in Budapest from all walks of life, and when you realise how everyone is ready to rise against the communists, you must go back to London and persuade the West to help us. The Russians will not risk a war if we make a stand together."

"It's not quite as simple as that, I'm afraid," said Biggins, and by the disappointment on her face I could see that he'd taken a step back in the popularity stakes, so I decided to capitalise on his faux pas.

"Don't be so hasty, Henry. We made a stand in Germany during the blockade, remember, and Stalin backed down then," I offered, trying to give our would-be revolutionary my most winning smile.

But for all the good it did, I might as well have been waving a swastika over the dinner table.

"Will you come and meet my friends who work on the newspaper?" she asked directly.

"Unfortunately we have a meeting we must attend at the legation. Would tomorrow be convenient?" asked Biggins hopefully.

"Well, I've already arranged for..." she began, but I interrupted her to seize my chance.

"Henry, surely we don't have to both attend the meeting, do we?" I asked.

Being the senior man, I knew that he wouldn't be able to get out of it. I could tell by the scowl on his face he wasn't keen, but our Hungarian journalist was as eager as a sailor on shore-leave to get him to agree.

"The sooner you see the truth for yourselves, the sooner we will be guaranteed the support we need," she said eagerly. "Please, Mr. Biggins, I would very much appreciate it if you could allow Captain Fletcher to meet my colleagues as soon as possible."

And with that she rested her hand on his.

He practically jolted out of his seat. Knowing the puritanical little Christian as I did, I dare say it was the first time he'd been touched by a woman in years – certainly one as stunningly gorgeous as our Hungarian beauty. She gave him a warm smile and that set the final seal on the matter.

"Well, I suppose as long as one of us is at the legation that would suffice. Perhaps I might be able to join you both when the meeting is over," he said hopefully.

"That would be very nice," she said, giving Biggins' hand a gentle squeeze and sending his blood pressure through the roof into the bargain.

I didn't like the way things were turning out at all, but I consoled myself with the fact that it would be *me* accompanying Miss Novak on our little jaunt to talk to her idealistic colleagues and, once that nonsense was out of the way, I could try to work some of the Fletcher charm in earnest.

If I'd known what I was letting myself in for by turning down my place at the meeting, I would have been following Biggins out of the restaurant, begging to be the one taking the minutes.

My name is Colonel Kutuzov

I drove to Miss Novak's apartment that afternoon in a government car that stood out like a sore thumb. The bonnet had a Union Jack draped across it and I was told by the people at the legation that this was to stop the AVH, Hungary's secret police, from harassing me. You can imagine what this news did for my nerves, and my feelings of apprehension weren't helped any by the fact that there were precious few cars on the road to begin with, which only made my presence even more conspicuous.

Naturally by '56 the Hungarians had repaired most of the damage done to the city during the war, but few homes had more than one room - or even running water come to that. Anna Novak rented a small, one-bedroom flat in the heart of the city. As it turned out, she was one of the lucky ones.

"There is a desperate shortage of housing," she explained when I remarked on the size of the apartment. "Many young couples are forced to set up home with their parents."

"Is it like this all over Hungary?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes, unless you happen to be Rakosi or one of his funkies. They all live in sumptuous and luxurious villas on the outskirts of the city, protected by their AVH guards. While the rest of us struggle to survive, they pay themselves huge wages and enjoy generous expense allowances."

I could see she was ready to get on her soap box again, so I led her to the car to lighten the mood with a change of scenery, but I was wasting my time.

I drove through the streets in silence, resigning myself to the fact that Miss Novak was a lost cause, when she finally asked me a question.

"Mr. Biggins called you Captain. Are you in the army?"

"Good Lord, no. I'm in the RAF. The freedom of the skies is the life for me."

"You are very fortunate. Sometimes, when I cannot sleep, I imagine being able to take to the air and leave this hard life behind me. One day, the people of Hungary will be free and we will be able to go wherever we please."

"I certainly hope so, Miss Novak."

"You may call me Anna," she said out of the blue, and the shock of this breakthrough in international relations nearly made me drive the car into the kerb.

"That would be very nice, Anna. Please call me Tom," I said, and when I smiled I was gratified to see her do the same.

To my surprise, Anna directed me to Budapest's polytechnic - an old, sprawling building on the other side of the River Danube. It was a Sunday and only a handful of students were to be seen as we made our way to an old metalwork room. Intrigued, I followed her past an array of machinery to a locked door at the rear.

When Anna had said that she helped to run a newspaper, I don't know what I expected - but it certainly wasn't what greeted me as she took out a key from her coat pocket and opened the heavy door. A pathetic little printing press sat on a table in the corner of a room scarcely larger than a cupboard. Coated from top to bottom in black ink, it looked barely capable of producing a simple poster, let alone a whole newspaper.

Ever since we'd arrived at the polytechnic, I'd been half-expecting to discover a swarm of energetic young students busy toiling over the latest edition, so imagine my surprise when the only person in the windowless space was an old man with a sour face, complemented by a shock of wild, grey hair. He was wearing an old, worn suit and he raised his eyebrows when Anna locked the door and I followed her into the home of her John Bull printing set.

"Tom, this is..."

Anna never got to finish her introductions because there was an almighty banging coming from outside.

"This is the police. Open up immediately or we will break down the door," said the faceless, booming voice.

There was no other way out of the room, even if we'd wanted to escape, so there was nothing for it but to do as instructed. When Anna turned the handle, it was torn from her grasp and the door flew open to reveal an AVH officer sporting his distinctive blue insignia. He was flanked by two guards armed with machine-guns.

"What is the meaning of this?" yelled the old man, his distinctive eyebrows now doing a fine old dance up and down his forehead. He pointed at the guards as if to emphasise the urgency of his question.¹

"You are all under arrest for the printing and distribution of illegal and subversive material intended to undermine the democratic government of Hungary," announced the officer, as if he was relaying a rehearsed speech.

All these pleasant exchanges were in Hungarian and, having only just arrived in the country, I was having the devil of a time keeping up. Mind you, just the look on the officer's face was enough to make me realise we weren't being invited home for tea. I decided to put an end to all the nonsense before it got out of hand.

"You are making a terrible mistake. I am with the British legation," I explained.

"That you are English is more than evident by the way you are butchering our beautiful Hungarian tongue," said the infernal know-all. "However, my orders are to arrest anyone who comes near this printing press. You will have to come with us to our headquarters along with the others."

Before I could protest, I was relieved of my revolver and the three of us were being pushed along to a large black Russian-built car parked in the grounds of the polytechnic. As we drove into the heart of the city we occasionally had to stop to allow a tram to cross our path, and I briefly toyed with the idea of pushing open the rear door of the car to make a run for it. As if he read my mind, the officer suddenly piped up.

"Please, I advise you, do not attempt to escape. My men have orders to shoot."

As we pulled up at the security police headquarters, I noticed a sign on the side of the road marking it out as Andrassy Street. When I was eventually able to telephone Biggins to get me out, I wanted to be sure that I knew where I was so he wouldn't waste any time looking for me.

But instead of being led to a comfortable office where, with righteous indignation, I could have warned the man in charge about the consequences of treating a British citizen in

such a shoddy manner, I was immediately taken down to a cell situated in the bowels of the building. Anna and the old man were served the same way and placed in similar accommodation.

Once inside, I realised there was barely enough room to stand, but I soon forgot about the cramped conditions when I found myself paddling in a foot of ice cold water.

“What the devil do you think you’re doing?” I yelled, but in my panic I had spoken in English.

Whether the guard understood me or not I never discovered, because in answer to my polite enquiry my jaw was introduced to a rubber truncheon, and the force of the blow sent me crashing down on to my knees. By the time I’d brought my hand up to examine the damage, the door had slammed behind me and I heard the sound of a key being turned in the lock.

Miraculously all of my teeth were still intact, but I soon forgot about this small piece of good fortune as panic rose inexorably from the pit of my stomach. I couldn’t believe what was happening to me. One minute I’d been on a mundane fact-finding mission, comfortably lodged at the British legation, and the next I was a prisoner in some sort of ghastly mediaeval cell at the mercy of a bunch of sadists. I cursed myself for having actually *volunteered* to accompany Anna when I could have been safely tucked away in a boring meeting with Biggins at the legation.

My mind worked overtime, wondering how on earth I was going to get out of the mess I was in. I found myself optimistically hoping that the police would realise what a terrible mistake they had made and release me, with endless apologies. Failing that, Biggins was bound to wonder where on earth I’d got to, but he was used to me disappearing and, knowing his track record, I didn’t hold out much hope that he’d be charging in with the cavalry any time soon. My frantic thoughts were interrupted by the clanging of keys as my door was unlocked.

I was ready to shout to the roof-tops about diplomatic immunity, and how I was a personal friend of Sir Anthony Eden, and how they’d soon find the British Army marching up to their doorstep to teach them a lesson. Unfortunately the wind was rather taken out of my sails before I’d even begun because there, standing before me, was a stocky, grey-haired figure in the uniform of a colonel in the KGB.

“Good afternoon, Captain Fletcher. I trust you are enjoying your stay. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Colonel Kutuzov.”

It is called a catheter

If you haven't had the pleasure of reading about my little adventure in Berlin back in '48, then you won't be familiar with the name 'Kutuzov' and all the horrors it naturally conjured up. Mind you, since Major Kutuzov had been dead and buried for the past seven years, even I was at somewhat of a loss for those first few moments after the Russian had boldly announced himself.

Yet, as so often happens in moments of pure terror, my mind raced and the instant he said the name, I was returning his gaze and looking to see if his revelation was just a coincidence. If I'm completely honest I'd already convinced myself that it wasn't, simply by the way he'd made the pronouncement with such a flourish, knowing that the name would be significant to me. There was no doubt about it, the two Russians were cut from the same cloth. The realisation must have shown on my face because his next words confirmed my suspicions.

"I believe you knew my younger brother before he was tragically taken from us."

Yes, the longer I looked at the figure in front of me, the more the resemblance became apparent. There was the same large head with thick, menacing eyebrows, but where the major's loaf had been shaven, this one was topped with well-groomed grey hair and a neat side-parting. And then there was the neck - so thick as to be almost a continuation of the torso. Yes, they could easily have been brothers. I quickly decided that denying everything was out of the question, considering my circumstances, so I tried to portray an off-hand bearing as best I could.

"Our paths crossed once or twice in a professional capacity, that is all," I explained, and he guffawed loudly, just as his sibling had done all those years before.

The terrible sound echoed off the damp walls, making my head ache.

"Come, come, Captain Fletcher, you are far too modest. You thwarted my brother's activities more than once and I believe you might well have witnessed his death."

"Even if that were true, I don't see what it has got to do with anything. What the hell am I doing here and what business does a Russian colonel have skulking around the cells of a Hungarian police station?"

Fear was quickly getting the better of me and I pretended to lose my temper in an effort to bluff my way out of the situation. I might as well have saved my breath, as became evident presently.

"Haven't you heard? Hungary belongs to Russia. Surely an Englishman can understand such a concept. It isn't all that long ago that your country had colonies all over the world. Of course that was when it was a great nation. Alas, today things are very different."

The smug bastard was grinning from ear to ear, and when I tried to stand up straight so that I could look down on my more diminutive adversary, I only succeeded in smashing my head on the concrete ceiling of the tiny cell.

"Colonel Kutuzov, you'll find that Great Britain and her allies can still throw their weight around if they have to, and I can assure you that they don't take too kindly to having their citizens dragged off and locked away for no reason by foreigners who should know better. If

you don't want to get into trouble with your superiors for instigating an international incident, I suggest you have me released immediately."

You'd have thought I couldn't say fairer than that, considering the circumstances, but it only succeeded in making the confounded buffoon laugh all the louder.

"Citizen?" he cried, and he laughed so hard it caused his belly to shake. "Is that what the British are calling members of the Secret Intelligence Service nowadays? Spies are not to be treated like ordinary prisoners of war. Our policy has always been execution for an offence such as espionage."

"I hate to be pedantic but, in case you haven't realised, we're not at war. How dare you treat a member of Her Majesty's Government like this?"

"I consider whether or not our two countries are formally at war merely a technicality. As to what I dare – I have personally sent an American 'citizen' to Siberia and his government has barely said a word. Please, I would not place too much faith in your country coming to the rescue – I would hate for you to be disappointed. They simply will not risk a war over the fate of one or two insignificant individuals."

"I'm sick of playing games, Kutuzov. Just tell me what it is you want," I said with all the dignity I could muster.

I have to say I found it a little difficult, what with being bent double and wading in dirty water up to my knees like some sort of holidaymaker in Blackpool.

"I would have thought that was obvious – even to someone of your limited mental capacity," said the cheeky bugger. "I want revenge. As soon as I learned of your arrival in Hungary, I had you brought here at the earliest opportunity so that I could give you a warm welcome personally."

I tried to stop my knees from shaking, which ain't easy when they're sloshing about in water cold enough to freeze an Eskimo's nick-nacks, and somehow Kutuzov's smile and polite bearing only made me feel worse.

"Here, why don't you sit down and make yourself more comfortable," he said, indicating to the Hungarian guard at the door to bring in a chair from the corridor.

I eased myself on to the cold metal furniture, relieved to be able to straighten my back at long last. Any respite was short-lived, however, because Kutuzov proceeded to pull an object from his pocket and held it up for my inspection.

"I would be interested to know, Captain Fletcher, if you happen to be familiar with this piece of medical equipment?" he asked, *malo animo*.

In his hands was what looked like a glass tube, which narrowed to a point at one end. I hadn't the foggiest what it was but even if I had, I believe I'd lost the power of speech by then, struck dumb as I was by the horror of the situation unfolding before me.

"I will take your silence to mean that you do not. In that case, let me enlighten you. It is called a catheter. Ah, I see by your reaction that you know the purpose of such an instrument," he said, as if he was a male rendering of Locusta.

"Help!" I screamed, desperately hoping that someone would answer my cries and intervene. Kutuzov looked back at the empty corridor and then shrugged, mocking me.

“It does not appear that anybody wishes to offer you assistance, Captain Fletcher. Now, where was I? Ah, yes - the catheter. It is designed to be inserted into a certain part of a man’s anatomy. I’m sure we don’t need to go into details, do we? Let’s just say that it ends up in the urinary tract. Unfortunately this particular design is made of glass, and therefore it is particularly important that you take great care not to break it once it has been implanted. If, God forbid, someone was careless enough to smash it with their fist once it was in place ... well, just imagine what terrible injuries would be inflicted on the patient.”

As the evil grin spread across his ugly face I just stared at him, wide-eyed in absolute horror. What kind of sick maniac would even think of something so diabolical, I thought. I decided there and then, whatever happened I wasn’t going to let anyone stick anything *anywhere* in me.

Deciding was one thing, but putting my resolve into action was quite another. True, they hadn’t felt it necessary to physically restrain me, but I was totally unarmed and the one and only door to my palatial accommodation was blocked by a guard armed with a machine-gun.

“Give me your gun,” ordered Kutuzov to the guard. “Tie his arms and legs to the chair and remove his trousers.”

I believe it was the way he gave the order, with a clinical detachment as if I was some sort of uncomprehending piece of meat, which made me see red. As I’ve said before, I find it far more satisfying to hold one’s anger in check and exact sweet revenge at a more convenient juncture, but desperate times call for desperate measures. I decided that I had to do something and take what little courage I had into my hands.

Looking back now in old age, I still don’t know what made me think that brute force would save the day. Back then I was in my prime, of course, and I’m proud to say that all of the thirteen stone I possessed was made of pure bone and muscle. I’ll allow that in a fight size isn’t always necessarily the deciding factor, but we were in a confined space, which I hoped would make all the difference. Even so, I’m no Bendigo and my desperate ploy might well have failed if it hadn’t been for a fortunate interruption that couldn’t have come at a more opportune time.

As the guard approached and relinquished his firearm, I tensed the muscles of my legs, ready to lunge forward and send him crashing into Kutuzov. Unfortunately the clever colonel probably realised what was on my mind and he stood back, pointing the machine-gun squarely at my chest. It was then that divine intervention decided to raise its head and save the day. I say ‘divine’ when in fact it’s down to *Anna* that I’m here at all, so I’ll raise a glass and give thanks to rebellious females, wherever they may be.

Perhaps it was fear that sharpened my concentration on the matter at hand, but when the piercing scream erupted from the adjoining cell, it was Kutuzov and his hapless sidekick who turned to look in the direction of the timely cry of anguish and not your terrified hero. I didn’t wait to count my blessings, but sprang from my chair and brought my fist up with the intention of smashing the guard on the jaw.

I would like to be able to say that it was the deployment of the finer arts of unarmed combat that ended the life of the Hungarian ruffian, but in strict truth I have to admit that it

was all down to a poor aim. I'd missed the bugger's jaw and caught him right on his Adam's apple. He fell to the floor, clutching his throat as he struggled for breath and slowly suffocated to death.

It was just a shame that I didn't have time to hang around and admire my handiwork, but unfortunately I had a more pressing problem to deal with just then, because Kutuzov had returned his attention to the room. He'd managed to avoid a collision with my latest victim, but his weapon hadn't been so lucky and it crashed to the floor, ending up submerged in the muddy water sloshing around our feet.

The Russian colonel and I almost crashed heads as we simultaneously thrust our hands into the freezing man-made pond. We reached the weapon at the same time, but while I was lucky enough to have a firm hold on the butt of the machine-gun, Kutuzov had to make do with a flimsy grasp of the barrel. I pulled the gun from the water and, as he turned to escape, I resisted the temptation to shoot him in the back. Instead I smashed the butt of the weapon against the back of his fat head with all the strength I could muster.

Why this sudden display of compassion, I hear you ask? Well, the fact is that love for my fellow man had nothing to do with it. You see, the last thing I wanted was the sound of gunfire bringing the whole of the Hungarian secret police down on top of me. Besides, a smattering of bullet holes decorating the good colonel's uniform would have spoilt my plan to escape.

Kutuzov's unconscious body dropped like a stone, but I caught hold of him before he fell into the water and soaked his tunic. I stripped him and donned his uniform as quickly as my nervous fingers would allow, straining my ears to listen for the sound of the other guards, who I was convinced must arrive at any moment. Fortunately no one interrupted my impromptu costume change and although the tunic and trousers were a little short and baggy for me, I decided they would do the trick.

It was now, with Kutuzov's gun in my hand, that I put the second part of my plan into action. The door to the adjoining cell was closed, while Anna's torturer concentrated on his craft, but fortunately it was unlocked and I gently pushed it open.

You may be wondering why I was risking a set-to with the administrator of AVH justice in the neighbouring pen. As you know, playing the white knight ain't exactly my style, but I'll freely admit that I had an ulterior motive. Walking out in a stolen uniform which looks like it has shrunk in the wash is one thing, but I've found that it's best to get hold of all the props you can, and a half-tortured enemy of the state acting as my prisoner was just the ticket.

Anna's Hungarian persecutor was busy rubbing his hands up and down her thighs, clearly deciding to take a break from pulling out her toe-nails, one of which I noticed had already been liberated from Anna's right foot, leaving blood oozing from the fresh wound. Tears were streaming down her face as her tormentor, who'd clearly never set eyes on a *mittimus*, turned to see who had appeared to spoil his fun.

"Please continue. I am here merely as an observer," I explained in my best Russian, hoping that the Hungarian guard understood what I said.

He simply nodded and turned his back on me to resume his day's work. I brought the butt of the machine-gun down on his head, but he must have caught the movement out of the corner of his eye, because he moved to the side and I only struck him with a glancing blow.

Although Anna's cell did not have the veritable lake sloshing around the floor that mine was blessed with, there was still six inches or so of Hungarian rainwater to add to the ambiance of the torture chamber. As the guard struggled to turn round, I jammed my knee into the small of his back and thrust him down head first into the icy liquid.

I'd heard it said that someone can drown in a few inches of water and I'm here to tell you that it's true. Mind you, my inconsiderate victim took his sweet time about it, with the result that my knee hurt damnably by the time he'd headed for the fiery depths below to meet the rest of his kind.

Anna had been looking on in startled fascination and, as I untied her from the chair to which she'd been strapped, I quickly explained that I wanted her to pretend to be my prisoner.

"Oh my God, Thomas, thank you, thank you, thank you," she cried, wrapping her arms around my neck and kissing me repeatedly.

I dare say if I'd had the time I would have quite enjoyed all the sudden attention and gratitude, but unfortunately we were still not out of danger. Not that I needed to have worried because Anna played her part like a pro, crying and screaming as I shoved her roughly through the corridors of the building. Then, when we were almost as far as the main doors, she stopped and turned.

"Oh no, we've left the professor!" she cried, and I looked around to see if anyone had noticed her outburst.

One guard glanced up from his papers to see what all the fuss was about and I slapped Anna across the face to show her who was boss, hoping our observer hadn't heard what she'd said.

"You should be more concerned about what is going to happen to you," I bawled, shoving her roughly forward and risking a glance at the guard, who had thankfully returned his attention to his paperwork.

Anna glared at me, no doubt angry at my unwillingness to go back for her friend, but she only succeeded in making our charade even more believable.

The Cerberus at the main door obligingly opened it for us, and I was just beginning to believe that we might actually make it out of there unmolested, when we met two KGB officers heading up the steps to the building.

"Forgive me, Colonel, but have you seen Colonel Kutuzov? We were ordered to meet him here to assist with the interrogation of a British agent and a female counter-revolutionary," said one of the Russians, eyeing Anna suspiciously.

"Yes, Colonel Kutuzov is expecting you," I replied, taking my cue. "He is dealing with the British spy as we speak and requires your assistance urgently."

"Colonel, may I ask who you are and what you are doing with this prisoner?" asked the officer, who I now realised was only a captain.

“No, you may not. I am not in the habit of answering questions from junior officers when I have important business to attend to.”

My bluff didn't work and the captain reached for the revolver in his holster. Unfortunately for the Russian, my machine-gun was in my hand as part of my ploy to convince all and sundry that Anna was my captive. Clearly my play-acting had run its course and all that was left was to pray that the gun was still operational after its recent submersion in freezing water.

I turned it on my inquisitor and when I pulled the trigger I was gratified to hear the shots ring out and feel the weapon recoil in my hand. I'd fired from the hip and the bullets caught the captain squarely in his stomach, sending him tumbling down the steps, screaming. His comrade stepped back and reached for his own weapon, but I didn't even give him the chance to get a finger to it and I served him the same way.

All hell broke loose behind us, as several guards emerged from the AVH headquarters to see what all the commotion was about. I fled towards the narrow street on the other side of the road, yelling for Anna to follow me. 'Women and children first' has always been an outdated concept as far as I'm concerned.

I could tell from the brief glance I gave our new shadows that there were three AVH men giving chase, all armed with machine-guns. No doubt I would have congratulated myself on my accurate assessment of the situation, if bullets hadn't pounded into the wall, covering us in dust and plaster and forcing me to take shelter in a nearby doorway.

Anna had joined me and we desperately looked around for a means of escape. We found ourselves in front of a shop, but it was closed and the door was too sturdy to break down. We could hear the guards cautiously approaching behind us and that was when I noticed the shiny brass plate bolted on the far wall, upon which the name of the shop was proudly displayed. Retail opportunities weren't foremost in my mind just then, but the reason I'd been drawn to the designation was that it had clearly been lovingly polished by its proud owner and it reflected the street behind us.

I could see our three brave hunters working their way along the pavement in single file and the man in front had his gun trained on our doorway. I was just resigning myself to the fact that our only choice was to surrender when, reflected in the shiny name-plate, I noticed the leader turning to signal to his compatriots.

I jumped out from my hiding place and shot him in the back. As his partners-in-crime dived for cover, I grabbed Anna by the hand and we ran off round the next corner before they had time to recover. What few people were milling about scattered when they heard the gunfire. A terrified fat man in a suit was dashing for a car parked on the road, fumbling for his keys as he went.

“I'll take those if you don't mind!” I yelled, pointing my gun at his head.

He just stared back at me uncomprehendingly and Anna screamed at him in Hungarian. I don't know what she said but it had the desired effect and he threw the keys into my willing hands. I was in the car and starting the engine in a matter of seconds, while Anna slipped into the passenger seat. We roared away to the sound of bullets smashing into the bodywork, but we were soon out of range and hurtling along the broad avenues of central

Budapest. I looked across at Anna to see how she had coped with the hectic events of the last few hours and she returned my gaze with those beautiful and piercing blue eyes before she spoke.

“Welcome to Hungary, Captain Fletcher.”

A man has to be alive to be afraid

As soon as I was sure we weren't being followed, I parked the car in a quiet side-street and Anna led us to an apartment where she assured me we would be safe. Since it was still some distance to the British legation and I was too tired to argue, I followed her, nervously looking around to make sure no one was following us.

The door to the apartment was answered by a thick-muscled man in his thirties, wearing the overalls of a factory worker. He smiled when he saw Anna, but his face soon turned to a look of undisguised hatred when he spotted me, and I wondered if I'd been waylaid into another trap yet again. In all the excitement I'd completely forgotten that I was still wearing the uniform of a KGB officer, and Anna had to raise her arms to stop the bearded brute slamming the door in my face.

"This is Captain Fletcher. He works for the British government and he has just saved me from being tortured by Rakosi's thugs," she said, and the smile returned to the big, square face as he clasped me by the hand so firmly that I thought it would fall off.

"Anyone who can beat the AVH is welcome here," he said in faltering English, and I was relieved that we were safe, at least for the moment.

Anna and I sat down on the only two armchairs in the room and she cried out as she removed her right shoe to reveal her blood-soaked toes.

"The bastards," cried our host, reaching into a cupboard at the rear of the room that served as a kitchen.

He came back with bandages and a brown lotion that stank to high heaven. While he played Florence Nightingale, I walked over and picked up a bottle of vodka and a glass from a table set against the wall.

"Do you mind?" I asked, indicating that I needed medicinal sustenance too.

"Please," he said, nodding that I should help myself. "Just tell your people we are sick of the communists."

"Thank you, Alex," said Anna, as her nursemaid finished putting the final touches to her dressings.

"Do all the workers in Hungary feel like you, Alex?" I asked, thinking there must be *someone* who supported the government.

"Yes, Captain. They might not admit it because they are afraid, but they all feel the same way," he said, standing up and pouring Anna some of the vodka.

"Aren't *you* afraid?" I asked, and I was shocked by his answer.

"Afraid? A man has to be alive to be afraid. They have taken everything, Captain. You see here a man standing before you and his heart pumps blood through his body, but he is dead inside," he said, thumping his chest.

"Do not bring back bad memories, Alex," warned Anna.

"Do you think a minute goes by when I do not remember? Besides, he must know what the communists are doing to us, if he is to understand."

He took a drink of vodka for himself and swallowed hard before he continued.

“I am just a simple toolmaker. I wanted nothing more than to live a happy life with my family. My child died at birth, Captain, because our lousy hospitals are run by people who don’t know what they are doing. All the jobs go to the communists, even when they are unqualified. My little girl drowned in her own blood,” he said with trembling lips, and he began to sob.

Anna and I sat there, unsure what to do, but he wiped the tears from his face and continued.

“The doctor did not even bother to come down to help when the nurse begged him – he just went back to sleep. After my little girl died, I dragged him from his room and beat him to a pulp.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“This is Hungary,” he replied with a humourless smile. “They not only arrested me, but also my wife.”

I just stared back incredulously, but if I thought that was the worst of it I was mistaken, and he described the full horror of what took place.

“They took me to a cell and showed me a chair, bolted on to a trap-door which could be released by a lever. The animals pointed to a giant meat-grinder that lay beneath, before ordering me to sit down. The terrible machine was operated by the same lever, ready to tear the limbs from my body when I was thrown from the chair. The pigs would walk past and pretend to lunge at it, causing my heart to stop.”

“But they let you live,” I said, trying to bring him out of his funk, but he had more to tell.

“Many times I truly wish they had not, because what happened next was worse than death. I could hear the screams of my wife in the next cell and they would bring in her blood-soaked teeth to show me what was happening to her. I had kept silent until that moment, not wanting to give them the satisfaction of thinking they could break me, but now I begged for mercy. I begged and I begged as my wife’s screams stabbed my ears like a knife. But these bastards do not know the meaning of mercy. They deserve to die a hundred deaths. If your government will do nothing, I will kill them all myself, even if it takes my whole life.”

“How did you get away?” I asked, and he looked at me, his eyes full of tears.

“Even though the AVH scum had guns, I jumped from my chair and I managed to beat one of them to death before his comrades could pull me away. They knocked me unconscious and I awoke when one of them urinated on my face. Then they released me.”

“They let you go?” I asked, not understanding why they would do such a thing.

“Yes - but not before they had shown me my beautiful wife’s dead body. It was lying, soaked in blood on the floor of the other cell. They let me go because they thought they had broken me. That was a mistake which one day they will regret. I hate the communists.”

As I took another drink of vodka to help me recover from the shock of what I’d just heard, I looked across at the strong, powerfully built Alex, his broad shoulders shuddering as he sobbed uncontrollably. I remember thinking, as I recalled his final words, it would take a hard man to blame him.

After sharing his wonderful stories of everyday life in 1950's Hungary, Alex left us and said he would not be returning until the following evening. He didn't say why, but in light of what he'd just shared with us, I wouldn't have been surprised if he hadn't been off to slaughter the odd communist or two. Not that I cared just then, because it suddenly dawned on me that I was going to be left alone in the company of the delectable Anna Novak.

The start of our tryst wasn't particularly auspicious. Instead of showing her gratitude for helping her to escape the clutches of her communist tormentors, she rounded on me.

"Why did you abandon him?" she cried, and for a brief moment I didn't know what she was talking about.

"Who ... oh, you mean the doddering old bugger who was with us in the printing room?"

"Don't speak about the professor like that!" she yelled, pointing her finger at me as if I was a naughty schoolboy.

"Well, forgive me for not charging back through half of the Hungarian secret police to rescue some old duffer, but I was rather busy saving you from a sadist trying to mutilate your trotters."

I got up to help myself to what was left of Alex's vodka and she followed me, determined to continue her remonstrance.

"I have been fighting the communists since I was a little girl and I don't need some Englishman's help."

"Well, you don't have to worry on that score. Next time I'll leave you and the secret police to get better acquainted."

"You are impossible!" she screamed, and she raised her hand to slap me across the face.

I caught her by the wrist before she struck home and pulled her towards me, planting a kiss on her succulent lips. This time her other hand made contact with the side of my face and I pulled away before she could do any more damage.

She took a step forward and I braced myself for another onslaught, but to my amazement she brought her hand behind my neck and gave me one of the most passionate kisses I've ever had in my life.

"I thought we were fighting," I said, and her next words put a smile back on my face.

"There will be plenty of time for that – in the morning."

To give birth is a girl's glory

I've long since given up trying to work out what goes on in the minds of the fairer sex, and whatever the reason for Anna's sudden change of heart, you can be sure I took full advantage. Any worries I'd had that young Hungarian women were no match for my Japanese conquests were quickly dispelled.

You see, sexual morality in post-war Hungary had quickly become rather lax. In the early years communist standards had been somewhat puritan. Acquiring an abortion had been punishable by life imprisonment and couples had been arrested for kissing in public. It was different for those at the top doing the preaching, of course. While hotels were being raided to search out unmarried couples, the leading funkies kept mistresses.

Gradually everything had changed. The birth rate had plummeted and it had to be raised by hook or by crook. Childless couples were punished with extra taxes and girls were actively encouraged to enter into casual sexual relationships, which was music to the ears for someone like me. The last thing I wanted was to become a Benedick.

"To give birth is a girl's glory and a wife's duty", claimed the posters springing up in clinics throughout the country, and unmarried mothers were actually rewarded with two thousand florins for every bastard they brought into the world. Divorces were more common than liars in parliament and prostitution was state-sponsored.

The happy result of all this was that ninety per cent of the female population were game, and I'm happy to report that Anna was firmly in support of the majority.

Far from being the St Winifred that I'd feared, she actually taught me a few tricks that even my Japanese ladies of the night hadn't seen fit to share with me, and I was soon congratulating myself on having the foresight to rescue Anna from her captors. Mind you, if I'd only known what trouble she was going to bring my way, I think I might have been tempted to forgo the nocturnal delights she offered and left her to relinquish the remainder of her toenails to add to the communists' sizeable collection.

In the morning it soon became clear that it wasn't just Anna's resistance in the *bedroom* that had crumbled. Whereas only the night before she had been scornful of any attempt by an Englishman to help with the revolutionary struggle, she was suddenly all for thrusting me into the thick of it. She made her suggestion as the first rays of the sun shone through the bedroom window.

"You must meet with our ex-prime minister, Imre Nagy, and convince him that if the people rise up against our Russian masters, the West will support us," she said as way of good morning before I'd barely opened my eyes.

"That might be easier said than done," I complained, deciding that he'd hardly make time to see a lowly English officer.

"It can easily be arranged. When I worked on a magazine a few years ago, I made friends with another journalist and she turned out to be Mr. Nagy's daughter. Since then, I have practically been part of the family. Uncle Imre has always been very kind to me."²

In spite of the fact that every muscle in my body was aching as a result of the previous day's activities, in and out of the bedroom, I'd been looking forward to a rematch with the

shameless Anna, and this sudden talk of meetings and political tomfoolery wasn't doing my vodka-induced headache any good at all.

I reached round to grab hold of some firm Hungarian buttock so that I could draw her naked body close to mine. But she pushed me away, as if I was exceeding the bounds of polite society and we hadn't been playing the beast with two backs only a few hours before.

"Are you listening to me?" she moaned, punching my shoulder to make sure I was.

"You're jumping the gun a bit, aren't you?" I said, thoroughly sick of her pathetic mood swings. "Nagy's been thrown out of the government. Besides, he's still a communist so he won't do anything against the Russians. And even if there was a revolt, which there ain't, I wouldn't count on the West getting involved."

If I'd thought that my reasoned argument would put a stop to her ridiculous political meddling, I was mistaken.

"No, you're wrong, Thomas. The Americans are dropping leaflets telling us to rise up - and every day they pledge support on the radio. They stopped the communists in Korea and they will do the same in Hungary."

"I wouldn't count on it. Hungary is a completely different kettle of fish. This is the Soviet Union's back yard and they've got nuclear bombs all over the shop. I know what these Western politicians are like, Anna - they're all talk but they won't risk a war."

She lay there as if she was contemplating what I had just said, but then her face hardened, betraying a new resolve, and she shook her head as she spoke.

"No, the West will support us if Imre Nagy returns to his rightful place as the head of our government and asks for support from the United Nations, I am sure of it," insisted my little Miss Micawber.

I could see there was no persuading her and I decided to go along with her lunatic suggestion, provided it didn't put your correspondent into harm's way, of course. So I pretended to mull the whole idea over like the obliging chap I am, and prepared to exact my pound of flesh.

"I tell you what, Anna. I'll go and talk to Nagy if my people say it's okay," I said, sighing, and she went to get out of bed so that she could dress and we could be on our way.

I grabbed her by the hand and pulled her gently back under the covers so that I could explain my terms.

"Anna, in my country, when someone agrees to do something against their better judgment, the other party is expected to show their gratitude."

"Oh, I see," she replied, and a wanton smile confirmed that she already knew how she was expected to accomplish the task, but she gave voice to the question anyway.

"How exactly can I show my appreciation?" she asked, fluttering her eyelashes in a way that would have had me hot under the collar, if I'd been wearing one.

I pulled the covers back to reveal all of her lovely nakedness and my eyes drank in every wonderful curve of her young body.

"Well?" she said mischievously, making no attempt to cover herself up.

"Shh, I'm still thinking," I replied, as I continued to ogle her.

“Thomas,” she squealed, giving my chest a playful slap before she rolled me on to my back.

She glanced down at my instinctive reaction to her alluring charms and took up her position before she uttered her next words.

“I can tell just by looking that you’ve already made up your mind.”

Uncle Imri

When I got back to the legation I'd been half hoping that Biggins would have ridiculed the idea of visiting Nagy and refused to let me go, but the idiot was all for it. He was so excited by the kudos such a meeting might win for the Service, it took a few minutes before he even got around to asking me where I'd been for the last two days.

I told him about Kutuzov's brother and how he'd been eager to get on unfriendly terms with a private part of my anatomy, but I'm sure he didn't believe me. As you can imagine, I was feeling a little uneasy to say the least, what with the evil major's sibling running around Budapest with nothing better to do than inflict unspeakable pain on yours truly.

Then there was the unanswered question of how we'd been arrested in the first place - the moment we'd arrived at the polytechnic. I put it all down to the blunder made by our diplomatic mob when they invited Anna to visit the legation for all to see. Whatever the reason, it was getting all too much for my fragile nature and I hadn't been in the blasted country five minutes.

So when I went to meet Anna's 'Uncle Imre', I was feeling rather delicate. If, when I was introduced to the ex-prime minister, I'd been hoping to meet an imposing figure, ready to take on the evil overlords of his country, I was sadly mistaken - as soon became apparent when we were finally ushered into Nagy's villa on Orso Avenue. A servant (gad, these communists know how to live, don't they just?) directed us to the garden where Nagy was fussing around his plants, while two of his grandchildren ran back and forth, tugging on his trouser legs.

In spite of the fact that he was busy with his horticultural pursuits, he was still wearing a smart, light-brown suit, complete with shirt and tie, apparently totally oblivious to the warm spring sunshine. As soon as I laid eyes on him, I immediately realised why many of his followers called him 'Uncle Imre'. He had a somewhat chubby, jovial face, complete with moustache and pince-nez. He was in his late fifties then and his hair was thinning on top, but I didn't find that out until later because he was wearing his customary porkpie hat, tilted at an angle.

When the servant announced us, Nagy looked up from his roses and he made an exaggerated run towards Anna, embracing her as if she was a long-lost friend. She eventually extricated herself from his middle-age spread and made the introductions.

"Captain Fletcher, this is Mr. Nagy," she said proudly.

"I am very pleased to meet you," he said, with a formality that matched his suit.

When we had eventually settled in the garden with our drinks, he got straight to the point.

"I am afraid that our idealistic Miss Novak here," and he touched her shoulder to indicate it was said with affection, "has got you here under false pretences. Alas, I no longer have any influence within my beloved Party, and as for all this talk of an uprising - that is absurd. If the people have any grievances, they can be brought before the Committee and the Party will listen."

“Sir, forgive me, but I have witnessed the severity with which Rakosi and his secret police treat the people of Hungary. Do you think they will allow themselves to be subjected to such an oppressive regime indefinitely?” I asked.

Whether or not I was still reacting to my recent incarceration at AVH headquarters, I don’t know, but I was damned if I was going to sit there and listen to some hogwash about how the communists had the interests of the people at heart.

He turned to look at me as if he’d noticed me for the first time, and his face appeared to redden before he replied.

“I admire your candour, Captain Fletcher, but I hardly think that a foreigner who has only recently arrived in our country can understand the workings of a nation and its government.”

“Mr. Nagy, I am afraid Captain Fletcher is right,” said Anna. “I was arrested and tortured yesterday and my only crime was being the editor of a newspaper that criticised Rakosi and his henchmen.”

“I find all this very difficult to believe,” said Nagy, waving his hands dismissively.

“Would you like me to show you my wounds?” cried Anna emotionally.

“This is hardly the time and place for such things,” said Nagy, agitated, and he got up from his seat to indicate that we had overstayed our welcome.

As we left the villa, I could see that his attitude had upset Anna and for the first time since we’d met, her indefatigable confidence had deserted her.

“Perhaps Nagy feels that he’s too old to get involved in politics again,” I said diplomatically, but my scepticism must have shown because she tried to apologise for him.

“He is just too involved in the Communist Party, that’s all. He has never known any other way. Once he realises the people of Hungary aren’t going to stand for the way things are any more, he will support us - and together we will be rid of the Russians and choose our own government.”

She was convinced of the rightness of her cause and no mistake. In fact, the more I thought about it, Anna would have made a damn better prime minister than the man in the porkpie hat. You see, being a natural-born coward myself, I can always spot a poor bugger with a yellow streak, even if no one else can.

As we walked along the quiet streets of the more affluent part of Budapest, the reality became all too clear. Nagy may well have been the Prime Minister of Hungary, before he was kicked out by the hardliners, but if Anna and the rest of her would-be revolutionaries thought that the kindly ‘Uncle Imre’ was the answer to their prayers, they were in for a rude awakening - he was too damned frightened by half.

As we crossed the road I spotted a man in an AVH uniform scowling in our direction. The unwelcome sight had me pondering Mr. Nagy, scared out of his wits, and it got me to thinking.

Perhaps he knows something we don’t.

Long live Hungary

As it turned out, Anna's prophecy that things in Hungary were about to change wasn't far off, but probably not in the way that she'd hoped. You see, Rakosi and his pals might have been able to carry on ruling Hungary with an iron fist, even after Stalin's death, if Khrushchev hadn't denounced his predecessor as a bungling despot. Now the pressure was on for Rakosi, and I'm happy to say I was there to witness the start of his downfall.

You see, it was then that the intellectuals in Hungary finally realised they weren't going to win a struggle against their oppressors unless they won over the masses.

"What we need is an organisation," they said, and the answer to their prayers came in the shape of the 'Petofi Circle'.

To avoid the risk of descending into a history lesson, I'll simply say that it took its name from the poet and leader of the abortive revolution in 1848 and it met at the premises of the Kossuth Club (yet another group of intellectuals who liked the sound of their own voices) to conduct carefully staged discussions. Mind you, they didn't impress many of the hopefuls like Anna because most of them were communists. As one of the more irreverent inmates from her newspaper put it: "You can't make butter out of shit."

The point is, I was on hand at one of their meetings where 'the people' began to be heard. Anna had arranged it, of course, hoping to show me just how quickly feelings of resentment were growing in Hungary. I'd resigned myself to several hours of boring speeches with the unhappy prospect of ending up like some kind of arse-backwards Hildesheim. As it turned out, I was dead wrong. It's funny, but as so often happens at those little moments when the tide of events subtly changes and ushers in a new era of history, you don't even realise you're there at the start of it all - to you, it's just another day.

The meeting had begun harmlessly enough, with old Party veterans dominating the floor and rambling on about how they'd spent years in prison under Admiral Horthy's regime, when he'd purged Hungary of any communists in the 'White Terror' before the war. I was just starting to nod off when someone bellowed from the audience.

"Since Stalin's dictatorship, more communists have been imprisoned, tortured and murdered than during Horthy's entire twenty-five year reign!"

It was impossible to see through the crowd to identify who had spoken, but an eerie hush settled over the hall and then, gradually, the clapping started until it grew into thunderous applause. It was at that moment that a tall, gaunt woman walked up to the microphone and turned to face the white-faced funkies on the rostrum.

"Comrades," she began, "after five years of prison and humiliation, I stand before you shaking with emotion. Not only did you kill my husband, you took away my baby boy from me. You killed all decency in our country."

It was then that she rounded on the audience to continue her tirade.

"Where were the members of the Party when these things were happening? How could they allow such degeneration to take place without rising in holy anger against the guilty? I will not rest until every one of them - the men who have ruined this country, corrupted the

Party, liquidated thousands and driven millions to desperation - have received their just deserts. Comrades, stand by me in this struggle!”

As she sat down, the hall erupted and cries rang out from the audience.³

“Down with Rakosi Long live Hungary!”

The events of that meeting ‘rang out’ across the entire country, and even the state-sponsored press grudgingly paid tribute to the Petofi Circle and recommended that Party leaders should join in with its discussions.

A few days later another meeting was arranged and Anna wanted me to attend once again. I have to say that this time I didn’t mind at all. I was quite enjoying watching the cruel bastards at the top, who’d been partly responsible for my unscheduled medical examination, sweating nervously while the anger of the mob grew day by day.

Stupidly I’d thought it wasn’t going to affect me and that I’d simply be able to report back to Biggins about the growing discontent in the country before we headed for home. Besides, Anna was more than happy to use her irresistible charms to persuade me to go along - and who was I to refuse her?

I remember the meeting took place on one of the hottest days of the year and it got as humid as hell before it began to rain. Mind you, the uncomfortable weather didn’t stop people pouring in and the eight hundred seats were soon filled. More and more of the populace crowded into the aisles and the balconies until there must have been well over five thousand souls crammed into the place.

As the evening wore on, so many had arrived that Vaci Street was blocked from pavement to pavement and loudspeakers were rigged in order for the overflowing crowds to hear what was being discussed. As before, the Party-faithful tried to defend the government, but soon the crowds were calling for Rakosi’s dismissal.

“How dare you insult the Party?” screamed one of the leaders.

“The Party?” came the reply. “*We* are the Party!”

Applause erupted as it had done before and soon the chanting began.

“Down with the regime. Long live Imre Nagy!”

The meeting went on until the early hours of the morning and I’m pleased to report that when we retired to Anna’s apartment, she was so aroused with revolutionary fervour that I had little difficulty in cajoling her into an equally passionate performance in the bedroom.

I was out like a light, once the fun and games had reached a satisfying conclusion, but later that day the sounds of the city disturbed our peace. I was rather looking forward to another bout, but she was practically kicking me out of the place and urging me to report back to Biggins as soon as I could. I tried to explain to her that the machinery of government was infernally slow, but she wouldn’t listen and couldn’t get me out the door quickly enough – the ungrateful trollop.

Subscribing to the rule that a gentleman should never hit a woman with his hat on, I decided that I would be able to sleep just as well back at the legation as I could in Mademoiselle Novak’s boudoir, and I took my leave. But as I stumbled into England’s little corner of Budapest, Biggins was on hand to prise out all the boring details of the meeting.

“Biggins, I’m tired,” I said, giving a gigantic yawn to illustrate my point.

“Fletcher, in case you’ve forgotten, you work for Her Majesty’s Government and I want a thorough report – now!” he yelled pompously.

I climbed the stairs, and before I headed to my modest bedroom to begin my well-deserved slumber, I briefed him as instructed.

“The Hungarian’s are pissed off and they want Rakosi to bugger off.”

I closed the door to my room and shut out the screams and curses of the apoplectic Biggins, before turning to enjoy the beautiful sight of my welcoming bed.

* * *

Amazingly I was allowed to have my full seven hours of beauty sleep and by then Biggins had calmed down sufficiently to join me for dinner - which I had already decided could double-up as a very late breakfast.

As I’d suspected, all hell had broken loose since the meeting of the previous night and Biggins was no longer interested in hearing the details. Apparently the Hungarian leader had reacted to the news like the thug that he was.

“I’ve heard through my contacts that Rakosi has drawn up a list of four hundred leading opponents for immediate arrest,” explained Biggins excitedly.

“Well, that’s par for the course,” I replied, not really caring.

“The point is, I’ve heard that the Kremlin’s had enough and they’re no longer willing to support him.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” I said, tucking into my bacon and eggs.

As it happened, I didn’t have to wait very long.

“The Party needs me! If I go, it will just cave in!” protested Rakosi, shortly before he was shipped off to Moscow.

A couple of days later, dozens of his victims were released from prison and some were even elected to the Central Committee. There would have been many more, but unfortunately the hangman’s noose had rather spoilt their chances of gaining votes at the ballot box.

It looked to me as though things had started to look up for the country, until I found out who was to replace the unfortunate Rakosi. Ernest Gero was chosen as the tyrant’s successor, so that one staunch Stalinist was being replaced by another. The people of Hungary had turned on their cruel masters like an angry dog and the communist leaders had looked as if they were ready to appease the masses, only to kick them in the teeth. I said as much to Biggins and he picked up my analogy and ran with it.

“You’re right, Fletcher. The trouble is, I think the dog is ready to bite its master right on the arse.”

The dam is about to burst

Events further afield in another part of Eastern Europe served to illustrate Biggins' point. There was fresh rioting in Poland, and Vladislav Gomulka, a communist who had previously been thrown out of the government, was elected Party Leader. Khrushchev was furious and he dashed to Warsaw where his plane was intercepted by the Polish Air Force. Soviet tanks were ordered into Warsaw's suburbs but Gomulka called their bluff and the Russians had to climb down.

You'd have thought that the idiots back in Whitehall would have been taking a keen interest, but unknown to us our new PM was busy planning an invasion of Egypt. And all because he wasn't happy about the way the Gyppos had nationalised the Suez Canal. A complete balls-up from beginning to end, and it only served to piss off the Yanks - not to mention causing everyone to take their eye off the ball with regard to events behind the Iron Curtain.

All of which left your poor hero stuck in the middle of a communist country where the angry masses were champing at the bit - buoyed up by the success of their Polish comrades. Anna was busy drumming up support with her pathetic rag, so even that pleasant diversion was cruelly taken away from me. I began to wonder if I'd become an honorary member of the Enkratites.

I managed to escape the drudgery of the place for a while when Biggins entrusted me with the task of getting a senior AVH man out of the country. His name was Colonel Janos Sarkosi and, as he explained to me on our journey, he could see what was coming and had decided his life wouldn't be worth spit if he stayed in Hungary.

I wasn't overjoyed to be participating in the escape of one of Rakosi's goons, but he'd convinced Biggins that he had valuable information about Hungarian and Soviet military deployments which he would happily share with our department in exchange for a new life in the West. Besides, if it meant I had the opportunity to seek out whatever nocturnal delights Vienna had to offer, who was I to argue?

He spat out what I imagined to be a few choice Hungarian curses when I 'accidentally' slammed the car door on his leg, and he looked at me with such hatred in his eyes that if he'd been armed, I swear I'd have ended up wearing a pine overcoat.

When I'd finally divested myself of the odious little sadist, I wasted no time and visited Vienna's fleshpots - and a fine old time I had too. However, when I returned to my temporary digs at the embassy, I found that no less a person than Sir Anthony Eden was interested in my whereabouts, which rather took the shine off the evening.

I'll not go into details because it doesn't have a bearing on my present tale, but the upshot was that the blithering idiot did his level best to get me embroiled in the whole Suez mess. I had a brief sojourn in Israel and Egypt which I'll share with you another time, if the grim reaper doesn't pop in for a chat.

When I was finally able to escape the whole sorry business and return to Hungary, I counted my blessings. If I'd known what was waiting for me, I'd have stayed in the desert

without an oasis to bless myself and thanked my lucky stars. You see, to rather strain my aquatic analogy, the dam in Budapest was about to burst.

* * *

I'd scarcely settled back at the British legation when Biggins welcomed me with the cheery news that Hungary's students and workers were taking to the streets. Fifty thousand citizens had gathered, in spite of the government's attempts to ban any such demonstrations out of fear of the great unwashed, and the people were demanding free elections and the return of Imre Nagy to power.

Biggins was eager for us to head for the streets so that we could report exactly what was going on. After my run-in with the AVH and Colonel Kutuzov, you can be sure I insisted we were armed as we made our way to Parliament Square. When we arrived, crowds packed every corner and Nagy's name was being chanted wherever you looked. The funkies were doing their best to get the people to disperse, without success, and suddenly the square was plunged into the shadows of Erebus when the street lights were turned off.

I noticed someone nearby rolling a newspaper and they lit it to provide a primitive torchlight. As others followed suit, the sound of rustling paper and fire spread across the square. The scene reminded me of one of those horror films where the peasants surround the mediaeval castle, seeking justice for the crimes of the evil inhabitant. Even with the disquieting feeling that something terrible might happen, it was a beautiful sight, and it only served to increase the feeling that history was in the making.

I looked up at the national flag and for a moment I couldn't make out what was different. Then it struck me. The communist emblem which should have been proudly displayed at its heart had been torn out, and as I turned to Biggins to point out my new discovery, I was greeted by the sight of Anna and some of her aspiring journalists approaching from one of the side-streets.

"Don't get your hopes up, Fletcher, I arranged for her to meet us here," he explained when he saw my eyes light up.

"I thought you'd be busy at the presses," I said in greeting, still feeling a little miffed at the way she'd cold-shouldered me just when things were starting to get interesting.

"The time for that is past now," she said, her eyes sparkling at the sight of the defiant crowd.

"What are your plans, Miss Novak?" asked Biggins.

"The Party's newspaper has failed to print all the demands of the people. In fact, it has omitted the most important demand of all – a complete withdrawal of all Russian troops."

"Well, what can you do? The communists control the press," said Biggins.

"We are going to take a complete list to the radio building and demand it is read out," she said defiantly.

"That's all very well," I said, determined to bring her back down to earth, "but by now the building will be swarming with AVH men."

She gave me one of her withering looks and no doubt she was about to let forth with another tiring lecture, but Biggins stuck his oar in and had my innards churning into the bargain.

“We’ll join you. Maybe we can be of some help,” offered our quixotic hero.

I didn’t like the sound of that. As usual he was being pretty free and easy with my services, and having experienced the hospitality of the secret police once already, I had no desire to repeat the experience.

Before I could protest, we were heading along a maze of backstreets, dotted here and there with run-down shops, until we reached a tiny roadway, barely a few yards across from wall to wall. On the right was a four-storey brick building and the windows of the ground floor were covered by vertical steel grids. This was the radio building – the hub of the national broadcasting system.

Anna and her student followers led us round to a gate which served as an entrance to a quadrangle. Before we knew what was happening, they were pushing the gate open and the crowd was surging through, threatening to take us with them.

“We can’t get involved, Biggins - think of the stir it will cause if they find out that British operatives are forcing their way into the radio station!” I yelled, holding him back.

For once he allowed common sense to win the day, and we had to resign ourselves to being spectators as the drama unfolded before us. Security police closed the tunnel gates, trapping Anna and her fellow protesters in the yard. A guard helped himself to their identity papers and allowed them to enter. Stones and bricks began to fly at the building and rumours spread through the mob that the delegation had been forcibly detained.

“There’s nothing we can do here, Biggins. Let’s head back to Parliament Square. Our people will want to know if Nagy is forming a new government. That’s where we belong,” I suggested, trying to hide the panic I was feeling at being surrounded by the unruly mob.

I’d been there before, in Germany, and I knew how quickly things could get out of hand.

Biggins took one last look at the entrance to the radio building and finally shrugged his shoulders in agreement. I was relieved to be heading back to the square, where the threat of violence didn’t seem to be so evident. Besides, the larger area offered more chances of escape compared to the claustrophobic alleyways surrounding the radio building – always an advantage as far as I’m concerned.

By the time we arrived, it was getting so dark that it was becoming hard to see a thing, and I was just about to suggest that we might as well call it a day and head back to our beds, when a light was switched on behind the balustrade on the Parliament building.

The shouting and yells of the crowd died away and every face looked up at the balcony to see the man they had been chanting for all day. Imre Nagy’s nervous voice croaked into the microphone.

“Comrades...” he began, but the crowd howled and whistled and he looked down at the ocean of faces, bewildered.

One or two of the more vocal protesters screamed back at him.

“We are not comrades!” they yelled.

He nervously adjusted his spectacles and tried again.

“Compatriots and friends!” he exclaimed, and it was with some relief that he heard the whistles turn to faint cheers.

If the crowd had been hoping for a rousing and defiant speech they were to be disappointed, because he simply waffled on about how the Central Committee would take care of everything and he urged them to go home quietly. But he’d misjudged the mood completely.

“We won’t go home. We’re staying together,” came back the defiant voices, and the end of his speech was met with hostile silence and no applause.

I think it was only then that I truly realised we were witnessing a genuine uprising of the people of Hungary, and the Communist Party-faithful had been caught napping.

The question was, what would they do now that they’d been woken up?

They were all grinning

Naturally I was all for heading back to the relative safety of the legation, but we heard rumours of mass slaughter at the radio station and Biggins wanted to return there to see if the stories were true.

As we approached Alexander Brody Street it was clear that thousands more had been attracted by the reports of a gunfight. The road was covered in broken bricks and the crowd had grabbed an outside broadcast van and hurled it like a battering ram against the locked oak gates. But aside from a few minor injuries, nobody appeared to be seriously hurt.

We arrived just in time to see the gates burst open and guards rushed forward to block the entrance. The soldiers tried to push the crowd back, using chains, rifle butts and tear gas, and they managed to bundle the attackers out on to the street and recover the van back into the courtyard.

I hoped that would be the end of it, but petrol bottles were thrown into the first-floor windows and one of the rooms caught fire. A pathetic, leaky fire hose was reeled out from above the entrance, but the crowd grabbed it and cut it to ribbons. Shots rang out and we instinctively ducked down on our knees with the rest of the throng, but we eventually realised that the guards had been firing into the air.

That was when the station began to broadcast and a hush settled over the demonstrators as they strained to listen to Gero's speech. It soon became apparent that he wasn't going to appease the protesters at all and he simply promised that the Central Committee would meet again in the next few days. It would have been better if he hadn't broadcast at all, for all the good it did, and the mob began to jeer. A couple of the livelier fellows climbed up to the loudspeaker which hung from the building and tore it from its mounting.

It was then that the rampage really began. We heard the sound of broken glass as windows were smashed and signal flares went off from the building's roof. Rumours spread through the crowd that one of the delegates had been shot, and somebody began throwing thunder-flashes that exploded with a loud crack in the narrow streets.

"Seize the radio!" came the battle-cry, and the insurgents surged forward.

AVH troops threw them back, holding their rifles with bayonets fixed. They set up a cordon, and as the disorderly pack of rebels retreated, the soldiers kicked out, tripping people over as they ran. Amazingly the protesters charged again and the guards fired shots into the air once more.

The mob finally appeared to see sense and everything calmed down for a while. When truckloads of AVH reinforcements arrived I felt sure that would be the end of it, and I wouldn't have believed what happened next if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

"Are you Hungarians?" jeered one man.

"Go on, shoot us," challenged another, and he bared his chest to provide an inviting target.

The commander's face went red with rage and I was convinced that he'd shoot the idiot where he stood, but to our amazement the colonel ordered his driver to turn round and the lorries skulked off out of sight.

“My God, is that Miss Novak?” cried Biggins, pointing to the street corner on the far side of the road.

I looked across to where he was indicating, assuming he was starting at shadows, but there she was, waving and running to meet us.

“Where the hell did you come from? I thought you were locked away in the radio station,” I said, puzzled.

“I pretended I needed to use the facilities and I spotted some of the radio managers escaping out of a back door. So I followed them and here I am,” she explained, feeling pretty pleased with herself.

“You’d have been safer staying where you were!” I yelled, but she ignored me to join in with the chanting and taunting of the security police.

As if to confirm my misgivings about Anna’s ill-advised escape, the guards poured out of the building’s entrance without warning and opened fire. The unmistakable sound of tommy-guns echoed through the street and everyone ran for cover, screaming as they went.

I managed to find a vacant doorway and I pulled Anna after me. When I felt her hair it was wet, and blood was pouring from a wound on her forehead. She had a glazed expression, but she was still breathing and she clutched my arms to stop herself from falling.

A friend of Anna’s ran towards us and, just as she was about to reach the safety of the doorway, a bullet shot her through the eye and she died at our feet. In the confusion I remember seeing a boy, barely twelve or thirteen years old, and he was clutching his stomach, writhing on the ground in agony.

I looked around, desperately searching for a way to escape the madness all around us. The street was suddenly empty, but it had an eerie and surreal quality, as dying smoke bombs illuminated the scene in an unearthly green haze. Mercifully the firing had stopped, but no one dared to move for fear of being the next victim.

A few minutes later I could have sworn that I heard the sound of an ambulance-bell ringing, and Biggins ran over from his sanctuary to confirm my suspicions.

“How did they get here so quickly?” I asked, still unable to believe help was at hand.

“Rokus hospital is only a block away,” he explained. “Let’s get Miss Novak hey, wait a minute. What the hell do they think they’re doing?”

I followed his gaze and I could see what had suddenly caused him so much distress. At the end of the street were two ambulances, but a group of AVH officers were refusing to let them through. It must have been all of ten minutes before we were allowed to help Anna on to one of the blood wagons and even then it was a struggle. The wounded and dying were packed into the two vehicles like sardines.

It was impossible for us to join her in the ambulance and we clung on to the fender for dear life as it pulled away. I just had a few seconds to view the devastation, and what I saw then haunted me more than all the mayhem that had gone before.

As we drove away we could hear the sound of the wounded and dying civilians inside the ambulance, and I glanced across at the rows of AVH uniforms lining the street. Instinctively I looked into the eyes of our assailants.

The vision of the guards admiring their handiwork is with me still. With their weapons still warm from the gruesome day's work, I witnessed something that left me despairing of humanity. Incredibly, through the ghostly green smoke, they were all grinning.

A coward like me

To this day I don't know what possessed me to jump from the ambulance when it was about to whisk me away to the relative safety of the nearby hospital. It was a decision taken on a whim. I dare say that if I'd had more time to think about it, I wouldn't have done it and I'd have been governed by my own rede.

I tried to convince myself that I simply had no wish to witness what was to befall the lovely Anna, when I was helpless to do anything about it. Or perhaps I thought I could make my own way to the legation, but I doubt whether that is true. No, I believe that in that instant I was feeling an emotion which is downright dangerous for a coward like me – I was as angry as hell.

There they were, armed to the teeth in their smart khaki uniforms, feeling pleased with themselves for having gunned down unarmed men, women and children. What made it all the more unfathomable was that their victims were fellow Hungarians who were simply protesting for a better life.

The thing was, with a hundred odd AVH men lining the streets, what the hell did I think I was going to do about it?

“What do you think you're doing?” asked Biggins, echoing my thoughts.

He'd obviously watched me jump off the ambulance and had decided to join me. I shrugged my shoulders and we stood there, unsure what to do as even more lorries arrived. Well, that's torn it, I thought, assuming that the trucks were delivering the next batch of AVH men - but I couldn't have been more wrong.

In fact more and more people were being ferried to the scene of battle, as vehicles toured the city calling for volunteers. I couldn't help but admire the determination of the demonstrators, even if they hadn't got a chance. But I was wrong again. People were telephoning from public call-boxes, begging the Hungarian Army to intervene against the AVH gunmen, and Biggins and I stood there dumbfounded as we watched events unfold before our eyes.

The police and army officers had been just as annoyed as us at seeing AVH men use their guns on unarmed civilians, and they began handing over their weapons to the demonstrators. That was when it ceased to be a one-sided battle and the grins of the AVH murderers were wiped off their faces.

The AVH guards quickly pulled back to the radio station and began to put up sand-bags in an effort to defend their position. As one or two braver souls tried to stop them, they were gunned down where they stood. We saw an army major approach the station to call for a ceasefire, so that the wounded and dying could be carried away, but from somewhere a bullet caught him in the chest and he fell to the ground.

More ambulances were arriving, but the mob surged forward and forced them to stop. We looked on in alarm, thinking that the demonstrators were running amok, but we'd misread the situation yet again. The vehicles were loaded with supplies for the AVH men and the crowd pulled the unlucky occupants from the mock-ambulances and beat them up before helping themselves to the arms and ammunition.

“Biggins, some of the buggers are taking up positions in the windows so they can fire down on the crowd,” I said, pointing up at the radio building. “Quick, follow me.”

We ran to a low wall on the other side of the street and we knelt behind it, drawing our revolvers. By resting our guns on the top of our makeshift battlement we were able to fire off a few well-placed shots, and it was with some satisfaction that we polished off at least a couple of gunmen.

With the chaos going on all around us, I’d assumed we would be pretty safe in our sheltered position – which just goes to show I wasn’t thinking straight. Somehow the defenders were getting reinforcements and a few shots started ricocheting off our pathetic stronghold. One of them missed my head by inches and I vowed, there and then: never again would I let my anger get the better of me.

We weren’t the only ones being shot at and everyone began to pull back until nobody was left in the street except for the dead or dying. We all made our way to the square on the other side of the building, but I have to say that the insane rage I’d felt had left me and I was no longer spoiling for a fight.

As if to help me in my decision to call it a day, four Hungarian T-34 tanks rolled into view and I remember thinking: well, that’s it, it’s all over. But I’d underestimated the strength of feeling among the Hungarian people once again, and we were shocked to see the commander of the lead tank climb out and announce to the crowd that his men would not fire on their fellow countrymen.

As we continued to watch events unfold, a convoy of soldiers arrived, but they were stopped by unarmed demonstrators. I think it was then, as we watched the troops hand over their weapons while they explained to the eager recipients how to use them, that we truly realised the days of the communist regime were numbered.

There was a lull in the fighting and Biggins and I took the opportunity to make our way to the hospital. When we arrived, the place was so chaotic that it took us nearly an hour to find Anna. A bullet had struck her skull, but she must have been as tough as she looked. Due to the trajectory of the bullet, it had ricocheted off her dome, taking nothing but shards of bone along with it. The doctor assured us that she’d only suffered a mild concussion and they’d cleaned the wound to reduce the chance of infection.

“You’re a very lucky young lady,” said Biggins, in that fatherly way he had whenever he addressed someone younger than himself.

“Thomas, you saved my life again,” she cried with tears in her eyes, and she reached up from the hospital bed to draw me towards her.

I looked across to see Biggins rolling his eyes, realising that I was to receive all the glory yet again – the jealous bugger.

“What happened at the radio station?” she asked, quickly forgetting her good fortune at still being alive.

“It seems you were right all along, Miss Novak,” said Biggins very formally, realising that his chances of getting on friendlier terms with Anna had passed him by. “Your country is in the middle of a full-scale uprising and it appears that the Hungarian Army is on the side of the rebels.”

“I knew it. This is the beginning of a new life for the people of Hungary,” she cried, staring into the distance - and that fiery passion was in her eyes again. “Nothing can stop us now!”

She was smiling and sitting up in her bed, and she looked so happy, I didn’t want to spoil things for her. So I kept my mouth firmly shut and waited until I was alone with Biggins to voice the one question longing to be asked.

“What will the Russians do?”

The debt of nature

Once I got Anna back to her small apartment she was making a full recovery in no time at all, which was good – and bad. I say ‘good’ because I hoped it meant we’d be able occupy ourselves in fine style while the hullabaloo continued to rage outside, but it was also ‘bad’ because it probably meant she would be itching to be on the streets, playing her worthy part in the whole business. You see, in her eyes it was something she had been working for ever since she was a young girl. And now that it was all coming to a head, she didn’t want to be left out.

I did my best to incapacitate her, of course. Once she’d assured me that she had fully recuperated, I was joining her in bed and giving of my very best in the hope that she wouldn’t have the energy for any revolutionary shenanigans. It would have worked too, if it hadn’t been for her blasted friend Alex, who came hammering on the door just as we were dozing off into post-coital oblivion.

“Anna, Anna, come quickly!” he yelled, letting himself into the drawing room. “Are you decent?”

While we lay there in bed, as naked as Adam and Eve, I examined the sweat trickling down my lover’s back after our recent exertions and I was certain I knew the answer to that. But I kept quiet to save what was left of Anna’s modesty and she put on a robe to see what our noisy intruder wanted.

“You must come and see. They are knocking down Stalin’s statue - it’s wonderful!” yelled Alex enthusiastically.

When Anna rushed back into the bedroom to dress, I grudgingly donned my suit and joined her in the drawing room to see what all the blasted fuss was about. Alex was evidently surprised to see me and he acknowledged my presence by giving a silent nod. It was obvious he didn’t think I was good enough for his precious Anna, but he resisted saying anything just then.

I noticed he had a rifle slung over his shoulder and enough ammunition strapped around his waist to hold off an army. We followed him down the stairs and on to the street and we were amazed to see armoured cars making their way towards the centre of the city. My instinct would have been to duck back inside the safety of the building, but some people were already stepping in front of the convoy and trying to climb on to the vehicles.

The officer in charge attempted to fend them off by kicking at their hands as they gripped the sides of the armour-plating, but the ordinary soldiers held out their arms invitingly. It was then that someone rushed on to the street unfurling a national flag, and the soldiers hoisted it on to their vehicle with pride.

When we arrived at Stalin Square there was almost a party atmosphere and people were laughing as they pointed to a placard that had been placed across the bronze chest of the Russian dictator.

“Thomas, did you know that the Russians melted down all the statues of our kings and queens to make that monstrosity,” explained Anna, as we watched a medical student in a white coat climb the eyesore and place a rope around its neck.

An army officer approached the would-be hangman and I thought he was going to order him to get off the statue, but he simply explained to the trainee doctor that he would need a truck and cutting gear.

It was another hour before somebody returned with some oxy-acetylene and started to cut through the Soviet leader's bronze jack-boots. I found myself cursing Alex for dragging me out of a nice warm bed, just to watch some half-arsed vandalism. Apparently I wasn't the only one eager to be away, but for a totally different reason.

"This destruction is an important symbol of our defiance, but power and guns are the only things these communists understand. We must keep up the momentum. I know where we can get all the weapons we need," said Alex, clearly thirsty for revenge. "Are you armed?"

It took me a few seconds to cotton on that he was actually talking to me, and I struggled to hide my rising alarm when my bloodthirsty little Anna answered for me.

"He has a revolver and he fought in the Korean War against the communists," she said, volunteering my services without a second thought - the annoying strumpet.

"What do you have in mind?" I asked.

"The Kossuth Officers' School on Ulloi Road has its own arsenal."

"It'll be jam-packed with troops, surely," I pointed out quite reasonably, but he was adamant and he insisted that they'd hand over their weapons, just as their fellow soldiers at the radio station had done.

Apparently the barracks were a mile or two south west of the square, so I resigned myself to a long walk and hoped that by the time we reached our destination, the place would either have been ransacked or so well defended that Alex would simply give up. Whatever happened, I'd resolved that at the first sign of trouble I'd be long gone, cutting dirt all the way to the British legation like a rat up a drainpipe.

"They're smashing up the Free People building," cried Anna after we'd travelled a few blocks.

I looked across at a tall edifice in which every window seemed to be broken. Before I knew what was happening, my pretty revolutionary was pushing her way through the crowd and pulling aside the broken front doors, while Alex and I followed on like faithful lapdogs.

"What is this place?" I asked, unable to see what marked it out from all the other ravaged buildings in the city.

"It's the offices of the communist paper. I used to work here," she said, as she made her way up the stairs.

From what I could see, all of the plate-glass doors had been smashed and the corridors were carpeted in jagged pieces, threatening to mutilate the feet of anyone foolish enough to be walking around without sturdy footwear.

Amazingly the phones were still ringing, but I was relieved to see that any AVH guards had long since gone. There was a bookshop which the mob was busy setting fire to, while some of the more discerning souls grabbed hold of any tomes written by Marx, Lenin or Stalin and took them to a hastily made bonfire in the street for a ritual burning.

For some reason someone had brought a dead body from the recent battle outside the radio station, wrapped it in a national flag, and dumped it on the balcony. One of the more vocal revolutionaries had hold of a microphone and was shouting down to the people in the street. I couldn't understand much of what he was saying, but whatever it was the anger of the mob was being whipped up into a frenzy.

"Erika!" screamed Anna, as she spotted a pretty blonde woman, blood pouring down her arm where a piece of broken glass had lodged itself.

"Anna, what are you doing here?"

It was a question I could have very well asked myself, as I nervously looked around to see the mob getting more unruly by the second.

"We're on our way to the Kossuth Barracks," she explained. "Let's get you out of here."

Amen to that, I thought, as Alex helped the unfortunate woman to her feet, and I prayed that we'd be out of the damn place before the bloodthirsty devils turned on the staff. But my request for divine intervention wasn't answered because the girl had barely taken a step out of the room, when her head exploded and she paid the Debt of Nature, as a high-calibre bullet entered her skull. Alex drew back, stunned, and he looked down to see his shirt covered in the journalist's brains. I'd drawn my revolver, but it was impossible to tell where the shot had come from.

Anna was distraught, screaming like a wild animal, and Alex had to practically drag her from the gory mess. As we ran along the corridor and down the stairs to the street, I tried to keep hunched down, and somehow we made it out on to the road unharmed. I'd hoped that would have been the end of our ridiculous jaunt across the battle-scarred city but, once she'd spent a few minutes being consoled in Alex's muscular arms, the tough young rebel was ready to carry on.

We arrived at the Kossuth Officers' School about thirty minutes later, but by that time the commander had thrown a cordon around the building and he was warning the mob not to come any closer or he would order his men to open fire. I'd had enough by then and I was just about to say my goodbyes, when Alex broke in on my thoughts.

"This way!" he yelled, and we followed him to the rear of the building.

When we rounded the corner we saw a large group of men climbing on to the back of a lorry, and Alex ran up to them to find out what was going on. They were getting ready to ram through the rear entrance of the barracks and Alex climbed aboard, looking back at me expectantly and hoping I would join him. Well, you can imagine what I thought of that idea and I shook my head.

"One of us better stay with Anna," I insisted, standing well clear of the truck in case any reckless idiot tried to drag me along.

Alex didn't have time to argue and the truck sped off, smashing through the gates into a small courtyard. Suddenly machine-guns rang out as the sentries fired their weapons into the lorry. Anna put her hands up to her ears to stop the sound of the cries as bullets tore into the truck's passengers. As far as I could tell, the only men to survive were those at the rear of the truck. There were four of them, including Alex.

"Run, Alex!" screamed Anna, tears streaming down her face.

Alex and his fellow survivors needed no encouragement and they sprinted for the broken gates, which were now hanging off their hinges. It looked as if they were going to make it, being hidden as they were from the cordon by the bullet-ridden truck, but then a vicious-looking guard stepped out from his barricade to take aim at the escapees. He fired and two of the men went down.

“Do something!” screamed Anna hysterically.

It was some distance to Alex’s would-be assassin and I doubted whether my revolver would have the range. I was damned if I was going in to help the careless fool, so I knelt down, squinted, and took a bead on the guard, being careful to aim high. Alex risked taking a look back to see the guard taking aim and he continued to run, his eyes betraying the terror he felt as he waited for the inevitable bullet to hit him in the back.

If I missed, Alex was a goner for sure, so I fired three shots in quick succession and although I didn’t kill the guard, somehow I caught him in the leg and he went down screaming. Alex was at our side moments later with his lucky companion and the four of us ran around the corner to safety.

“Thomas, my friend,” bawled Alex, drawing me to his broad chest and knocking the wind out of me. “You saved my life!”

He kissed me on both cheeks before taking a step back to admire his saviour.

“I am forever in your debt. God willing, one day I will be able to repay you,” he said, giving me another hug for good measure.

I was just happy to be out of danger and the only thing I wanted right then was a plane ticket back to England, or any damn place - just as long as it was out of Hungary. So I told him it was nothing and that there was no need to feel indebted to me – all nonsense, of course, but he took it to heart and tears began to well up in his eyes as he embraced me for a third time.

I was inwardly cursing myself for getting into such a dangerous mess in the first place. But if I’d only known, the debt that Alex felt he owed me was going to be repaid sooner than I thought.

An orgy of destruction

When I left my fellow revolutionaries and headed off to the legation, I witnessed an unforgettable sight. A lorry towing Stalin's now decapitated statue drove along the Boulevard, chased by a jeering mob. It was only when I was finally left to my own thoughts that I began to ask myself: what had driven the people of Hungary to take to the streets and instigate such an orgy of destruction?

I decided it had to be revenge, plain and simple. There was hardly a single family which had not had at least one member dragged away in the middle of the night by AVH guards or KGB officers. The hatred of the regime had been building like a pressure cooker and it had only taken a spark to start the rebellion. The people were remembering all the empty promises that had been made and never fulfilled.

It was the middle of the night when I finally got back to the legation and I expected to have to wake the buggers up, but everyone was still milling around. I found Biggins sitting on his balcony, listening to the rattle of gunfire coming from the centre of the city.

"There you are," he said as I walked through the doorway. "Can you hear what's going on out there?"

"Can I hear? I've been right in the middle of the bloody..."

Before I had the opportunity to apprise Biggins of my latest escapades in revolutionary Budapest, I was interrupted by a vibration that eventually grew into a terrifying roar. We squinted in the dark at a huge shape rumbling along the street below.

"My God, it's a tank," cried Biggins in astonishment.

"Not only that, it's Russian," I said, noticing the low, round outline and the wide gun barrel. "It's a T-54 unless I'm very much mistaken."

"By George, you're right. Look, there's the Soviet emblem."

"By the look of the dirt splattered all over it, they've come a long way."

"Jesus, there's another ... and another," cursed Biggins uncharacteristically.

"This is war," he whispered, as we noticed four helmeted figures sitting on top of one of the tanks, clutching rifles.

"You could be right, Henry. The question is, are we stuck in the middle of it?"

* * *

As dawn approached, more and more Soviet troops arrived under the grey skies of Budapest. They appeared to be pouring in from the south-west and while some stayed on the bridges, others took up positions on the roads and around government buildings.

I witnessed all this because, instead of going to bed like sensible people, Biggins had insisted we drive through the streets in the early morning to see what was happening for ourselves. I think he wanted to be the first to report on the full scale of the Soviet involvement, but he was chasing a lost cause as far as I could see. I recalled that I'd spotted Western journalists roaming the streets the night before, but I wasn't to know that Hungary would soon be all but cut off from the outside world.

I was pleased to be in one of our legation cars, with the Union flag proudly draped across the bonnet. But if I'd thought that the arrival of the Russians was going to quieten things down, I couldn't have been more wrong. They were as trigger-happy as the protesters and they indiscriminately sprayed streets and buildings with machine-gun fire. I say 'indiscriminate' because they even strafed the Kossuth Barracks, which had stood up to Alex and his fellow insurgents the previous day.

"Well, that's the end of the uprising," announced Biggins confidently. "I'll report back to London that the Russians have no intention of letting the Hungarians gain their freedom. Khrushchev's no better than Stalin. What chance have civilians got against well-armed soldiers and tanks?"

Almost as if to answer Biggins' question, we spotted a Russian tank that had come to a halt while a crewman adjusted something on the side of the turret. One of the upper-storey windows in the building opposite opened and a rifle shot echoed through the streets. The soldier slumped over the side of the tank, a bullet in the centre of his chest.

We hunkered down in the car, waiting to see how the Soviets would react. But what we thought was the action of a lone gunman turned out to be a co-ordinated attack. Petrol bottles appeared from nowhere and smashed against the tank, causing it to erupt into flames. Two of the crewmen managed to clamber out and one of them ran straight towards us, his arms outstretched as if he was appealing for help. Suddenly he fell forward as a bullet hit him squarely in the back. He never got up again.

I turned to Biggins who was sitting in the driver's seat open-mouthed.

"Henry, what was that you were saying about civilians not being able to stand up against soldiers and tanks?"

A truckload of peashooters

I could hardly keep my eyes open from lack of sleep, but Biggins insisted on driving through the centre of the city so we could formulate some idea of the Russian threat. Down by the river there was a thick fog, which only added to the eerie stillness after the night's violence. As well as tanks there were assault guns, armoured cars and anti-tank guns that had obviously been brought in overnight.

During our cursory inspection of the city we spotted dozens of tanks, but even in the early hours it was clear that the people of Budapest weren't about to give up without a fight. Guns and ammunition were being dished out to men as they queued on street corners, and even women and children were tearing up paving stones to build barricades.

Finally Biggins agreed there was nothing more we could do and we headed back to the legation. All I wanted to do was climb into my bed and sleep for a week, but he had us listening to the radio. As we tried to tune into the station where Anna had been shot, all we could hear was some appalling chamber music which kept speeding up and slowing down until you thought it would stop.

Eventually an announcement came from the bunker at the defence ministry building, saying that the regime had formed the new Central Committee and that Nagy had been appointed prime minister. The broadcast warned that martial law had been declared and that anyone caught with illegal arms would be shot on sight.

It went on to announce that Soviet troops had entered the country (which was stating the bloody obvious, if you like), and it assured listeners that they were there by invitation. Almost as an afterthought, a curfew was imposed until two o'clock in the afternoon.

"So much for Nagy being the last hope of the Hungarian people," I said, voicing my lack of surprise.

I retired to bed and it had never looked more inviting. I was shocked to realise when I finally awoke that it was nightfall, and I assumed that Biggins must have headed for the land of nod too. If I'd known he was going to be a busy little boy and conjure up yet another one of his hare-brained schemes, I would have propped my eyelids open with matchsticks and kept him out of mischief. As it was, I awoke to find him full of the joys of spring and eager to share his new-laid plans.

"I contacted London to let them know what's been going on down here and they're in a hell of a tizzy," he said, before I'd even had time for a cup of tea. "I think the uprising has caught them rather on the hop."

"Surely, Henry, you should know how things work in Whitehall by now. Unless the oafs from Eton and Harrow get a memo in their pigeon holes, they assume everything is hunky-dory. God forbid one of them steps out of his nice comfortable office to see what's going on in the real world."

"You're a cynical bugger, Tom. Anyway, the PM's still smarting over this Suez disaster and the Americans have torn a strip off him at the United Nations. So he's eager to get back into their good books."

“Well, good luck to him, I say, but what’s all this got to do with us?” I asked, desperate to tuck into a late breakfast.

“When I reported our assessment of the situation here, Sir Anthony was so impressed with our latest intelligence that he passed it on to the CIA.”

“Tell Eden he’s welcome. If he wants to use our hard-earned knowledge to score points with the Yanks, that’s up to him. At least we’ve done our bit,” I said, optimistically as it turned out.

“Ah yes, well ... that’s why I wanted to see you, Tom,” he said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair and suddenly making me feel uneasy.

“Oh God, Henry, what have you got us into this time?” I asked, exasperated.

“The thing is, the Americans have been encouraging the insurgents here in Hungary, but they don’t want to send in troops and risk starting a war.”

“So, what do you expect? Dulles and his pals have been egging on naïve people like Anna all this time, knowing full well they can’t risk a nuclear war. And now that everything’s started to kick off they’re just going to sit back and watch the carnage,” I said, thoroughly sick of politicians, but I should have guessed that people like us were going to be the ones expected to pick up the pieces.

“No, the Americans want to help,” insisted Biggins pathetically. “They read our report about the number of Soviet tanks in Budapest and they realise the protesters can’t stop all of them with home-made petrol bombs.”

“They’re not daft, are they?” I said, wondering where all this was leading and fearing the worst.

“To help the revolutionaries, the CIA has shipped a truckload of bazookas into Austria. Now all they’ve got to do is get them into Hungary.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. It’s only a hop, skip and a jump over the border,” I said.

“President Eisenhower says he can’t risk involving American personnel. Imagine what the Russians would do if they found the Yanks supplying weapons to revolutionaries in a Warsaw Pact country.”

“Well, the bazookas will have to stay where they are then, won’t they?” I said, unable to see what Biggins was driving at.

“Ah, well, you see ... we’ve come up with a solution,” he said, staring at the carpet, and I knew that the hand of doom was waiting to take a swipe at me again.

“Let me guess. This solution wouldn’t involve *me* by any chance, would it?” I asked rhetorically.

“The PM explained to the president that he has people on the ground ready to get the job done, and Eisenhower has taken him up on his offer.”

“That’s just great,” I said, thoroughly browned off. “I’ve got to risk my neck delivering a truckload of pea-shooters, just so Eden can get back into the good books of the president.”

“It’s an order, I’m afraid,” he said, as if it was all out of our hands.

“I don’t suppose you had anything to do with it, Biggins. You didn’t by any chance volunteer my services just to earn Brownie points, did you?”

“Tom, how could you think such a thing?” he replied unconvincingly.

“What I don’t understand is how it makes any difference if *we* deliver the bloody things instead of the CIA. Surely the Russians will kick up just as much of a fuss if we’re caught delivering tank-busters instead of the Yanks.”

“Maybe, but I assured the PM we’re not going to get caught. The bazookas are already loaded on a Dakota near Vienna. All we have to do is drive up there and fly them in.”

“But that’s what I’m trying to say. The CIA has got its own pilots – why can’t one of their jockeys do the job?”

“Well, I explained that we know people on the inside,” he said, virtually admitting that it was all his idea.

“What? Don’t tell me you mean Anna and her bunch of journalists? A fat lot of good they’ll be.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he said smugly, sitting back and folding his arms with an infuriating grin across his fat face. “Miss Novak has been more than helpful. When I told her what we had in mind, she arranged a landing site for us on some farmland outside the city. Her people will be waiting for us when we land under the cover of darkness – simple.”

“Yes, you are,” I said, wondering how on earth he thought there was no risk involved.

All sorts of things could go wrong, I thought. The Hungarian Air Force might not take too kindly to an unscheduled flight into their country, for one thing. Even if we did manage to land in the dark on some farmer’s cow-field, could we rely on Anna’s shower to be there waiting? More to the point, were they trustworthy? We could well turn up, only to be greeted by a Russian welcoming committee. I gave up arguing, of course, knowing when my fate was truly signed, sealed and delivered. So I decided to change tack.

“Anna was all for it?” I asked.

“I’ll say! You know she’d do anything to teach these damn Soviets a lesson,” he replied, but then his face fell when he realised what was on my polluted mind.

“In that case, I’d better go and pay her a visit to iron out the details, and she can show me just how grateful she is.”

Talking of shit

When I finally got to Anna's little apartment, my plans for improving Anglo-Hungarian relations were scuppered because Alex had decided to stick to her like glue, insisting it was too dangerous for her to be travelling around Budapest alone. As they pored over maps and I handed them the radio we would use to signal when to light the beacons for our landing, I was inwardly cursing the big lug for spoiling my chance to get Anna between the sheets. If the muttonhead wanted to repay me for saving his life, I thought, why couldn't he just bugger off? As it turned out, if I'd known what was in store for me, I'd have been mighty grateful that he decided to stick around.

So, deprived of Anna's wonderful favours, I was eager to get reacquainted with Vienna's night life and make up for lost opportunities, but when Biggins and I arrived in the city, my fellow operative was all business, blast him. To top it all, our CIA contact at the airfield was an arrogant and cocky blighter called Roberts, who thought he knew everything and didn't see the need to listen to what anyone else had to say.

"Why the hell we've had to wait around with our thumbs up our ass for some God-damn limey to fly our bird a few miles over the border beats me," he protested by way of a greeting.

"It's a matter of avoiding the Hungarian Air Force," explained Biggins tactfully. "We have contacts in the country and we've arranged a safe landing site."

"Just make sure these tank-busters get to where they're supposed to go. The US of A has spent a lot of dough getting these babies over here," he told us, pulling up the waistband on his trousers before they slipped below his generous midriff.

"It shouldn't be a problem, as long as the plane is loaded correctly and we don't have any excess baggage tipping us off course," I said, patting his stomach.

"Why you limey son-of-a..." he roared, clenching his fists and ready to defend his honour, but Biggins stepped in.

"You'll have to forgive Captain Fletcher, Mr. Roberts. He has a rather unique sense of humour which the uninitiated often take the wrong way," he said, standing between us and giving me a disapproving look.

The CIA man simply scowled and walked out of the hangar, leaving us with the Dakota and its lethal cargo. Once we'd completed all the usual pre-flight checks, I radioed the tower, which was temporarily manned by Americans for our clandestine operation.

"The weather's closing in, Captain. Are you sure you don't want to delay your departure? It's really looking like shit out there," said the chap in the tower, ignoring the usual standard radio procedures like a typical Yank, and I could hear Roberts laughing in the background.

"No problem," I assured him confidently. "The RAF isn't put off by a little spot of rain. By the way, talking of shit, could you say goodbye to Mr. Roberts for us, there's a good chap."

As I pushed the throttles forward, it was a pleasure to hear our friend from the CIA screaming obscenities like someone with a firework up his arse.

As it happened, our amateur weather forecaster turned out to be right and we were buffeted from pillar to post on our short flight. Of course things weren't helped any by the fact that we had to fly as low as possible to avoid detection. Not that anyone would have been stupid enough to take a plane up to intercept us in such appalling conditions, even if we were discovered.

When we eventually approached the landing site, Biggins radioed the agreed signal and we both squinted down into the inky blackness below, looking for any sign of the beacons that were supposed to guide us to Anna's waiting revolutionaries. The expected landing lights failed to appear and we exchanged worried glances. The fuel level had been kept to a minimum so that we could deliver as many bazookas as possible, and we knew we wouldn't be able to loiter for too long if we were going to make it back to Austria.

Unknown to us, Alex and his band of insurgents were having the devil of a time trying to light their fires, what with the rain lashing down. Fortunately for all concerned, someone had the foresight to bring along extra bottles of petrol and managed to ignite the fires, in spite of the damp conditions.

As soon as we saw the glowing beacons appear behind our right wing, I turned the Dakota around and lined her up for the landing. Suspecting that the landing site was unlikely to resemble a bowling green, I put in full flaps and pulled back on the throttles to slow us down as much as possible. Fortunately we had a good headwind, which brought down our ground speed even further, and I was on the point of stalling as the field came up to meet us.

It was still one hell of a bumpy landing - not an ideal state of affairs when you have several tons of high explosive sitting in the cargo hold a few feet behind your head, I can tell you. We both breathed a huge sigh of relief when the Dakota finally came to a stop and I cut the engines.

There were a dozen or so of Anna's faithful followers on hand to load the waiting truck with our vital cargo, courtesy of the Central Intelligence Agency. Suffering from fever-lurk, I was damned if I was going to wallow in the rain and mud, lugging back-breaking bazookas in the dead of night. So I made up some nonsense about having to prepare the plane for the return trip and stayed in the dry warmth of the cockpit.

Biggins left the Dakota to give Anna a hand, the dirty old devil, while I helped myself to a relaxing cigarette and listened to the grunts and groans as everyone did their best to get the guns on board the truck. I was just congratulating myself on the perfect smoke ring, when I was awoken from my reverie by the sound of a gunshot.

I looked through the windshield and I could just make out a tall figure through the driving sheets of rain, armed with a pistol, and he was pointing it at our amateur gunrunners lined up against the truck. He called to me over his shoulder.

"Hey, you in the plane. Come on out and join the rest of these traitors where you belong," he said in English, which had me wondering if he knew who I was.

However well informed he might have been, he clearly hadn't thought things through, and I grabbed my revolver, making sure it was fully loaded before I headed for the door. My plan was simple, such as it was. The idiot was facing the others and I would simply shoot him in the back before emerging as the saviour of the hour.

Even so, if you're a coward like me you can't be too careful and I edged gingerly to the rear of the plane, trying to keep my breathing under control so that as soon as the unknown gunman came into view, I could get a clean shot. As I approached the door, I cocked the revolver and took careful aim. I was about to fire when a hand suddenly emerged from outside the Dakota and grabbed my wrist, smashing it against the fuselage so that the gun fell from my grasp and clattered to the floor.

I was pulled out of the plane and I landed on the wet ground to find a fierce-looking thug looming over me, pointing a pistol at my head. My assailant shouted something in Hungarian to his accomplice, who yelled back above the roar of the driving rain.

"Kill him, he is a British spy!"

He'd replied in English, no doubt to put the fear of God in me. If that was the case then he succeeded. I was about to scream for mercy, when who should beat me to it but my new friend Alex - the tough, burly revolutionary himself.

"No!" he yelled, and the gunman covering the rebels shot my rescuer as he lunged forward.

The bullet caught Alex in the shoulder, but the tough bugger continued on as if nothing had happened. He collided with his assassin and sent him crashing to the ground. The others scattered and I didn't wait for my own assailant to carry out his orders. While he watched the wounded Alex beat his comrade to a pulp, I kicked his legs out from under him.

He dropped his gun and crawled away, reaching into his jacket to bring out another sidearm. Oh God, I thought, this is it, but he pointed the bulbous revolver into the air and fired. What with my fear of being shot dead on the spot, I'd failed to recognise the weapon for what it was - a flare gun. A bright orange glow illuminated the sky, as a little parachute floated gently to the ground.

Two trucks appeared out of the darkness to deliver a band of AVH men, and a gun battle quickly ensued as our small band of insurgents retrieved their weapons to defend themselves. I was heading back to the Dakota before the first shots rang out and Biggins was doing the same. He reached into the plane and pulled down an unopened crate, smashing it on the ground to reveal its contents.

I didn't stick around to see if he knew how to load and fire the cumbersome contraption, but headed for the cockpit to start the engines. A bullet smashed through the window and I ducked my head down, cursing the starters as they slowly began to turn the propellers.

I breathed a sigh of relief when the engines finally sprang to life. Suddenly the whole sky lit up when a ball of flame erupted from one of the trucks, setting fire to the troops surrounding it. Clearly Biggins had mastered the intricacies of firing a bazooka at its target and I yelled for him to climb on board.

As I prepared to throttle up, I risked one last look back and saw Biggins and Anna helping the wounded Alex on to the plane. Before anyone had any bright ideas about

waiting around for the others, I pushed hard on the throttles and the Dakota inched forward. The problem was that the hastily constructed beacons had long since given up the ghost, but at least the burning truck provided enough illumination for the initial part of the take-off.

The rough ground threw the plane so violently that I thought every rivet would pop, and my legs ached as they strained against the rudder pedals, trying to keep the plane on a straight course. Eventually we left the chaos behind us, but we also lost the comforting illumination of the burning truck. As I kept the throttles open, I had to rely on a leap of faith that we wouldn't crash into an unseen obstacle on the ground.

I could have cried with relief when we finally gained enough speed for me to pull back on the control column and we rose into the air. I looked back to see the blood-soaked Alex lying on the floor of the plane while Anna tended to his wound. Biggins made his way to the cockpit as the wind whistled through the fresh bullet-holes in the fuselage. When he'd settled in the co-pilot's seat, I looked across as he wiped dirt from his eyes.

"Henry," I said, patting him on the shoulder for a job well done, "next time the chaps in the CIA want to make their own delivery, for God's sake let's not argue with them."

Written on our foreheads

I'd leaned the mixture and we managed to land back in Austria with a few thimblefuls of fuel to spare. Roberts may well have been an arsehole, but at least he was an *efficient* arsehole, and he'd arranged for Alex to be whisked off to a doctor on his company's payroll before the engines had finished turning over.

Of course the Yanks weren't exactly overjoyed that we'd lost their valuable shipment of weapons. When Anna asked Roberts if he could arrange to get us some more, I thought he was going to have a fit, but he simply spat on the ground and walked away, cursing under his breath.

I hadn't been in a better mood for months, and for once it wasn't down to the fact that I'd come through danger unharmed. You see, Alex was going to need a few days to recover, and the loyal Anna insisted on staying close by until he was well enough to return to Hungary.

Naturally I was on hand to make her stay in Vienna as pleasurable as possible, and that was when the good old CIA really came up trumps. Having failed to supply the protesters with military hardware, the Yanks decided to do what they do best – that is to say, throw wads of cash at the problem like so much Caution Money.

So I assured our American cousins that their suitcase of dollars would reach the revolutionaries, and promptly booked a suite at the best hotel in Vienna so that we could live *en pension*.

Anna was completely overawed by the opulence that the decadent West could provide, but it had the desired effect I'd been hoping for. And after a night on the randan we were soon quaffing champagne and caviar in the king-size bed as a prelude to the night's activities.

I'd have been happy to rough it in Vienna until the whole Hungarian mess was over, but Alex was inconsiderate enough to make a full recovery. The upshot was that Anna was eager to get back and help her fellow resistance fighters - the mad bint. So, two days later, the four of us were driving back across the border.

Biggins and I had thought we might have some trouble explaining how two of Hungary's citizens had left the country and were now returning in a British legion car, but not a bit of it. Apparently the few troops that were still working at the border had more important things on their mind, like trying to stop the disillusioned hordes fleeing to the West.

Mind you, I was more than surprised that Biggins and I *ever* managed to make it back and forth across the border. Our travel documents said we were passport control officers – the standard cover the unimaginative idiots in Whitehall used for their intelligence officers. We might as well have had 'spy' written on our foreheads in indelible ink.

Of course when we got back to the legion my good mood wasn't to last. Apparently the folks back in Downing Street were finally waking up to the fact that if they didn't do something soon, they might lose a golden opportunity to kick the Warsaw Pact where it hurt.

“We’ve been ordered to help the insurgents in any way we can,” said Biggins, interrupting my unpacking.

“You’ve got to be joking,” I said, not believing what I was hearing. “I don’t suppose they had anything to say about what the Russians will do if they discover two British Intelligence officers taking on the Soviet Army.”

Biggins looked at the floor and began clearing his throat – a sure sign he had more bad news.

“I think the words were: ‘We’ll deny any knowledge of you if you’re compromised.’”

“Well, that was nice of them,” I said, trying to keep my anger in check. “God forbid the pencil pushers should ever take responsibility for anything.”

“They can’t risk an international incident,” insisted Biggins, trying to put on a brave face.

“That’s rich. They don’t mind us putting our necks on the chopping block for a lost cause, but they’re not prepared to face the consequences if it all goes tits up.”

“Well, that’s the way it is – we’re just going to have to get on with the job as best we can,” said Biggins, as if he knew what he was talking about.

“It’s all academic anyway. Without the bazookas, the people can’t stand up to armed Soviet troops and tanks,” I said.

I didn’t know the Hungarians, did I?

All the help they can get

If I'd hoped that Biggins was going to call it a day and the whole mess would blow over by morning, I was sadly mistaken. I found him in the basement garage loading the boot of the car with all manner of weapons. There were two submachine-guns and a box of grenades tucked behind a large can of petrol, complete with empty bottles, rags, and matches. He'd even got hold of a couple of shotguns from somewhere and sawn off the barrels, so they could be hidden under our coats.

"I'm glad you're intending to keep a low profile," I said, unable to believe my eyes. "My God, Henry, where did you get all this stuff? Are you trying to start a war?"

"It *is* a war, my friend," he replied with the same gleam in his eye I'd seen so many times before, and it was a sure sign he'd really got the bit between his teeth. "The people of Hungary have had enough of communism and they have a right to choose their own government. If they're going to stand up against these Russian bullies, they'll need all the help they can get."

"That's all very well, Henry, but what do you have in mind? You can't just drive around in a British legation car looking for trouble."

"Of course not," he said testily. "I'm going to head over to Miss Novak's apartment and offer my services."

I bet you are, I thought, you randy little devil. He'd been drawn to the patriotic little madam from the first moment he'd laid eyes on her. I decided to play on his infatuation for the beautiful revolutionary.

"You know, Henry, I think Anna will be pleased to see you – she's got a soft spot for you, did you know that? I'll stand by the radio here and keep an eye on how things are developing."

I could see his little mind working overtime, trying to decide what to do. Eventually he shook his head.

"No, I think it would be best if we stick together and watch each other's backs."

Fine, I thought, if that's the way he wanted it. At the first sign of trouble he was welcome to watch mine - all the way to Austria.

* * *

As we drove into the centre of the city, I clung on to the hope that Anna and her band of desperados would have made themselves scarce. But as luck would have it, we met her coming out of her apartment building, together with a couple of students – a young lad and a skinny girl. As we pulled up, Biggins wound down his window and called her over.

"Where are you going, Miss Novak?" he asked.

"Mr. Biggins, I thought you might have left the country. Are you here to help us?"

"That depends on what you've got planned," I said quickly, not wanting to get into another gun battle.

“We’re going to the printing works to demand that they publish the Fourteen Points,” she said, as if that explained everything.⁴

“Get in, we’ll give you a lift,” said Biggins.

“Please, Mr. Biggins, after all we’ve been through together, call me Anna,” said our little Hiren.

“OK ... Anna, call me Henry,” he replied, and he blushed to such an alarming degree, you’d have sworn he was suffering from high blood pressure.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” I said, feeling somewhat peeved at being sidelined.

“What’s the matter, Thomas, are you getting jealous?” asked Anna playfully, leaning forward from the rear of the car to give me a peck on the cheek - and wiping the smile off Biggins’ face into the bargain.

I was almost beginning to feel sorry for him, when the pretty girl with the string bean figure spoke up for the first time.

“Are these the British men you told me about?” she asked, speaking English almost as faultlessly as Anna.

“Yes, they have been sent by their government to help us,” said Anna alarmingly, and I was about to put her straight, when the broomstick spoke again and almost caused Biggins to crash the car.

“I like Henry,” she said brazenly. “He has a strong, kind face. I would never feel frightened if he were with me.”

The car hit the kerb and the inane grin had come back on Biggins’ flushed face with a vengeance. I looked into the rear-view mirror to see the young boy staring out of the window. He looked so bored you’d have thought he was dead from the neck up. Anna was laughing.

“You’ll have to forgive my friend. Eva is a poet and a philosopher – she always says what she thinks.”

Eva’s pretty green eyes caught sight of me looking at her in the mirror and the confounded know-all was at it again.

“That is right, Anna, and I am also a good judge of character. This other foreigner, for instance,” she said, nodding towards me. “I am surprised you have made love to such a man.”

Biggins spluttered and over-steered as he took the corner. Somehow he recovered just in time.

“Hold on...” I began, but the cheeky mare didn’t mind me and carried on with her diatribe.

“I think he is a selfish man who doesn’t care about anyone but himself.”

Well, of all the nerve, I thought. I was about to tell Biggins to pull the car over so that the whole blasted lot of them could make their own way to print their drivel, when Anna unexpectedly leapt to my defence.

“That is not true, Eva,” she said, still laughing, and she patted me condescendingly on the shoulder. “Thomas has saved my life and Alex’s too. He is a brave pilot in the RAF. You care about me, don’t you, Thomas?”

“Of course I do,” I replied, trying to sound as convincing as possible. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t, would I?”

Biggins looked across at me incredulously, knowing full well that he’d had to shanghai me to join his pathetic mission. That was always the problem I had working with my old school chum - he knew me too well.

My relief at realising we’d finally reached the printing works was replaced with alarm when we heard the crackle of gunfire. Young men were attempting to rush the building and, as we watched from the street corner, two of the attackers were picked off by the police.

The lad with the sparkling personality in the back of the car suddenly threw his door open and ran towards the building, brandishing a revolver. It was hardly worth the effort because he’d barely taken a couple of steps when he too was shot and fell to the ground.

“Joseph!” screamed Eva, sliding across the rear seat to run after him.

I grabbed the pretty female Aristotle by the sleeve and held her back, before she was forced to face the far from metaphysical reality of what a bullet in the head would do to her philosophical brain.

“Biggins, get us the hell out of here!” I yelled.

Instead of heeding my sound advice, the hapless moron leapt from the car and ran to pull Joseph’s lifeless body back to the car. Bullets ricocheted off the pavement behind him and I leant across to the open window of the car so that I could fire back with my revolver. Not that my little pea-shooter would have done any good at that range, but I had to show willing – especially with our two revolutionary hotheads looking on.

Incredibly the foolhardy Joseph was still breathing, in spite of having grown a new hole in his chest. Eva helped Biggins manhandle him into the car and I took the wheel as I screamed for Biggins to get in. His arse had barely touched the seat when I pulled away, causing the tyres to screech until I was sure we were well out of harm’s way.

We eventually got our reckless hero to the hospital, which amazingly was still open for business. I was all for heading back to the legation, and I reckon I might have been able to persuade Biggins of the hopelessness of the situation, if darling little Eva hadn’t stuck her confounded oar in as we got back to the car.

“You won’t leave us, Henry, will you?” she asked, suddenly scared out of her wits after having seen one of her friends nearly killed in front of her eyes.

I looked to see Biggins’ reaction, and that was when I knew my fate was finally sealed once and for all. His next words caused my heart to sink.

“Of course I won’t, Eva. We’ll stand by you until the country finally belongs to the Hungarian people.”

Eva clutched Biggins’ hand and had him blushing all over again. Anna was smiling, no doubt at the knowledge that she’d just won a valuable and faithful ally to help fight her blasted cause.

I, on the other hand, was cursing pretty little manipulative students and gullible men in their thirties who’d lived sheltered lives and should have known better. *Amor conquers all*, I suppose. I kicked the wheel of the car when I was sure no one was looking and expressed my thoughts out loud.

“Hell’s bells and heavens to Betsy!”

He made his own nitro-glycerine in school

Our female tour guides wanted to be taken to the Parliament building to see if Nagy and the new members of the Committee had agreed to the demands of the revolutionaries. As we drove along, posters began appearing along the streets and we assumed that the mob attacking the printing works had somehow managed to win the day.

I followed Anna's directions and it wasn't long before we came to a railway bridge where some of the populace, mostly schoolboys as far as I could tell, were busy setting up a barricade. I stopped the car a few yards away and it was just as well that I did, because moments later they were toppling a railway truck down the embankment on to the road.

Anna ran over to find out what they were up to and I noticed that a few older men had joined the youths. They were armed with rifles and machine-guns, and they took up positions behind the barricade. Anna spoke to one of the boys and reported back.

"Two Russian tanks are heading this way. They are going to try and stop them."

Well, good luck to one and all, I thought, I'm getting in the car and heading home, but Biggins had already snatched the keys from my hand and was opening the boot. He came back laden with his precious petrol bomb kit and proudly offered it to the youngsters. Some of the boys grabbed the presents enthusiastically, but one lad shook his head and pointed to a large container at the side of the road, saying a few words in Hungarian.

"He says he has something much better than petrol," explained Anna. "He has made his own nitro-glycerine in the school laboratory."

If I stared open-mouthed, do you wonder? There he was, a spotty youth barely out of shorts, preparing to take on the might of the Soviet Army with his home-made chemistry kit. It beggared belief, but it's true. Biggins continued to do his bit for world peace by handing over some of our grenades to the youngsters, explaining how to use them. Stone me, doesn't it make you proud to be British?

I helped myself to a grenade and went back for my machine-gun. Even Anna and Eva managed to get hold of a couple of rifles from somewhere. While Biggins was busy training up his army of children, I'd spotted a likely place up on the embankment behind the wall of the railway bridge and I headed for it, deciding that good cover and a belvedere were the order of the day. We didn't have to wait long and the street soon vibrated with a deep rumbling sound as the Russian tanks rounded the corner.

"Fire!" yelled one of the older men, and guns started rattling from every direction.

The lead tank fired a shell at the barricade, but it missed and hit the bridge, sending bricks and masonry flying among the crowd. The teenager with the do-it-yourself bomb scored a direct hit against the tank and it began to burn fiercely. A Russian soldier levered himself out of the turret, but he was immediately peppered with bullets and slumped to the ground.

Some of the foolhardy youngsters came out from behind the barricade and rushed forward to spit on him. In their excitement, they'd forgotten about the other tank which had pulled around the flaming wreck, and it opened fire with its machine-gun.

Two of the schoolboys were riddled with bullets and fell to the ground, destined never to complete the remainder of their education. I pulled the pin on my grenade and lobbed it at the tank, aiming to let it roll beneath its soft under-belly. I missed, but it had the desired effect of buckling the tank's tracks, rendering it immobile.

Unable to get out of harm's way, it caught fire when the mob threw more petrol bombs, but this time no one ventured out. Either they were already incapacitated, or they preferred to boil to death rather than face a hail of bullets.

With the small battle over, Biggins and our two delicate flowers of the Revolution had lost interest in the proceedings, so we got back into the car and headed for Parliament Square.

Debris littered the roads and we parked the car before heading on foot towards the sounds of chanting. The girls were still clutching their rifles, but Biggins and I thought it would be better if we at least *looked* like innocent bystanders, so we wore our coats with the shotguns surreptitiously tucked underneath.

To my amazement thousands of people were still crammed in front of the government building. I was just beginning to think that there might be safety in numbers, when a motorcyclist turned up to say that yet more Soviet tanks were approaching down Fehervari Road, and the construction of barricades began all over again.

Someone had thought to bring barrels filled with petrol, and they rolled them out into the middle of the road. When they were lit, the tarmac seemed to explode and the lead tank had to halt to avoid ending up in a pool of fire. There must have been a dozen or so other tanks following on behind, but in their panic they rammed each other to the sound of screeching metal.

"More tanks!" screamed a young boy who could have been no more than ten years old.

Another convoy rattled past from the other side of the square, followed by three black limousines, and the occupants opened fire on the crowd. Yet more tanks and armoured vehicles approached from the direction of Kossuth Bridge, and I thought about escaping all the madness and running to the American legation, which I knew was close by.

Before I had time to act on the thought, bullets slashed the tyres of a personnel carrier, bringing it to a halt, and a Russian soldier tried to fire its large machine-gun, but he was shot dead. A youngster threw a petrol bomb which failed to ignite, but a man who looked old enough to be knocking on the doors of the mortuary rushed forward and lit it with a match.

The hatches on the carrier crashed open and Russians in steel helmets threw themselves out, only to be savaged by the crowd. A man in the overalls of a factory worker had the foresight to remove the machine-gun from the burning wreckage and he set it up at one of the makeshift barricades.

More petrol bombs were thrown, and incredibly someone had even managed to get hold of an anti-tank weapon. It was only then that I truly realised what a difference our planeload of bazookas could have made. If the courage of the people in Parliament Square was anything to go by, in the right hands those American weapons could have wiped out every tank in Budapest.

As it was, the Russians were struggling to manoeuvre their vehicles in the narrow streets, and when more and more of them were set on fire, the smell of burning flesh became almost overpowering. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. There were students, young workers and even schoolchildren, all acting like a miscellaneous band of Klepts, attacking soldiers as if they didn't care whether they lived or died.

In spite of the foolhardiness of the Hungarian youth, Russian tanks were digging in. They stood astride every intersection, and although rebels were firing from the rooftops, the Russians were shooting back, smashing windows and puncturing the brickwork. In spite of the huge number of defiant people all around us, I couldn't stop the terrible feeling of dread that threatened to engulf me.

I had good reason. The killing was only just beginning.

A wooden kimono

I thought we might all be goners there and then. But now I have to tell you about one of the most incredible sights I've ever seen in my life - and even though it unfolded before my very eyes, I still find it hard to believe it ever happened.

As we stood there facing each other, demonstrators on one side and Russian tanks on the other, an eerie quiet descended over the square. The crowd surged forward and the people at the front had little choice but to climb up on the tanks or risk being trampled underfoot. A teenager led the way, and to everyone's amazement he planted a flag in the muzzle of the gun.

Following his lead, students started to bang on the closed hatches and yelled at the men inside to show themselves. I held my breath, waiting for the bursts of gunfire I felt were sure to follow. It was then that the miracle happened, and it had us staring in disbelief.

Across the square ripples of laughter burst out among the crowd before it fell silent, as if everyone was waiting to see what happened next. A hatch on one of the leading tanks suddenly flew open and a Russian officer tentatively poked his head out.

Many Hungarians had learnt Russian in school or during captivity in Soviet prison camps, and they began to ask the Russian lieutenant why he was in Hungary.

Before we knew what was happening, *all* of the Russian soldiers were clambering out of their vehicles to meet the crowd. As if that weren't strange enough, demonstrators and Soviet troops began to hug one another and some even exchanged caps. One soldier climbed down from his tank, took hold of one of the Hungarian flags from a demonstrator, and placed it proudly on his tank.

It might be the cynic in me, but I asked myself what *I* would have done if I'd found myself surrounded by a hostile crowd that suddenly offered an olive branch? You can be sure I would have been playing the part of their new best friend and cursing my commanders for sending me to fight such wonderful people – but that's just me.

When the people explained they weren't fascists but Hungarian workers, the soldiers even began to fraternise with the youngsters, and it would have taken a hard-nosed devil to say the displays of friendship weren't genuine.

Eventually an officer must have issued an order, because the engines of the tanks roared into life, sending clouds of dust into the air as they lumbered off in the direction of the railway station. Some of the demonstrators fell in behind them, creating the amazing spectacle of a procession of Hungarian citizens led by Soviet tanks.

"The soldiers are with us," cried Anna. "Nothing can stop us now and Hungary can finally be free."

I'd noticed that some of the tanks had ominously stayed behind and more were arriving on the other side of the square, so I didn't share my pretty rebel's sense of optimism.

I've said it before, but it's strange how a moment in history can be triggered by an insignificant event or a tragic misunderstanding. That bright autumn day in Parliament Square was a case in point.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, the shooting of weapons could be heard and the guns of the tanks opened up in response. All around us people started to scream and some headed for the massive doors at the front of the parliament building, but the guards kept them firmly shut. The men on the outposts must have thought the mob was trying to storm the building, and they opened fire into the crowd. That was when the armoured vehicles moved off, throwing the bewildered protestors on to the ground.

The four of us were in the centre of the square when the shooting started and I was looking for a way out, when the tanks to our rear began to fire again. As we watched, we could actually see the shells pass overhead and land on the other side of the square.

“What the hell are they doing?” cried Biggins.

I was about to say that it should have been bloody obvious, but when I looked to where he was pointing I shared his disbelief. For there was a Russian tank with smoke leaping from its burnt-out turret, having been hit by a Soviet shell.

In war such things happen at the best of times, but in the confusion of the city streets it was just a matter of time before someone was killed by a member of their own side.

More shells burst overhead and I led our bewildered foursome away from the firing until we were at the edge of the square.

When the panic finally subsided, we looked back and all that remained were a few armoured vehicles and the dead and wounded. The bodies were contorted at hideous angles, but for some reason the one vision that stays with me was of a woman in an elegant coat, her lifeless eyes staring up at the sky while she still clutched her handbag.

The shelling finally stopped and I could see the Russian soldiers milling around their tanks, looking as dazed as the demonstrators. Suddenly an armoured troop carrier rolled out of a side-street full of Hungarian troops. Two of them manned a machine-gun and they began to spray bullets into the Soviet troops at point-blank range. They’d clearly witnessed what had happened and, mistake or not, they wanted their revenge.

“Get down!” I yelled, and the four of us headed for the gutter.

Bullets smashed into the wall behind us and from somewhere I heard a grenade explode.

“Let’s get out of here,” cried Biggins, and for once I agreed with him.

There must have been a dozen of us running for the shelter of a nearby building, and it looked as though we were going to make it, until four Russian soldiers emerged from the doorway and began firing.

The three men taking the lead went down with the first volley and I saw Eva stumble as a ricochet caught her in the leg. That was when Biggins turned into a man possessed, desperate to avenge his St Cecilia.

He brought his shotgun up and fired, sending two of the Russians flying back against the wall, their torsos sprayed with blood. The other two turned their guns on the madman in their midst, but Biggins had dropped his shotgun and was already reaching for the revolver in his shoulder holster. I realised he wasn’t going to make it in time and I tried to take aim with my own shotgun, but there were too many people in the way.

Two shots rang out and I felt sure that Biggins was a candidate for a wooden kimono, but I looked across to see the remarkable sight of Anna standing as calmly as our very own

Mary Ambree, with her rifle aimed in the direction of the Russians. Amazingly she'd dispatched Biggins' would-be assassins with two well-placed shots.

When we all reached the building and sheltered in its hallway, Biggins was gasping for breath and thanking Anna for saving his life. She didn't hear him because she was busy tending to Eva's wounded leg.

"Isn't she marvellous, Henry?" I said, smiling with relief at just being alive. "I taught her everything she knows."

* * *

Biggins' new friend, Eva, had survived - but she was one of the lucky ones. Several Western reporters at the time put the total death toll at hundreds. I'll leave the body counting to those who go in for that sort of thing, but I'm here to tell you that I saw at least a dozen trucks loaded with corpses.

Of course it wasn't the exact number that really mattered to the mob. It was the fact that the massacre, like some sort of ghastly Peterloo, had happened at all.

We made our way to the edge of the Parliament building and I was just about to point the way to our car, when a door burst open and a motley group of middle-aged men emerged on to the street. One of them cried out.

"Let's go! Go! Go!"

"My God," cried Anna, looking on in total disbelief, "that is Ernest Gero."

Several black limousines were waiting with their engines running to whisk the group of men away. Clearly the Party leadership had decided to get out before the building was stormed by the mob, and what I overheard next confirmed my suspicions.

"There is no need to panic, sir," said a calm-looking figure following on behind.

"That is easy for you to say, Mezo. Do you want the mob out there to lynch me?" replied Gero, his voice betraying his fear.⁵

A few others passed by and then I saw a face that I recognised and Anna had spotted him too. I still remembered the round, kindly visage, even though the owner was now chomping on a fat cigar, trailing smoke behind him.

"Mr. Nagy?" yelled Anna excitedly, unable to believe what she was seeing. "Where are you going?"

"Miss Novak, what a surprise to see you here. Do not trouble yourself. The Committee is adjourning for a short while, but we will reconvene very soon," he explained in his habitual slow and easy manner.

He walked on a little further before he spotted Eva with a blood-soaked bandage on her leg.

"Oh dear, my child. Whatever has happened to you?" he asked innocently.

"There has been shooting outside," said Anna, making the understatement of the year.

"Surely not," he said, and I saw Anna's eyes light up with the fiery passion that always took hold of her when her cause was threatened.

“Mr. Nagy, there are three hundred dead in Parliament Square. Your government is steeped in the blood of innocent people!”

Nagy looked visibly shaken, but before he found the words to reply, another man appeared with a revolver in his hand and led the bewildered Party member to one of the cars. Anna watched him leave and it was the first time I’d seen her looking vulnerable.

She noticed us watching her and she bit her lip. Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the look of despair left her, to be replaced by a firm determination which said she wasn’t going to be beaten. I reckon that if the spineless members of the Committee could have summoned up half the courage of the pretty Miss Novak, the Soviets might have thought twice about invading the country.

The question was, would Nagy listen to people like Anna and stand up against the Soviets? And if he did, could he win?

The end justifies the means

Biggins tried to persuade our female companions to come back with us to the legation to rest for a few hours. After our recent excitement we were all exhausted and Eva still needed medical attention. Naturally I required no such encouragement and before anyone had a chance to disagree with the suggestion, I was leading our weary party back to the car.

Amazingly our vehicle was in one piece and we were able to leave the scene of utter devastation behind us. When we arrived at the legation a huge crowd had gathered outside, calling for guns and asking why the United Nations wasn't sending in troops. So I drove round to the rear of the building to avoid all the commotion.

As we turned the corner, a tan-coloured saloon swerved in front of us and mounted the pavement. A woman and a young boy jumped out of the way to avoid being pinned against the wall, and two men jumped out and disappeared into a courtyard.

"That's an AVH car!" screamed Anna. "I'd recognise those bastards anywhere!"

A second car pulled up behind the first and four men got out to run after the first two. Before I could stop her, Anna leapt from the car and ran to the entrance of the courtyard. She was preparing to rush in, but I caught up with her and held her back.

"Don't worry," she said, gently pulling my hand from hers, "I only want to make sure those sadists don't get away."

We stood at the entrance and at the far end of the courtyard we could see the AVH men being grabbed by their pursuers. The rebels took hold of their victims by the arms and smashed their heads against the wall like human battering rams. It must have gone on for several minutes and it was an uncomfortable sight. Part of me wanted to walk away, but I remained with Anna to see what happened.

Eventually the four men let their victims drop to the ground like useless rag dolls. They walked towards us, causing me to take a step back and drop my hand within easy reach of my revolver.

"Did you kill them?" asked Anna.

"Yes," answered the first man.

It wasn't so much the flagrant brutality that had shocked me, as the unemotional way it had been executed. *The end justifies the means*, no doubt. I won't pretend I wasn't happy to see two of Rakosi's torturers cancelled out, but I'd witnessed enough murder and mayhem for one day, and I turned to Anna to suggest it was time to leave. But when I saw my companion I simply stood there, totally stunned.

In the fading light she looked as beautiful as she had ever done. But, to my horror, she was smiling.

* * *

Once inside the legation I can't say that things improved a great deal. Some of the demonstrators had managed to get in and they were giving our minister a rough time.⁶

“The Soviets claim they are here under the terms of the Warsaw Pact!” yelled one of the more articulate men in the group. “But they are only supposed to help if we are attacked from *outside*. You must tell the United Nations what the Russians are doing.”

“Please, believe me,” insisted the minister, the stress of the last few days etched on every line of his face, “I am doing my utmost to ensure my government is informed of events.”

He didn’t tell them we had our own transmitter, but they had probably worked it out for themselves. He signalled for us to follow him to his office and I directed Anna and her friend to my room where they could rest.

“You were actually in Parliament Square when the massacre took place?” asked the minister incredulously. “Are the Hungarians exaggerating?”

“No, sir. In fact we ended up in a bit of a gun battle ourselves,” said Biggins carelessly.

“Do you mind explaining to me what two members of Her Majesty’s Secret Intelligence Service are doing gallivanting all over the city and fighting on the side of the rebels?” asked the minister, clearly worried that we might cause problems for the legation.

“I’m afraid we’re under orders, sir,” explained Biggins, trying to be tactful and not wanting to tell the nosy stickybeak it was none of his business.

The minister gave an indignant snort and waved us away. That suited me just fine, as I pictured the delectable Anna waiting for me in my bedroom. Biggins must have been thinking along the same lines because he was hot on my heels as we made our way through the throng in the reception hall.

“Are you English?” asked a woman, grabbing my arm as we worked our way through the demonstrators.

“Yes,” I replied, continuing to push ahead.

“Are you married?” she yelled. “I’ve got a beautiful daughter. Take her. Marry her. She’s got to get out of here.”

As much as I was tempted, we adjourned to my room to find it empty, save for a note on the bed.

To the UN – This is written in the name of the Hungarian youth, which pleads with you while fighting unsuccessfully under this Red terror – please help us. Without help and more guns and ammunition we can’t win but we’re going to keep fighting. Please pray for us.

Hungarian Fighting Youth Organisation.

Another scrap of paper instructed Biggins to pass the note on to the minister and it was signed by our pretty duo. I tore it up in frustration and Biggins picked up the declaration before I could destroy that too.

“I’ll get this to the minister and then we can find the girls,” he announced calmly.

“What?” I cried, unable to believe what I was hearing.

“They could be in danger,” he said pathetically.

“I wouldn’t be surprised, and who’s to blame for that? We’re not their babysitters, for goodness sake.”

“Fletcher, I can’t believe you can be so unfeeling. You and Anna have ... I mean ...”

It was a pleasure to see the hypocritical little Christian choke on his words. I’d seen him kill and maim for his country, but he couldn’t bring himself to say out loud what he suspected Anna and I had been up to during our brief encounters. And now he was becoming all holier-than-thou, just because he was randier than a ferret and wanted to have his wicked way with his *own* Amelia.

“We don’t even know where they are,” I said, trying to inject some logic into the argument.

“Eva said something about the rebels making their headquarters in the Corvin cinema. I bet they’ve headed there.”

“What will you do if you find them- help them take on the whole Soviet Army?” I asked, totally exasperated.

“If that’s what it takes. Besides, we have orders to assist the rebels in any way we can.”

“Whoever thought that one up should be in a padded cell, and I suggest you make a reservation right along with him.”

“I think there’s something you’ve forgotten, Captain,” said Biggins, suddenly becoming very formal. “For better or worse, you are a member of Her Majesty’s Secret Intelligence Service and you have a duty to carry out your government’s orders.”

I started to interrupt but he continued to drone on.

“Of course if you would like to resign, I’m sure we can re-open the case against you for burning that poor farmer’s house to the ground. Then you can swap Hungary for a nice prison cell back in England.”

My God, I thought, he must really have the hots for this tart – he hadn’t threatened me like that for years. I doubted very much whether he meant it, or indeed if there would still be a case against me – not after my ‘selfless’ service in Berlin and Korea. All the same, I didn’t fancy putting it to the test, so I decided I’d best grit my teeth and swallow the medicine.

“I’ve got an idea, Henry. Why don’t we pop along to this little cinema of yours and see if we can be of any help. What do you say?”

I'm going out alone

Counter to all of his bluster, Biggins must have been as worn out as me and he deigned to let us get a few hours sleep before we headed out. As the man said, life is one long process of getting tired.

The sun rose to reveal the battle-scarred city in all its glory and we drove through the streets to see groups of young men, armed with rifles and machine-guns, walking resolutely to their destination. Some even dashed across the city on motorcycles in search of the fight.

Danger appeared to lurk on every corner and my frayed nerves threatened to snap. As we slowly drove through the rubble-strewn streets, I couldn't help but notice the strange sights that greeted us through many of the broken shop windows.

I saw clothes, shoes, coffee, sugar and even expensive watches and silver trays lying untouched in shop fronts, open to the elements for all to see. As we waited on one corner for an armoured vehicle to pass, I spotted two slices of cake missing from a tray and a five florin coin was in their place.

We pressed on and came to another emporium where everything had gone. Ah, I thought, someone's succumbed to the five-finger discount – but I was dead wrong. A note had been torn from an exercise book and placed amongst the debris. It read: "All goods left with the janitor. We don't loot." And all this was at a time, remember, when most people were on a Lessian diet and only had enough provisions to survive for a day or two.

When, a few years later, I met a Russian general who claimed that the insurgents were nothing but a bunch of fascists and gangsters bent on looting, I recalled the moment when I'd seen a suitcase full of money, carefully placed in the centre of a shop window that had been accidentally damaged by the rebels.

How did the protesters survive, I hear you ask? It's a good question and the answer is that it was all down to their fellow supporters in the rest of the country. Lorries brought in bread, sacks of flour, turnips, beetroot and milk – in fact all manner of belly timber was brought in from the surrounding farms, and the people patiently queued for everything.

"Bread for the people of Budapest from the citizens of Kormend. We hope it helps you in your struggle, comrade," said a man, handing over his offering.

"We thank you, friend," said the recipient, "but I'm not a comrade any longer. That word has ceased to exist."

Eventually we reached the Corvin Passage, just across from Ulloi Road. The cinema itself was situated in a pear-shaped courtyard, built on a raised island at the centre. Hundreds of rebels were swarming in and out of the building and there were even Hungarian soldiers mingling amongst them. Two anti-tank guns had been positioned so they could be fired through the Passage at any passing Soviet vehicles.

The whole area was a mess and we'd been forced to footslog the last couple of blocks. We'd almost made it into the cinema when a Russian tank hurtled past and one of the rebel guns fired, but it missed and only succeeded in shelling the buildings on the other side of the road.

We managed to make it inside, only to find that chaos reigned there too. Older men were instructing their younger counterparts in the art of fighting like partisans – tactics they had picked up from countless Russian war films which had illustrated every aspect of guerrilla warfare. In the corner of one room, a young lad had set up a laboratory where he was carefully pouring home-made nitro-glycerine into empty bottles.

It began to look as if we were on a wild goose chase and we were about to abandon our search, when Alex appeared at the top of the stairs, closely followed by our two revolutionary lovelies.

“Henry, you came to find me,” squealed Eva, putting a stupid smile on Biggins’ face.

“We thought we might be able to help,” he said, daring to kiss her on the cheek, the little Casanova.

“There are reports that a Russian column of men and vehicles has entered the city and is heading this way,” said Alex, clearly having no time for loving reunions. “We are going to try and stop them.”

You can imagine what I thought about that, but Biggins was all for it, the clot, and we joined the rebels in one of their trucks before they headed off down the road. We only got as far as the next intersection when we were forced to stop. A Russian self-propelled gun with one of its tracks blown off was blocking the road, and Soviet troops traipsed behind in a long line.

We soon realised that this was the front of the convoy itself and we followed the rebels, as they headed for the shelter of the buildings on either side of the road. Biggins was intent on sticking close to his Hungarian temptress and the five of us ran up the stairs to a large office on the third floor, where there was a long row of windows looking down on to the road below. The girls still had their rifles and Alex, like us, was armed with a machine-gun.

The Russians eventually managed to heave the wreckage to the side of the road and continued forward. I thought that the undisciplined rebels might be able to loose off a few shots and the Russians would retaliate, but I was in for a shock. The Soviets had nearly made it along the entire length of the street before the insurgents let rip. A withering fire rained down on the surprised troops, slaughtering them where they stood.

Soon only two tanks in the middle of the column returned fire, but they were put out of action when rebels clambered up and smashed bottles full of nitro-glycerine into their engine gratings, setting them on fire. As the soldiers climbed out to escape the inferno, I prepared to do my bit by taking a shot, but my finger hadn’t even reached the trigger when the helpless Russians were mown down before they’d had time to jump from their vehicles.

When we joined our fellow ambushers down on the street, it was clear that we would have to abandon the trucks and we made our way on foot past the carnage we had just created. As we passed the Soviet troops, now reduced to nothing but cold meat, I saw rebels, some of them barely into their teens, helping themselves to the soldiers’ weapons. Clearly there weren’t enough to go round and occasionally a fight would break out.

The children were fearless, I have to say, and I was to have a taste of their courage soon enough. We’d barely left the wreckage of the unlucky convoy behind, when a huge 75-ton tank loomed into view. A little girl, who could have been no more than thirteen years old,

ran up and hurled a bottle of petrol at it. The Russians started shooting, but she stood her ground and threw *two more* bottles, and the tank exploded in a huge ball of flame.

As we continued, the road began to widen out and we were met by a terrifying sight. A Soviet tank column was rolling north but it was too far away for us to throw petrol bombs. What's more, these were T-34s and a grenade wouldn't have even made a scratch. As far as I could see, there was no way the rebels would be able to stop them.

A young lad standing next to me was staring at them breathlessly. I watched him as he feverishly looked back and forth, searching for a solution as if it was some sort of game. He ran off and returned with a string of six grenades tied together.

"I'm going out alone!" he yelled, and before anyone could stop him, he was running after one of the tanks.

He quickly pulled the pins on each grenade and managed to throw the cluster of pineapples right on top of the tank, but they rolled off and crashed to the ground.

"Run!" we cried, knowing that it was only a matter of seconds before they exploded.

He was crying with frustration and, with tears streaming down his face, he picked up his deadly cargo and climbed on to the tank. He clung to the turret, the grenades pressed between his young body and the tank.

"No!" cried Anna, as we looked on in horror.

Seconds ticked away and seemed to last a lifetime. I suppose, in a sense, they did. For when the explosion filled the sky, the tank was destroyed, taking the young boy with it.

I've seen more than my fair share of human life senselessly wasted, but few memories come close to what I witnessed that October day in Budapest. Anna was on her knees, crying for the stricken youth, and her tear-filled eyes looked up at me. In my fevered imagination it felt as though she was pleading for me to avenge the death of the boy, but what could we do? The other tanks had halted, and we might as well have been armed with catapults for all the good our machine-guns would have been against them.

Then something incredible happened. The crew of the second tank clearly didn't want to end up victims of a suicidal attack like their comrades, so they climbed out and ran into a side-street. Another young lad ran towards the empty vehicle, a can of petrol in his hands.

"Come on," cried Biggins, following the youth and beckoning me to follow.

Alex was busy preparing more petrol bombs and the girls stared at me, as I stood there hesitating. I don't know what made me chase after the idiot. Perhaps it was the accusing look Anna gave me when I faltered. Whatever the reason, moments later I was climbing the empty Soviet monstrosity behind my reckless colleague.

"Wait, I've got a better idea," said Biggins to the lad, who was preparing to pour petrol into the open hatch.

Clearly the boy didn't speak English and he was cursing Biggins, who had snatched the can from his hands before climbing into the tank. He beckoned me inside and closed the hatch behind us.

"Now what?" I asked, feeling like I was in Hob's Pound.

"*You're* a pilot – surely you can figure out how to drive one of these," he said as I stared back at him, utterly lost for words. "Get her moving while I work out how to fire the gun."

I was tempted to run for it, but Biggins was blocking the hatch and a fist fight was out of the question within the cramped confines of the tank. So I took the driver's seat as instructed and tried to make out the controls.

As it turned out it was pretty straightforward. There were two levers – one for each of the tracks. If you pushed them forward, the tracks advanced, and if you pulled them back, they reversed. By combining the two, you could pretty well make the tank go wherever you wanted. Meanwhile Biggins had discovered how to rotate the turret and he'd found the aiming sight for the gun.

"It's already loaded," he announced. "I don't think the other tanks have spotted us. See if you can line her up and I'll fire at the nearest tank over there."

He was pointing though a slit in front of the driver's seat, and there was nothing for it but to do as he said.

"That's it, stop!" he yelled.

The tank rocked as the shell left the barrel and Biggins let out a whoop of triumph.

"My God, Henry, how the hell did you do that?" I asked, admiring his handiwork.

The second tank was burning nicely and we could hear faint cheers ringing out behind us. Unfortunately we'd become so engrossed in the technical difficulties of operating our steel fortress, that it was only then we noticed the other tanks lining up to deal with the traitor in their midst.

"Uh-oh," I said, and I pushed the left lever forward until we'd made a one hundred and eighty degree turn.

Shells smashed into the building in front of us, as I slammed both levers forward and willed the tank to move.

"What are you doing?" asked Biggins like an idiot.

"Getting away!" I yelled, trying to be heard above the roar of the engine.

"Where to?"

"Through that alleyway," I cried, nodding in the direction of my proposed escape route.

"You mean the one that's *clearly* too narrow for the tank?"

I didn't get the chance to answer his question because suddenly we were deafened by the ear-splitting sound of metal smashing into masonry. The tank lurched and threatened to throw us from our seats, but somehow it kept moving and I made sure the levers stayed firmly forward. Eventually we ground to a halt and Biggins opened the hatch to climb out, closely followed by the RAF's finest tank driver.

We looked back to see the rear of the machine covered in rubble and one of our pursuers was lining up to fire. We clambered down and ran to the other end of the alleyway, emerging into a street parallel to the one we'd just left. The tank exploded behind us, covering England's top operatives in dust and smoke. We looked at one another, a pair of ghostly apparitions struggling for breath, barely able to believe we were still alive.

"Well," I said, as a crowd gathered around us, wondering who had demolished the neighbourhood with their tank, "driving those things is a piece of cake. Would you believe I've never had a lesson?"

A turnip sandwich

Of course the heroic Biggins wasn't about to call it a day and he was eager to get back to his new love in her fetching rebel arm-band. There was no way for us to reach the street from which we'd just escaped except by climbing through the rubble of the demolished alleyway, but even Biggins wasn't crazy enough to try that. So we were forced to take a detour until we ended up back where we'd started at the Corvin Passage.

The insurgents had sensibly chosen to retreat to their headquarters too, and Biggins was practically jumping for joy when he spotted Eva alive and well. I was rather more excited by the sight of the tank graveyard that littered the approach to the cinema. How the rebels had managed to inflict such damage with home-made bombs was beyond me.

Unfortunately the battle was far from over and the remaining tanks were firing at any window where they thought a gunman might be hiding. Panes of glass decorated the pavement and one building had given up completely, choosing to collapse into its own basement.

Hungarian soldiers siding with the rebels had brought another valuable anti-tank gun and it was quickly put to good use, blowing up the nearest Soviet tank. We watched as its mangled gun barrel landed barely ten yards away. That must have been the final straw for our Russian friends because they started to withdraw, leaving a crater-strewn road in their wake.

Cheers erupted and by the time we'd found a suitable spot to sit and lick our wounds, someone was bringing milk and food which had been donated from a farm outside the city. Eva was hugging and kissing Biggins, almost causing him to drop his turnip sandwich.

"You were marvellous, Henry. The way you charged at that tank and turned it against the Russians – it was magnificent," she said, singing his praises.

There was no mention of my unwilling participation in the ridiculous escapade, I noticed, but what do you expect from a dreamy-eyed poetry student who spends her time worrying about iambic pentameters? Biggins was lapping it up, of course, and blushing to such an alarming degree, I thought he might be spotted by a stray Soviet aircraft.

"Just think, Henry," she went on pompously. "Only a few weeks ago I was a student at the polytechnic, discussing Hungary's history – and now I am *making* history."

I was feeling sick just listening to her go on and I decided to put a stop to her gushing.

"I tell you what, sweetheart, it would be a lot more useful if you could *make* me another sandwich - this one tastes like crap."

* * *

Needless to say the relative merits of revolutionary cuisine were not our main concern just then, as important matters of state were suddenly on everybody's mind. We huddled next to a radio that someone had thoughtfully installed in the foyer of the cinema, so that the rebels could keep abreast of the latest developments. True, the station was still controlled by the communists and therefore a tad biased, but it was better than nothing.

It confirmed that Imre Nagy had been made prime minister and a spontaneous cheer erupted around the room. As usual he was several steps behind what was actually happening to his beloved country. He'd made the *monumental* decision of agreeing to reshuffle his Cabinet, but since the majority of the members were still Stalinists, it made little difference to the people on the street.

We called it a night and everyone who'd been involved in the excitement of the previous day did their best to find a place to lie down and get what little sleep they could.

You might well be wondering, what with my delectable rebel on hand, why I wasn't pestering Anna for a well-earned frolic in the back row of the auditorium. Well, aside from the fact that there was precious little privacy in the damn place, I'm ashamed to say I simply wasn't up to it. After all I'd been through over the past few days, all I wanted to do was to crawl into a dark corner and sleep for a week. As far as I was concerned, Anna could have walked up to me *in naturalibus*, crying: "How about it, big boy?", and I would probably have just turned over and asked her to read me a bedtime story.

The following morning was a Sunday, I think, and the girl operating the radio announced that Nagy had packed Gero and the other Stalinists off to Moscow and ordered an end to hostilities. We all sat there, stunned, but there was more to come.

"The Hungarian government has come to an agreement with the Soviets," said the radio announcer, "whereby Russian troops will immediately begin their withdrawal from Budapest."

Moreover, the AVH was to be disbanded, leaving Imre Nagy with absolute power in Hungary. There was even talk of dissolving the Warsaw Pact, which I'm sure pleased our Soviet friends no end.

I breathed a huge sigh of relief. That was it – it was all over. I could tender a loving farewell to Anna and head off home, where Russian tanks weren't waiting round every corner to blow me up to high heaven. Biggins was clearly thinking along the same lines.

"I expect we'll be asked to verify the withdrawal of the Russians," he said, thinking out loud. "God has truly been on our side."

"God is usually on the side with the biggest guns," I said, ever the realist.

Everything would depend on whether or not Khrushchev was as good as his word. I crossed my fingers that the suit and tie brigade at the UN could be trusted not to dither in their usual style, while they watched a critical moment in history pass them by. If sane heads prevailed, I'd be the first to wave the Soviets a cheery goodbye, I thought.

As I looked around me, two little girls walked across the foyer, their hair tied into ponytails, and they almost fell over under the weight of the heavy rifles they were carrying. Aye, I thought, whatever made me think the world was a *sane* place?

Our withdrawal has been greatly exaggerated

With the announcement of the ceasefire, Biggins grudgingly agreed that it would make sense to return to the legation to receive new orders. Eva gave him a lingering kiss which had him almost changing his mind, and I had to practically drag the besotted idiot out of the cinema.

I'd waited for a similar farewell from my own fair princess of the revolution, but Anna simply ignored me while she busied herself with cleaning her rifle. Mind you, I caught her watching me out of the corner of my eye as we walked away - which for some reason cheered me up no end.

My good mood was cut short when we finally got back to the legation. We'd had a message from the British ambassador in Vienna informing us that three Soviet armies were converging on Hungary from Romania, Czechoslovakia and the Ukraine.

The rebels knew none of this, of course, and they were busy ransacking the villas of the ousted communist elite, or patrolling the city which they now assumed belonged to the Hungarian people.

We were told to drive around and see if the ceasefire was being observed, and we didn't like what we saw. In spite of the Russian promise to withdraw their troops, we saw two Soviet tanks guarding the shattered radio building, and the defence ministry was surrounded by Russian T-54s.

I've often found that it's just when you start to relax and believe the worst is over that all hell decides to break loose. That's how it was all those years ago, when Biggins turned the car on to The Boulevard before we headed back to the safety of the legation.

A figure stepped out of a doorway with a machine-gun and sprayed the car with bullets. The windscreen shattered and Biggins slumped forward, blood streaming from a wound to his head.

"For God's sake, don't shoot - we're English!" I yelled, getting out of the car and hoping whoever was attacking us would understand.

"I know you are," growled a voice in Russian, and it sounded frighteningly familiar.

Then, as if to confirm my suspicions, Colonel Kutuzov emerged from the shadows to reveal his ugly pockmarked face – *origo mali*. As I stood there, with my revolver frustratingly tucked away in the holster on my belt, the Russian pointed his machine-gun straight at me and my legs threatened to give way.

"I thought you lot had buggered off back to Moscow," I said with a bravado I didn't feel.

"The reports of our withdrawal have, shall we say ... been greatly exaggerated."

"How did you find me?" I asked in an effort to keep the maniac talking.

"I would like to say this was part of some masterly plan, but I have to admit that when I saw the British flag on your car, I simply took a chance and I have been most fortunate. The fact that I killed the driver instead of you is also serendipitous because now you will know why you are being executed, and by whom."

He stepped forward to take aim, when the car door opened and Biggins stumbled out, clearly not quite as dead as Kutuzov had hoped. The colonel turned his gun to cover the new intruder and I looked across to see what Biggins would do.

There was something odd about his appearance and it wasn't just the blood pouring down his face, staining the front of his shirt. In my terrified condition it took me several moments to work out what it was and then it struck me. He was wearing his overcoat which, when we'd screeched to a halt only a few minutes before, had been draped over the back seat. His hands were in his pockets and he staggered from side to side like a drunkard.

Instead of shooting him on the spot, Kutuzov watched with an amused grin across his ugly face as Biggins tottered from one foot to another. When he thought the impromptu dance had gone on long enough, he brought his gun up to fire and a shot rang out. I looked at Kutuzov and was shocked to see a red circle appear in the middle of his forehead, before his dead body slumped to the ground.

In confusion, I stared back at Biggins and eventually I spotted the black, powdery hole that had appeared near the pocket of his coat. Suddenly it dawned on me - he must have had a revolver in his hand the whole time and he'd fired as soon as he'd had a clear shot. I knew he'd been a sniper during the war but even so - it was damn good shooting and I said so.

"Jesus, Biggins, you're a cool one. It's a bloody good job you didn't miss. I owe you a beer," I said gratefully, but he didn't seem to be listening.

What's more, he was now staggering about even more alarmingly, and the exaggerated stumbling which I'd thought was an act to fool the hapless Russian colonel, I now realised was a result of his wounds. As I helped him to the car he was mumbling incoherently about his beloved Eva, which I took as a good sign. I ran over to Kutuzov's body, just to make sure he was really dead, and his lifeless eyes were staring at the sky. Capital, I thought, and I drove my patient back to the legation so that our quack could take a look at him.

"He'll be okay but he'll require plenty of rest," explained the sawbones, once he'd patched Biggins up. "Captain, I'm afraid that whatever assignment you and Mr. Biggins were working on will have to be put on hold for the foreseeable future."

"Are you sure, doctor?" I asked our Katerfelto, trying to look suitably concerned.

"I'm afraid I must insist."

When the doctor finally left, I helped myself to a brandy and lit a cigar. Well, I thought, this day just gets better and better.

* * *

I had the first good night's sleep I'd had in a long while and when I awoke and looked out of my window, the first thing I saw was a Russian staff car driving by and two officers stopped their vehicle to check their maps. I remember wondering: if they were planning to withdraw, why the hell did they need to be conducting a survey?

Still, I put my suspicions to one side and I dared to believe that the Soviets were genuine after all, as I spotted more and more tanks heading south. Many of the steel behemoths had

the corpses of their human comrades strapped to their backs, and I idly wondered if Kutuzov was among their number, blankly staring back at his British victor.

Any optimism on my part was soon dashed when we received a cable from one of our military attaches, stating that he'd spotted a Soviet column arrive the previous morning, showing all the signs of a long road trip. He added that the insignia on the tanks looked unlike anything he'd seen before and, more ominously, he'd noticed that the troops were Mongolian.

"You have a visitor," announced one of the secretaries, knocking on my door and disturbing my mid-afternoon nap.

So I dragged myself downstairs to see who had the temerity to eat into my busy schedule and found Anna, looking as lovely as ever, waiting in one of the reception rooms for my arrival. I was looking forward to carrying on where we'd left off before all the troubles had started, but she was all business.

"Thomas, I'm part of a delegation which is meeting with Mr. Nagy later today," she said proudly.

"Well, I hope he's a little more supportive than the last time you met with him," I said, recalling how he'd been hell-bent on burying his head in the sand.

"That is unfair," she complained. "He is in a very difficult position."

I wasn't in the mood for an argument so I politely asked her to get to the point.

"Mr. Nagy has sent a message requesting that you join the delegation," she explained, clearly upset that I was being singled out for special treatment.

"Tell him he can request all he wants. If he's having problems sorting his country out, it's nothing to do with me."

"How dare you speak about Mr. Nagy that way?" she cried, and she looked so angry, I was glad she'd neglected to bring her rifle along.

"I'm only teasing," I said, worried that she might cause a scene.

"Thomas, there is no time to waste with your silly British sense of humour."

"I tell you what, Anna. I'll join your little delegation on one condition."

"What would that be?" she asked, displaying the hint of a smile.

"When this is all over, perhaps we could spend some time together."

"Just spend time together?" she asked, and her wicked grin was there for all to see. "What would we do?"

"I'm sure we could think of something to demonstrate the friendship between our two countries."

But why Mongolians?

When our group arrived at the Parliament building it was still surrounded by Soviet tanks, their big guns pointing skywards. We entered and were met by someone who said he was the deputy premier, but Anna insisted that we saw Nagy himself.

“I am afraid it will be difficult to see the prime minister – he is very busy,” he said, and he indicated several other delegations waiting patiently outside Nagy’s room.

“I received a message from the prime minister himself asking to see Captain Fletcher, a representative of the British government,” insisted Anna, touching me on the shoulder.

He looked me up and down and his haughty expression made it clear he didn’t believe I had any business being there. There was a brief pause while he stared back at us. Alex, who was among the delegation, gave a menacing scowl. It must have decided matters because the deputy turned on his heels and knocked at Nagy’s door. He went inside and returned a few moments later.

“Would you be Miss Novak?” he asked, and his surly manner had been replaced with nods and smiles.

“Yes.”

“The prime minister has agreed to meet with you and Captain Fletcher, but no one else.”

I glanced across at Alex and he looked utterly dejected by this latest news, but he wasn’t in a position to make a fuss. So we left him in the hallway to sulk while the deputy escorted us into Nagy’s office.

“Anna, it is good to see you again,” said Nagy, rising from his desk to embrace her, and he turned to give me a firm handshake. “And Captain Fletcher, of course. Please, won’t you both take a seat.”

It was clear he hadn’t slept for a while and the tired lines on his face had aged him. He was a shadow of the man I’d been introduced to a few months before.

“What you are doing is wonderful,” enthused Anna, who always thought her beloved Imre could do no wrong. “You are leading our country to freedom and we will be rid of the Soviets for good.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, my dear,” replied Nagy, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “I am afraid the political realities are a little more complex than you might imagine.”

Anna was pouting and her shoulders almost seemed to sag in disappointment. I could have sworn that the zealous little rebel was about to cry. Nagy must have noticed her reaction too because he tried to placate her.

“Please, don’t be despondent, Anna. All will be well in the end – it will just take time. We must be cautious, yet at the same time we must explore every avenue. That is why I have asked Captain Fletcher to join us.”

“I am more than happy to be of assistance if I can, Prime Minister,” I said, deciding it couldn’t hurt to play the sympathetic Westerner.

“That is very kind of you, Captain. Your government is no doubt aware that in spite of Russian assurances to the contrary, they are in fact bringing certain elements forward.”

He was putting me on the spot and no mistake. If I said I knew what was going on, it was tantamount to admitting we were spying on his country. Fortunately he didn't wait for an answer.

"However, what you might not know is that they are also tightening their grip on our airfields. The commander-in-chief of my air force wishes to attack the Soviet forces, but we only have a few hundred planes at our disposal. I have tried to explain to my enthusiastic officers that such an attack would only make sense if the West supported us. As an officer in the Royal Air Force, do you think such assistance would be forthcoming?"

At first I didn't know what to say. The American-backed Radio Free Europe had been urging on the Hungarian people for months and now, in their hour of need, Nagy was effectively asking me if the West was prepared to back up all of its talk with action. I quickly decided that he probably knew the answer as well as I did and that honesty would serve best.

"I am sure that our governments are willing to offer whatever moral support they can, but I very much doubt whether they will risk a nuclear war by attacking the Soviets directly."

"It is as I suspected. We must look to the Soviet Union for our freedom. Indeed, your prime minister seems only interested in bombing Egypt. Our little problems in Hungary appear to have been forgotten."

It was clear he was trying to embarrass me. While the UN should have been concentrating on events behind the Iron Curtain, it had to deal with Eden's half-baked attempt to keep hold of the Suez Canal. No doubt Nagy thought we had no business condemning the Russians when our own government was busy throwing its weight around as if it was still a colonial power.

"I'm sure the wishes of the people of Hungary are also at the forefront of Sir Anthony's mind," I said, trying to salvage my country's dignity.

"Yes, quite," said Nagy, clearly not believing me. "Be that as it may, without more ... tangible offers of support, it is left to me and my new government to oversee Hungary's peaceful transition to an independent state."

"May I ask a question?" I said, deciding I might as well try earning my pay as an intelligence officer for a change. The prime minister nodded.

"I have heard reports that the Soviet troops entering the country may be Mongolian. Is that significant?"

"If what you say is true, it does not bode well. I know the Soviet leaders were unhappy when their troops chose to fraternise with the rebels they were supposed to suppress. Khrushchev will not make the same mistake again."

"But why Mongolians?" I asked.

"The Mongolians care little about the political comings and goings in Eastern Europe. Indeed, I doubt very much if the enlisted men even know which country they are in or who they are expected to fight. If they choose to resist, the counter-revolutionaries will find themselves facing a very different enemy."

“We will never surrender,” insisted Anna with her usual fervour. “Mr. Nagy, if you are willing to make a stand against the Soviets, the people will support you to the ends of the earth.”

“I know you mean well, Anna,” said Nagy, taking her warmly by the hand, “but sometimes the insurgents have not helped their own cause or mine. The outrages they have committed against former AVH officers have shocked the outside world. The hard-line communists are making much capital out of the photographs emerging from Hungary.”

Anna appeared to be at a loss for words, and I suddenly remembered her grinning face when she’d witnessed the death of the two AVH torturers outside the legation. She decided to ignore the accusation and instead pressed Nagy for an answer.

“Will you install free elections in the country and insist the Soviets leave once and for all?”

“Alas, I regret that events are moving more quickly than I had anticipated. I hoped that we could reconcile ourselves with our partners in the Soviet Union, but it may well be too late. All I can say is that I will endeavour to do what is best for Hungary.”

As the meeting ended and we got up to leave, I looked back at the once-jovial face staring down at the papers on his desk. It was as if the weight of the world was on his tired shoulders and I couldn’t help feeling sorry for him.

He was a communist at heart, but he wanted an independent Hungary as much as any of his fellow countrymen. But unlike Anna and her intrepid followers, he knew what the Soviets were really capable of, and he was trying to steer a delicate path between acceding to the rebels’ demands and not antagonising the Russians.

The real tragedy was that whatever he decided to do, he was doomed to fail.

Russians go home

The rest of the delegation had disappeared, so Anna and I drove back to the Corvin Passage alone. On our way we spotted a man who'd been hanged, his tongue protruding from his contorted face. I stopped the car and saw that some money had been nailed to his chest.

"An AVH man," said Anna, as if that explained everything, and we drove away from the gruesome sight.

"You know, Anna, this sort of thing doesn't help your cause. It will just give the Russians the excuse they need to send in their troops."

I could tell that the sight of the dead man's body had shocked her too, but she was too proud to admit it.

"What do you know?" said my female Hutin venomously. "These people have been arresting and torturing us for years. The time has come for them to receive a taste of their own medicine."

I could see there was no point arguing with her and we continued the rest of the journey without saying a word. As if to add to the oppressive feeling in the car, we turned the last corner to see an elderly couple weeping, as they pushed a handcart on which stood a plain wooden coffin – another victim of Hungary's struggle.

"Anna," cried Alex, before we'd barely set foot in the rebel headquarters. "We have truly won. The fighting is over and we even have our own newspaper - look!"

He flourished a publication which couldn't have been more than three or four pages long. From what little I could make out, the articles were goading Nagy to take a stronger stand. 'Ruszkik haza' was one slogan I knew all too well – 'Russians go home'.

"We are going to insist that all of our demands are finally met," he said enthusiastically. "We are heading out to the Party's headquarters. Are you with us?"

Anna's body seemed to visibly slump and her tired eyes closed as if she had nothing left to give. Eventually she took the machine-gun which Alex offered and stood up straight.

"Of course, Alex, lead the way."

She looked at me and I stared back, not knowing what to expect. She gave a huge sigh before she spoke.

"This is not your fight, Thomas. Go home to England. We will beat these communists with or without your help."

Before I had a chance to say anything she had walked away, and Alex put a strong arm around her shoulders to show his support. I watched the mixed bag of revolutionaries follow on behind and I remember a boy, no more than ten years old, clinging on to a rifle taller than himself.

I decided to go back to the legation and I got into the car and drove away. After no more than a few yards I brought the vehicle to a halt, cursing, and turned it around to follow the rebels.

"Oh, bugger it!"

The sound of my voice, cursing my own stupidity, filled the empty car.

I soon started to have second thoughts about my impromptu decision, when I passed clean-up teams sprinkling lime over the corpses of Russian soldiers, still lying in the grotesque positions in which they had been left.

I finally arrived at the Party headquarters on Republic Square, and the ugly building seemed at odds with the pretty autumn leaves littering the manicured lawns.

I parked the car in a side-street and I could hear gunfire ripping up the square. Every single window in the Party building seemed to be smashed and I found my feet crunching on broken glass.

I spotted Anna and her friends taking cover in a garden, and Alex was sniping at the building with his rifle from behind a tree. I found some steps leading to the basement of a building and I climbed down to take up a position where I could still keep an eye on Anna - like some sort of pathetic, love-sick bodyguard.

As bullets ripped back and forth across the square, I was just thinking that the rebels would have to give up any thought of storming the building, when a captured T-34 tank arrived, firing its machine-guns at the Party headquarters. Some of the rebels took cover behind it as it lurched forward, and bullets could be heard ricocheting off its armour. A truck arrived moments later and men started unloading shells, before they passed them up to their comrades in the tank.

The scene was quickly becoming chaotic, but I was pleased to see that Anna had wisely remained in the garden, while she tended to a wounded member of her group. For the moment she seemed to be out of the line of fire, which was more than could be said for the ambulance driver who was writhing on the ground in agony a few yards away from where I was standing. He'd been hit trying to get to an injured woman.

There must have been a sharpshooter amongst the guards in the building because I noticed that more and more of the rebel snipers were getting hit. I remember even seeing a journalist drop his camera as a bullet ripped into his chest. Four more tanks arrived, but this time I realised they were manned by regular Hungarian soldiers, sent to protect the Party members from the rebels. Eva ran up to them, screaming like some sort of wild banshee.

"The AVH guards have been shooting at our wounded!" she yelled.

I expected the tank crews to ignore her, but they proceeded to turn their turrets towards the smoking Party building and fired shells until gaping holes appeared amongst the brickwork.

The smoke drifting across the square from burning vehicles was almost unbearable, and I had to hold my handkerchief over my mouth to stop from breathing in the fumes and dust. It was virtually impossible to see from one end of the square to the other, but I managed to spot Alex leading his group towards the building, running from tree to tree. I drew my revolver and followed, trying to keep Anna and the others within sight.

They reached the entrance to a block of offices next to the headquarters, and when they entered I could hear gunfire. I ran up and pressed myself against the wall, inwardly cursing myself for stupidly putting my life at risk.

“No woman’s worth this,” I muttered, scolding myself.

I peered through one of the broken windows, resolving to run like the devil if things looked hairy. There was a large hallway, filled with half a dozen AVH guards holding off Alex and his gallant rebels. The guards were crammed in a doorway and my fellow insurgents had been forced to take cover behind a large desk which had been thrown on to its side.

Alex stood up and, like a man whose hatred knew no bounds, he fired his machine-gun until it was empty, forcing the communists back. He discarded the useless weapon and drew his pistol, leading the charge.

I was pleased to see that Anna was bringing up the rear - until I spotted another guard emerge from a corridor on the other side of the hallway, preparing to shoot her in the back. He hadn’t seen me watching his every move through the window, so I took careful aim and fired three quick shots, throwing him back against the wall, clutching his stomach.

Anna spun round as soon as she heard the firing and a look of shock appeared on her face when she saw the dying guard, lying in a pool of his own blood a few feet away from her.

She clutched her rifle, while her eyes darted from one end of the hallway to the other, looking to see where the shots had come from. She gasped when she finally saw my face in the window, and for one awful moment I thought she was going to shoot me out of panic. I waved and it slowly dawned on her what had happened. She ran out of the building and pulled me close, kissing me again and again.

“You saved my life!” she cried. “You didn’t abandon me. I knew you cared.”

I was thoroughly enjoying the moment, but I was acutely aware that danger was lurking all around us.

“We need to get out of here, Anna. It’s not safe.”

“I’m not leaving. Sacrifices have to be made if we are to win our freedom.”

I was about to drag her bodily back to the car, when the main doors to the Party building opened and three figures gingerly stepped out, waving a white flag. The firing continued as before and Anna screamed out.

“Don’t shoot. They’re surrendering!” she yelled, but nobody could hear her above all the noise.

One of the men was wearing the uniform of a colonel and he went down almost as soon as he’d left the building. It all happened so quickly that at first I didn’t realise he’d been hit. Then another shot rang out and the man clutching the flag teetered forward and fell, fatally wounded.⁷

A group of rebels pushed through the open doors and dragged out another unlucky officer. He had his hands raised in surrender, and as soon as he saw his dead comrades, he tried to pull back. A moment later, when he fell forward, I thought that one of the mob had pushed him, but then I saw the red patch where he’d been shot in the back. More soldiers

were hauled out and when someone smashed the butt of a rifle against an officer's head, you could hear his skull crack.

Suddenly we could hear more shooting coming from inside the building and women were screaming. Six young men were brought out at gunpoint. They were wearing ill-fitting uniforms and when they were pushed against the wall, they looked back with a sense of bewilderment. One of them brought his hands up, as if in prayer.

"We haven't done anything bad," he insisted. "Please give us a chance."

God didn't answer his wishes because the rebels began to fire bullet after bullet until only his dead body jolted with the impact. I heard more shots as I guided Anna to the other side of the square, and I presumed the unlucky man's comrades went the same way.

"No, I've got to go back and help," said Anna, when she realised what I was trying to do.

"Help with what, Anna?" I cried, desperate to make her see sense. "Your rebels are just slaughtering everyone."

She was about to push me away when we both heard a scream and looked up to see where it had come from. A woman was standing out on a window ledge, pleading for help. Suddenly a hand reached out and tried to grab her, but instead she chose to jump to her death.

"You can stay and watch all this carnage if you want to – I've had enough!" I yelled, but still she hesitated.

Another woman was running down the street and two men grabbed hold of her. Urged on by some of the female rebels, screaming that their victim was a whore, they tore her clothes until she was stripped to the waist and proceeded to beat her unconscious.

"Please, leave her alone," pleaded an old grey-haired man, tears in his eyes. "This is not why we are fighting – it only makes us as bad as they are!"

The mob ignored him, continuing their orgy of revenge, and it was clear that nothing short of a bullet was going to stop them. I had three left and I wasn't about to use them just to have the mob set about me instead.

"Are you coming with me or are you a part of all this?" I yelled, giving Anna one last chance before I walked away.

She just stood there in utter confusion, torn between her determination to fight for what she believed in, and her inability to reconcile it with the atrocities she saw being acted out all around her. Even to this day, I can't say for sure what she would have done if it hadn't been for the next tragic episode which unfolded before her very eyes.

A wounded officer, unable to stand, was being propped up by one of the rebels. Two men dragged his battered body over to a tree and tied a thick cable around his ankles. Oh my God, I thought, they're going to hang him, and I believe that if their wanton cruelty had been limited to a simple lynching, Anna might well have rejoined her compatriots, but there was more to come.

His face and body were doused in petrol and, after he'd been lifted into the air, one of the sadists lit a match and set him on fire, filling the air with his screams. More trips to the Tyburn Tree were to follow, with onlookers demanding that the executioners cut off different parts of their victims.

The anguish on Anna's face was tangible and suddenly she ran. It took me several minutes before I caught up with her.

"This way, Anna!" I yelled, grabbing her by the hand and leading her to the car.

We ran away as fast as we could, leaving the screams and horrific smell of burning flesh behind us. When we finally reached the car and I fumbled for the keys, Anna leant against the bonnet and was physically sick in the gutter, retching violently.

As we drove away, I looked across to see her staring ahead, her face expressionless. I yearned to know what she was thinking and wondered if the horror of the scene had simply drained her of all emotion.

Or perhaps, like me, she couldn't imagine what had possessed her fellow revolutionaries to massacre their own countrymen without mercy.

Back to the Dark Ages

I took Anna home to her apartment and all my efforts to talk to her were in vain. After the terrible events of the day, she seemed to lock herself away into her own little world and nothing I said would bring her out of it. She simply climbed on to her bed and curled up like a lost little girl, oblivious to my presence.

It was clear that any fun and games were out of the question, so I left her to her thoughts and headed back to the legation. I returned to find Biggins back on his feet, like the trooper he was, and he looked shocked to see me.

“Blow me, Fletcher, I’d convinced myself you’d cleared off to Austria.”

“Not a bit of it, you cheeky bugger,” I replied, mortally offended. “If you must know, I’ve been keeping up the good work while you’ve been lounging around taking it easy.”

“Oh yes?” he asked sceptically.

“I’ve had a meeting with Imre Nagy and I joined the rebels at the Party Headquarters.”

“My God, Fletcher, you weren’t mixed up in that terrible business in Republic Square, were you?” he said, clearly shocked.

“You’ve heard about that already?”

“It’s the talk of the town. One of the hacks has brought back photographs of the ghastly business. The Hungarian government’s in a panic – they’re terrified that every last one of them will be lynched.”

“Put it this way – after what I’ve just witnessed I wouldn’t like to be in their shoes just now.”

Biggins looked thoughtful for a few moments before he spoke again.

“This incident puts Nagy in a difficult position. He has promised the Soviets he can maintain law and order. If it looks like he’s losing control, the Russians will have no choice but to send in the heavy mob. Don’t these bloody rebels realise they’re playing into the communists’ hands?”

“I doubt if anyone was doing much thinking from what I saw. They had the bloodlust on them and that was it,” I said, at a loss to explain what I’d witnessed.

“The trouble is, it wasn’t an isolated incident, I’m afraid. Now that the security police are out of the picture, it seems anyone who was associated with the old regime is fair game. Hangings aren’t the worst of it. One poor devil was even drowned. It’s as if the country’s gone back to the Dark Ages,” said Biggins, shaking his head.

“The question is, where will it all end?” I asked rhetorically.

“It appears that it’s shaken Nagy out of his complacency, at least for the moment. He’s actually agreed to multi-party elections.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Nagy was a red-blooded communist through and through. It went against everything he believed in, but there was more.

“He’s even talking of abandoning the Warsaw Pact.”

“The Russians will never stand for that, surely?”

“I’m inclined to agree with you but it’s mob-rule, I’m afraid. The rebels keep forcing Nagy to make further concessions, and it must be giving the people in the Kremlin a few sleepless nights to say the least.”

I retired to my room, mighty relieved that Biggins hadn’t recovered enough to come up with one of his hare-brained schemes. When I awoke I was called downstairs to listen to the radio.

Nagy’s declaration for an independent Hungary with a promise of elections was read out. In the streets strangers ran into each other’s arms, crying with joy. After ten long years Hungary was finally free and the Russians had been shown the door. It looked like the rebels had won.

It should have been one of those world-changing moments in history when nothing was going to be the same again. And perhaps it would have been if Eden and his counterparts in Paris hadn’t been busy trying to bully the Egyptians into giving back the Suez Canal.

The Americans looked on in disbelief as their European allies threatened to invade Egypt if they didn’t get what they wanted. At any other time it would have been a terrible error in judgement, but right then, coming when it did, it was the worst thing that could have happened for Hungary. As Khrushchev watched events unfold in the troubled Land of the Pharaohs, it gave him the perfect excuse he’d been looking for.

Hungary’s new-found freedom was about to come to an end.

God in heaven, they've come to hang us

I suppose it's all water under the bridge now, but if I think back to that time when we let the people of Hungary down in their hour of need, it still makes my blood boil. Spurred on by the support the West had promised, I'd seen Hungarian children throw their lives away to stop the Russian bear from strangling their country. Then, when the people of Hungary needed them most, the Western bureaucrats in their expensive suits prevaricated while they tucked into five-course lunches and decided to do nothing. It's enough to turn a man to drink – which probably explains the empty bottle of brandy sitting on my desk as I write these memoirs.

Still, I've never been one to bother with politicians – all they seem to want to do is poke their noses into other people's business. Naturally I was happy to stay well out of it, but since I was on Her Majesty's payroll I didn't have much choice. Nagy was yelling for advice from NATO and he'd asked to see Biggins and I at his villa, where he was briefly ensconced while he sorted out his wardrobe and got to see his wife for a few hours. So Biggins telephoned to make the arrangements and we were heading off before I had time to catch my breath.

When we arrived we were pleased to see the presidential car was still parked outside, along with two empty trucks which must have delivered the police who were swarming all over the place. The door was blocked by a guard, armed with a machine-gun, and even when we'd shown him our passports it took us several minutes to persuade him we were expected. As we were led upstairs, Nagy's secretary screamed at the sight of us.

"God in Heaven, they've come to hang us," she cried, clearly mistaking us for rebels.

Nagy appeared to see what all the commotion was about.

"Don't panic, woman!" he yelled angrily, and he invited us to join him in his study.

"Gentlemen, I'm going to quit the Warsaw Pact," he said without any preamble. "However, Soviet troops have crossed the border. Andropov has assured me they are only here to protect the Russian civilian population, but frankly I do not believe him. I am going to declare my country's neutrality and appeal to the United Nations for help. Will your country stand by us?"

Well, there it was, stated in plain terms. Nagy had finally realised he had no choice but to nail his colours to the mast and he was appealing to the West for help. He wanted to know if our government would step up to the mark and he was putting us on the spot. Biggins and I looked at one another, unsure how to reply, but what could you say? – "Sorry, I expect our politicians will just sit on their backsides until it's too late and everything's gone arse over tit."

"I'm quite sure our governments will strongly condemn any attempt on behalf of the Soviets to force their will on an independent nation," said Biggins diplomatically.

My God, Biggins, you've got some nerve, I thought, what with Eden threatening to bomb the Egyptians to bits, just for nationalising a canal that happened to run through their own country. Clearly Nagy wasn't too impressed either.

“Words of condemnation are all very well, Mr. Biggins, but that is all they are – words. What we in Hungary need now is action. Will your armies come to our aid?”

Biggins shifted uncomfortably in his seat, so I decided it was time for a little home truth and damn the consequences. Besides, Nagy knew the facts of life as well as we did – he was just too frightened of the consequences to admit it, and I wasn’t about to lie for the whetstone.

“Prime Minister, do you think the British and French would be threatening to attack Egypt if she possessed nuclear weapons?” I asked.

At first the question seemed to confuse him and he looked at the papers on his desk, as if he was looking for an answer. Finally he spoke.

“I doubt it very much.”

“There is your answer, sir,” I said, thoroughly sick of stepping on eggshells. “We may not like the Russians throwing their weight around, but we’re not about to risk World War Three over a few square miles of eastern Europe. If you want to stand up to the Russians, I’m afraid you’re going to have to do it on your own.”

He just stared at me, lost for words, and for a few dreadful moments I thought I might have overstepped the mark and he’d have us arrested on some trumped-up charge. Biggins was wringing his hands nervously. Eventually Nagy adjusted his glasses and addressed us in his usual formal tones.

“Gentlemen, clearly I have been acting under a misapprehension. However, I admire your candour and my Cabinet and I will consider what you have said. Thank you but I’m rather busy, as you can imagine, and I need detain you no further. Good day, gentlemen.”

We left the room with our tails between our legs, feeling like naughty schoolboys who’d been confronted with their headmaster’s disapproval. Whether the new Prime Minister of Hungary chose to ignore my invaluable advice or he had no choice, I don’t know, but the next day back at the legation we awoke to see the latest headline in the New York Times:

‘SOVIET TANKS AGAIN RING BUDAPEST: NAGY DEFIANT, APPEALS TO UN.’

For Hungary and Imre Nagy, time was running out.

* * *

As the Hungarian and Soviet armies confronted one another, Nagy appealed to the nation for calm. The last thing he wanted was for the Russians to have an excuse to march in and reoccupy the country.

“However,” he added, “if the Hungarian Army is attacked, it will defend itself.”

As for me, after all the bloodshed I’d witnessed during my brief stay in the country, I didn’t care who was running the blasted place as long as it was sorted out quickly. All I wanted to do was get back home and lie in bed without the sound of tanks rumbling down the street and lynch mobs hanging half the population.

For once I let my head rule over other more insistent parts of my anatomy and steered well clear of Anna's apartment. For one thing, I'd no wish to get roped into a desperate attempt by some of her wilder colleagues to stop the Soviets. And for another, I doubted very much whether she'd have been receptive to another bout in the bedroom, what with her precious country's future hanging in the balance. So I spent the day in a vain attempt to lie low, but Biggins wasn't having any of it.

"Something's in the wind," he announced, and for once he wasn't referring to his awful aftershave.

"What do you mean?" I asked, trying to sound interested.

"Two members of Nagy's Cabinet have mysteriously disappeared," he explained.

"Well, who's to blame them. I'd do the same myself if I had the chance."

"No, you don't understand. Someone spotted them being driven to the Soviet embassy."

"What do you make of that?" I asked, too tired to play games.

"I think the Russians might be preparing to get Nagy out of the way. I smell some backstabbing of the highest order going on," he said, tapping his nose as if he'd spotted a couple of Ysoides.

"What do you expect?" I asked. "That's the usual underhand way the communists go about things."⁸

It was then that Biggins delivered even more alarming news.

"It looks like the Soviets are tightening the noose. Some of the journalists have tried to get out of the country, but Russian troops have turned them back."

That was enough to get my blood-pressure soaring. When the hacks start abandoning ship, you can be sure that things have well and truly hit rock bottom. More to the point, from what Biggins was saying, we were trapped with no way of getting out of the country. It was enough to put you off your goulash, which was all our useless cook seemed able to concoct just then.

The Iron Curtain had well and truly come down and smacked me on the arse.

We have to believe

“Have you chaps heard anything about a Soviet withdrawal?” asked a voice from the open door.

It was the air attaché and Biggins told him that the last we’d heard, the Soviets were getting ready to invade the country.

“I’ve just come back from the airport and that’s exactly the way it looks to me. The thing is, on my way here I popped in to see a friend of mine in the Hungarian Army. He says that Prime Minister Nagy has agreed to meet with the Soviets and they’ve promised to pull out of the country.”

“Does he believe them?” I asked.

“It would appear so, yes. He’s ordered the National Guard to hand in their arms and ammunition, and all tank crews have been told to return to barracks. I suppose the prime minister knows what he’s doing.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” I said, and he gave me a quizzical look before passing on his welcome news to Biggins.

“Oh, by the way, Henry. There’s a rather attractive girl here to see you. She says her name is Eva, if that rings any bells.”

I knew she rang more than a bell as far as Biggins was concerned and his eyes lit up at this new turn of events. He was out of the room and dashing down the stairs before the group captain had finished speaking, and I followed, apologising for my friend’s ill-manners.⁹

“Oh, Henry, thank goodness you’re here,” gushed Eva when we arrived in the main reception room.

She gave him a long kiss right on the lips, which had the guard at the door smirking to himself.

“Whatever is the matter, my dear?” asked Biggins, always the gentleman.

“It’s Anna. Ever since the captain took her away from us, she won’t come out of her apartment,” explained the sour-faced little Zoilist.

What an ungrateful little madam. If it hadn’t been for me, her ‘friend’ would have been six feet under because of her little group’s antics. I felt like showing the bossy boots the door and giving her a swift kick on the way out, but Biggins was all over her.

“What can we do to help?” he asked.

“Now that we’ve beaten the Russians, everyone at our headquarters is celebrating. It seems such a pity that after all of her hard work, Anna is going to miss out on our final victory. Perhaps you and the captain can persuade her to join us.”

Biggins and I looked at one another. As far as we could tell it wasn’t an act and she genuinely believed that they’d won. I’d have liked nothing better than to burst her bubble and I began to tell her she was talking out of her arse, when Biggins interrupted me.

“Of course we’ll help, Eva. If we can get Anna to come back to your base, will you be there too?” he asked, clutching her hand.

“I wouldn’t miss seeing you again for the world,” she said, stroking his cheek, and it was all I could do to stop myself throwing up on the spot.

But I knew it was pointless trying to get him to change his mind. He was besotted with the daft bat and whatever I came up with wasn’t going to compete with the witch’s womanly charms.

So we headed off to Anna’s apartment, only to find that somebody else had beaten us to it. Alex had also decided to see if he could get through to his morose friend, and he’d brought along a bottle of brandy to help bring her out of her funk. She wouldn’t touch it so, hating to see good liquor go to waste, I helped myself to a generous glass while Biggins did his best to persuade Anna to go to the celebrations. I took the opportunity to talk with Alex while I poured him a drink.

“Tell me, Alex, do you think you’ve won?” I asked, hoping he had more sense than his female counterparts.

“The Russians say they are going to withdraw,” he said, but you could detect the lack of conviction in his voice.

“And you believe them?”

“Why, have you heard something different?”

“Not exactly, but have you ever known the communists to run away when they have the upper hand? It could be a trick just to catch the Hungarian Army off-guard.”

“I have not said anything to the others, but you may be right. A friend of mine in the army reported for duty and he discovered that his gun had mysteriously been disabled.”

“So why are you here trying to get Anna to join you if you think it’s all just a sham?” I asked.

“We have to believe,” he said pathetically. “We’ve come too far to fail now.”

“The problem is, you won’t know if it’s a trick until it’s too late.”

I was attempting to put an end to the whole idea of celebrating a victory so that Biggins and I could head back to the legation, but it backfired disastrously.

“There might be a way to find out. I know where Prime Minister Nagy’s delegates are meeting the Russians,” said Alex out of the blue, and Biggins’ ears pricked up.

“Where?” he asked, clearly having had enough of trying to cheer Anna up.

“The meeting is taking place at the Soviet base in Tokol at ten o’clock tonight,” said Alex, intrigued by Biggins’ sudden interest. “Why?”

It was like one of those nightmares when you can see what’s coming but you find yourself paralysed, unable to stop it. Oh God, Biggins, please don’t say what I think you’re about to say, I thought, but his eyes lit up as he blurted out his latest brainwave.

“It’s only seven o’clock and we have a car. We can be there before it starts.”

There's nothing we can do

I had nobody to blame but myself, of course. In my eagerness to get back to safety, I'd ended up making things ten times worse. Why the hell hadn't I kept my big mouth shut? Naturally I tried to talk Biggins out of it, reminding him why we were there in the first place. I hoped his infatuation with Eva would win the day, but he always put his duty first, blast him.

So we left Anna to cry into her brandy and the three of us headed to the Soviet base at Tokol airport. Incredibly we managed to cross the Csepel Island Bridge unhindered but when we reached the base, guards were posted at every entrance.

"What do you suggest now?" I asked.

"We'll find a way through the fence somewhere. No one will see us in the dark," said Biggins, and I looked at him, wondering if he'd finally lost his marbles.

He parked the car at what he thought was a suitable spot and opened the boot, rummaging through all the clutter until he found what he was looking for.

"I don't suppose you've got any wire-cutters back there," I said, trying to rain on his parade, but the eager little Boy Scout proved me wrong and was cutting away before I had time to ask what the hell they were doing in the car in the first place.

"Come on," he said in a loud whisper, and Alex obediently followed, while I hesitated and took a good look around before finally joining them.

Satisfied that the coast was clear, I pocketed the car keys and tagged along a few paces behind. Thankfully the airfield was relatively dark as we approached the main building. We stopped, gasping for breath, while my heart threatened to hammer its way out of my chest.

I was about to curse Biggins for taking us on a wild goose chase, when a car pulled up outside the front of the headquarters and a company of Red Army soldiers assembled to present arms. We heard the muffled sounds of welcome before the members of the Hungarian delegation were led inside.

"What now?" I whispered angrily. "We can't go in any closer or we'll be seen."

"Let's just wait and see what happens," said Biggins, but you could tell by the look on his face that he was having second thoughts about what we were doing there.

The army private who had driven the Hungarian delegation was enjoying a glass of beer, leaning against his vehicle, when all of a sudden a squad of uniformed Russian soldiers dashed past him, causing him to drop his beverage, cursing.

"I recognise one of those Russians," said Alex, clutching his machine-gun tightly. "It is Serov, the chief of the Soviet security police. He was the one who..."

Alex's revelation was interrupted by a crashing noise from inside the building. We could hear shouts of protest, and a courtyard at the rear of the building was suddenly illuminated by an array of floodlights. We were no longer hidden from view, so we were forced to crawl to the shadow of a large tree a few feet away.

A door crashed open, banging against the wall as it nearly flew off its hinges, and two Russian soldiers armed with machine-guns led one of the Hungarian delegates to the far

wall of the courtyard. The Russians took a few steps back, turned and fired. The Hungarian cried out and slumped to the ground in a bloody heap.

“The bastards!” screamed Alex, and he got up, evidently intending to charge towards the courtyard and avenge the death of his fellow countryman.

“Don’t be a fool!” I screamed, and it took both Biggins and I to hold the big oaf down.

“There’s nothing we can do,” said Biggins, as Alex began to weep in frustration. “I’ll report what we’ve seen as soon as we get back to the legation.”

We quickly led Alex away before he did anything stupid but, as we made our way to the hole in the fence, a second shot rang out. It signalled the murder of another delegate, and Alex let out a cry. As we drove away, Biggins turned in his seat to speak to me.

“At least now we know - the Soviets have no intention of coming to any agreement with the new government. Nagy and his Cabinet have been double-crossed.”

I looked back to see Alex bristling in the rear seat, ready to shoot anyone wearing a Russian uniform, and I remember thinking: if the Soviets want Hungary back, they’re going to have a fight on their hands.

* * *

If Biggins had hoped to engineer some sort of intelligence coup by our unscheduled visit to the Soviet base, he must have been disappointed. By the time we reached the rebel headquarters, Russian tanks were entering Budapest itself. It had already gone midnight, but the old cinema was still a hive of activity with rebels, young and old, preparing their weapons for the fight they knew was about to begin.

Eva was there and Anna had finally joined her. Biggins was all agog at seeing his little Miss Precious again and I slumped in a corner to rest my aching muscles. I was too tired even to think and I just stared at the floor while chaos continued all around me.

“Can I join you, Thomas?” asked a gentle voice, and I looked up to see Anna’s tired face looking down at me.

I nodded and she sat on the floor beside me, taking my hand. Still remembering the fiery determination she’d shown when the uprising first began, I half-expected her to pull me up and drag me along to join her cause, but she just lifted my arm and brought it around her shoulders, before nestling against my chest. I remember she looked so vulnerable, I was in danger of becoming another Lochinvar.

In spite of the noise all around us, we dozed off. When I awoke, daylight was starting to appear through the windows and people were gathered around the radio to hear the early morning broadcast.

“Shh, listen – Uncle Nagy is about to speak,” cried the young girl operating the wireless.

Nagy spoke over the airwaves, trembling with emotion.

“This is Imre Nagy speaking, the Prime Minister of the Hungarian People’s Republic. Today, at daybreak, Soviet troops attacked our capital with the obvious intention of overthrowing the legal Hungarian democratic government. Our troops are in combat. The

government is at its post. I notify the people of our country and the entire world of this fact.”

“Ok, everybody, listen!” yelled Alex. “We need to help our brave soldiers. We are going to the Kilian Barracks. Bring your weapons.”

“Are you coming?” asked Biggins, his revolver in his hand.

“What are you talking about, Henry? We’re British, in case you’ve forgotten. It’s not our fight. Your duty is to report back to London,” I said, trying to knock some sense into him.

“Our duty is to stop the communists taking over Europe. Now come along – we’re going to need as much help as we can get.”

It was clear Eva’s tender kisses had somehow addled his brain, and I was just about to tell him he belonged in the nuthouse, when Anna slowly got up, grabbed a rifle, and headed for the doorway.

“Well?” said Biggins, looking at me expectantly.

“Ok, Henry, I’ll come along, but don’t expect me to get involved,” I said grudgingly.

As I trudged out of the cinema, trying to catch up with Anna, I could still hear my parting words ringing in my head. Don’t ‘get involved’, I reminded myself. That’s what I’d continually been saying since I’d arrived in the blasted country and I was beginning to wonder: would Hungary ever let me go?

Just the man I need

When we eventually reached the barracks, tanks were already drawn up across the street. Inside the tunnel entrance some of the sentries were dead and I grabbed Biggins by the arm.

“Henry, the Russians are attacking already,” I warned.

Before he had time to answer, bullets started coming from nowhere and a young boy standing next to me clutched his throat and slid to the ground, blood spurting through his fingers. We could see an officer trying to shut the main gate, only to be wounded by a mortar blast, and he began to crawl towards the shelter of the barracks. A nurse ran out from the building to help him, but a machine-gun from a Russian armoured car fired, killing them both.

Bullets were ricocheting off the walls, while everyone crouched down behind whatever cover they could find. Anna was next to me, her rifle still slung over her shoulder, and I’d never seen her looking more lost. At the sight of the nurse being killed, Alex sprang to his feet, screaming like a wild man.

“I’ve had enough of these bastards!” he cried, and he stepped in front of the armoured car that had decided to gun down the unarmed woman.

He fired his machine-gun, killing a Russian soldier who slumped down on top of his vehicle. Those inside fired back and bullets tore into Alex’s broad chest, but still he fired, and his bullets bounced harmlessly off the armour.

“Alex!” cried Anna, as she watched her friend totter forward and fall to his knees, before his body was thrown to the ground by one last salvo. She looked up at me, tears streaming down her face.

“How can we ever stop them, Thomas?”

She continued to stare, as if she was pleading with me to provide the answer. I looked around, desperately searching for the wooden crate that Alex had hauled all the way from the cinema building. In his scramble to avenge the nurse’s murder, he’d dropped it and it lay against the wall with the lid in pieces.

I took out three grenades and lined them up in front of me before looking round the corner to see if the armoured carrier was still there. It was, and the occupants were crouched down, safely hidden behind the armour-plating. But, unlike a tank, it had no roof.

I turned back and took several deep breaths before rubbing my hands, trying to imagine I was the next bowler up to face the wicket. I pulled the ring on the first grenade and lobbed it high into the air. It bounced harmlessly off the front of the carrier and exploded in the street. The second missed too, but killed an unlucky Russian soldier who was sheltering behind the vehicle.

Seeing what I was trying to do, the engine of the carrier roared into life, as the men inside tried to reverse out of harm’s way. I threw the last grenade a little higher and more to the left and it landed home. We could hear the troops scrambling to find it before it went off, but they were too late. A muffled explosion ripped through their metal home, killing everyone inside.

In spite of our brief success at holding off the Russians, it was clear that the situation was hopeless. Without the army on our side we had no chance, and when I saw hundreds of Hungarian tanks crammed into the parade ground, unable to get out through the single narrow exit, I began to form a nasty suspicion.

“Biggins, I know you want to help these people, but this is hopeless. Look, the army has been tricked,” I said, pointing at the tanks sitting idle in the barracks. “We’ve got to get away from here and find some other way to stop the Russians.”

He looked at Eva and still he hesitated, but eventually he relented and we carefully retraced our steps. Most of the rebels followed on behind, save for a few foolhardy souls.

“I am sick of the fighting,” said Anna, once we were back in the relative safety of the cinema. “There must be another way to save Hungary.”

I was right behind her, of course, and I was about to suggest that we all headed back to the legation to plan our strategy, when Anna had her own idea.

“We need to go back to the Parliament building. Mr. Nagy will have to negotiate with the Russians and he will need our support.”

When I looked at the four of us, covered in dust and fit to drop, I was rather at a loss to know what ‘support’ she thought we’d be able to provide. But as usual she was determined to have her way and Biggins agreed. Mind you, I suspected it was just so he could stay with his precious Eva.

At least there were still some Hungarian troops guarding the Parliament building, and when Biggins flashed his credentials they allowed us in. We were heading up the stairs, when a bald man in an ill-fitting jacket recognised Anna.

“Miss Novak, what on earth are you doing here? When did I see you last? It must have been when I taught at the academy,” he said, clearly hoping to reminisce.¹⁰

“We are here to see Prime Minister Nagy,” she explained.

“I’m afraid that will be impossible.”

“No, we must see him,” she insisted, barely masking her desperation.

“You misunderstand me. Mr. Nagy is not here.”

“Where is he?”

“No one seems to know.”

Without waiting for an explanation she ran up the remainder of the stairs and made her way to Nagy’s office. It was unguarded and without knocking she burst in, quickly followed by Eva and two members of Her Majesty’s Government who had no business being there.

“Professor Bibó?” said Anna, totally bewildered - and she was in like-minded company.

“Anna,” said the tall, dark-haired man seated in Nagy’s chair, and I was beginning to wonder if she knew every academic in Hungary.

“I’m here to see the prime minister,” she explained.

“In that case, my dear, you have come to the right place – I am the new prime minister.”

For a moment we all just stared at one another while we tried to digest this latest revelation. Eventually Anna regained her composure.

“But where is Mr. Nagy?” she asked.

"I am afraid he has deserted the sinking ship. The members of the Cabinet have decided that I am to fill the position which he has abruptly vacated. Might I ask who these people are?" he said, pointing in our direction.

"I am sorry, Professor Bibó, I am afraid I was a little taken aback. This is my friend, Eva, and these gentlemen work for the British government."

"I see," he said, coming round from his desk to shake our hands. "Your arrival may well be very propitious. Since the timid souls in the Cabinet appear more interested in saving their own necks, I have been forced to draw up my agenda alone. I have decided that my first duty must be to address a letter to President Eisenhower, demanding that he call Mr. Khrushchev's bluff. As I see it, without the help of the West we have very little chance of success."

Talk about stating the patently obvious. Budapest was crawling with Russian tanks while the Hungarian Army had been caught napping, and he'd decided that now was the time to ask the West for a little assistance. Well, you could see how he'd made his way to the top of Hungarian academia, couldn't you just? But there was more.

"Then I will be drafting a compromise solution to the British, French and Indian envoys," he went on. I would welcome any advice you gentlemen would be willing to give."

Get out of the place and don't stop running until you get to Austria was the suggestion that immediately sprang to mind, but I held my tongue. As it turned out, we weren't given the chance to offer advice or anything else. Unbeknown to us, the Soviet takeover of Parliament was taking place as we spoke. The troops and police guarding the building were ordered to lay down their arms - which they promptly did.

A member of the Cabinet appeared at the door to inform Professor Bibó what had happened, and he cast a nervous glance in our direction.

"Tell the Cabinet that I shall be sitting in this large armchair when the Soviets come. I will not go quietly. If the Russians move against me, it will demonstrate to the entire world that force has been employed to crush our independent government," announced the new Prime Minister of Hungary proudly.

The man at the door left and we stood there, unsure what to do next. After a few minutes a young, red-faced man strolled in.

"Why haven't you gone home like the others?" asked the professor.

"I'm staying here," he replied without any further explanation.

"Ah, good - just the man I need. Consider yourself my press chief. I am going to hold a press conference."

Apparently the Cabinet had agreed the Soviets could occupy the building on condition that any civilians were free to leave. So we decided to abandon the new Prime Minister of Hungary and headed back to our car.

We drove away in silence, leaving the lanky professor and his single member of staff to conduct their final duties. They appeared to be all that was left of the Hungarian government and I hoped that at last I could look forward to the end of my ordeal. The battle for Hungary was well and truly over.

Unfortunately, nobody had told the rebels.

Crying like a little boy

Even Biggins suggested that we return to the legation, but the girls insisted on being taken back to join the rest of the rebels at their headquarters. By using the side-streets, we managed to avoid any Soviet tanks and I made sure we had our Union flag displayed over the bonnet of the car. The last thing I wanted was some trigger-happy Russian soldier taking pot shots at us.

We finally arrived at the cinema to find it was still bustling with activity. Guns were being cleaned; petrol bottles were being filled; and outside a tram had been capsized to act as a barricade. Two teenage girls were even making a concoction of soapy water to spread across the cobbles, in the hope that the Russian tanks would lose their grip and smash into each other.

The fighting was very close and we could feel the ground tremble beneath our feet. Heavy shells exploded nearby, while the roar of jet planes could be heard overhead. Biggins and I grabbed a pair of binoculars and ran up the stairs at the rear of the building, so that we could climb on to the roof and get a good look at what was going on.

“The rebels must have given up. I can’t see anyone except the Russians,” said Biggins, peering through the binoculars. “No, wait a minute...”

Even from that distance I could see what he was pointing at. People were jumping up on the tanks, throwing hand-grenades inside and slamming the drivers’ windows shut.

“These people are attacking tanks with their bare hands. How can the UN just let this happen?” asked Biggins in frustration, and all I could do was shrug my shoulders.

“There’s something different about those Russians, isn’t there?” I asked, and Biggins passed me the binoculars so I could get a closer look.

As soon as I saw the slanted eyes and high cheekbones, I realised these were the Mongolian troops we’d been warned about. In comparison to the Ukrainians with whom some of the rebels had fraternised, they looked like soldiers from another world.

I focused on one nasty-looking individual and his sadistic eyes told you he would have no compunction about killing. He looked like he didn’t belong, and it wouldn’t have surprised me if he’d thought the Danube was the Suez Canal and he was fighting the West for his Russian masters.

We rejoined the rebels downstairs and there was a rumour going round that American troops were on their way to intervene on behalf of the Hungarian government. We said nothing but shared a look which confirmed what we both knew to be true – the Americans had no intention of helping. It was just wishful thinking on the part of the desperate insurgents fighting for their lives.

We made one last plea to the girls to come back with us to the legation, when a shell slammed into the building. That was when the chaos really began.

Dead and injured rebels were being carried in and taken down to the cellars. One man who’d had his left leg shot from under him leant against a window and continued to fire at the advancing troops, before a bullet to his head finally finished him off for good.

“We’re going to fight to the last man!” yelled some idiot from the foyer of the cinema.

Well, I thought, that's just the sort of language a committed coward like me loves to hear, and I desperately started to look around for a way out of the terrible mess. I risked a quick glance out of one of the windows and Biggins came up behind me.

"Any ideas?" he asked, carefully avoiding the fact that it was his fault we were there in the first place.

"It looks like the Russians have set up a cordon of tanks. The only chance we have is if we get rid of them – unless we surrender, of course."

"We will never surrender," announced Eva helpfully.

As you know, if there's a fight in the offing, I'm the first to run the other way and wish the boys on the front line good luck while I make my escape. The problem was that there was nowhere to run to, and with my suggestion of waving the white flag ruled out by suicidal rebels, there was no choice but to make a stand. So I looked around for inspiration.

The rebels' supplies were desperately low. All of the petrol bottles had gone, as well as the grenades, and what few machine-guns and rifles remained would have been useless against tanks. Then I spotted a crate in the corner which was untouched.

"What's in the box?" I asked.

"They're mines, " said Anna. "We didn't use them because there's nowhere to bury them."

I ran over and took a crowbar to the crate. Once I'd got it open I called Biggins over.

"Henry, do you know how these are activated?" I asked.

"Of course. Once they're armed, if that lever moves across – boom!" And he raised his hands as if to illustrate.

"Could you operate them by hand with this?" I asked, picking up some rope from the table behind me.

"Yes, but how would you get the mines under the tanks?"

I risked another look through the broken window to see the Russians firing at the makeshift barricade, but it was still standing.

"I'll explain as we go along," I said.

I asked Anna to round up as many volunteers as she could, and once they'd assembled I issued my instructions.

"Each of you take a mine," I said, as Biggins and I passed them round. "I need you all to crawl down below the cover of the barricade and place the mines behind it, out of sight of the tanks. Try to space them out as evenly as you can."

"What will you be doing?" asked Eva, unable to resist having a little dig - even with the building falling down all around us.

"I'll take this rope and tie it to the mines and Biggins will arm them," I explained, and happily that shut her up.

Even with the barricade to protect us it was still pretty dicey. With the Russians emptying their machine-guns into the upturned tram, one or two bullets were bound to get through. An old chap clutched his thigh when a shot hit home, but he was a real trooper and he still managed to place his mine in the correct position before limping back to safety.

I carried the rope to the first mine and it took me several long, agonising seconds to thread it through the lever. All the while I tried to forget that a bullet could have ended up in my skull at any moment but, once I'd got the hang of it, I polished off the rest of the mines in no time.

Biggins was all meticulous efficiency as he calmly went from one mine to the next, arming the mechanisms. I fed the rope out, being careful not to pull the end prematurely. Fortunately there was sufficient length for me to shelter inside the foyer of the cinema, and Biggins took up a position from where he could see the barricade when it was finally demolished, like Tumbledown Dick.

We must have only had to wait for half an hour or so but it felt like an eternity, as we listened to the thunderous explosions slowly destroying our last defence.

"They've broken through, Tom. Ok, they're moving forward. Hold it ... hold it ... now!"

I yanked the rope and the explosion was followed by the sound of glass smashing, as every window in the building blew in, showering us with broken shards. Everyone had instinctively taken cover, and slowly we all brushed the dust and debris off our bruised bodies before we turned to see the result of our handiwork.

Six tanks had advanced forward and of those, four lay destroyed – now nothing more than buckled pieces of metal. Some of the rebels ran forward, clutching Hungarian flags, and at first I thought they were letting their overconfidence get the better of them, but I soon realised the clever little devils had something else in mind.

They climbed on to the remaining vehicles and planted the flags next to the turrets. In the confusion some of the Russians thought they were facing the Hungarian Army and they began to fire at one another.

This is it, I thought. If we don't run now, we won't get another chance.

"Come on!" I yelled, grabbing Anna by the hand, and Biggins did the same with Eva.

We must have run twenty or thirty yards, when I suddenly saw the safety of a side-street looming before us.

"Quick, this way," I cried, and that was when Eva ruined everything.

"No, I'm not running away. I'm going to stay and fight until the end!" she screamed, trying to pull away from Biggins' grasp.

Biggins did his best to hold on to her, but she started to punch his arm with her fist and he was forced to let her go. She ran back towards the devastation we were leaving behind, while Biggins looked on in disbelief.

"I've got to go with her."

She'd said the words so calmly that Anna had nearly caught up with her friend before I realised she was gone.

"Stop them," cried Biggins, and he began to run after our fleeing angels.

"Come back, you bloody fool!" I shouted, but my last words were drowned out by the deafening roar of an exploding mortar as it scored a direct hit on the rebel headquarters.

We were both flung to the ground by the force of the explosion, and the change in air pressure made it feel as if my ear drums were about to burst. With rubble and broken glass all around us, we both staggered to our feet and tried to see if we could spot any sign of the

girls. Where the corner of the cinema had once stood there was nothing but a crater, and an eerie silence pervaded the scene, as we watched the dust settle on the devastated landscape.

“Oh, my God! Eva!” screamed Biggins, and for the first time in our acquaintance I saw him weeping like a little boy.

Even after our recent brush with death he was still ready to go after his beloved Lady Right, but, before he had the chance, Mongolian soldiers were charging the building.

“You bastards!” he screamed, and he had his revolver in his hand, firing blindly into the mass of Soviet troops.

Two of them went down before they spotted us and, as we raced towards a side-street, they brought their machine-guns round to spray bullets in our direction. Eventually the firing stopped and we sheltered in a doorway to catch our breath.

“They killed them,” he whispered hoarsely, as if he’d never witnessed death in battle before that moment.

Biggins and I had been involved in more gunfights than I cared to remember, and he’d always shrugged off the bloody results like the professional he was. But this was different, of course. The soft-hearted fool had become fond of his strong-willed little Eva and now he was paying the price.

Naturally my thoughts threatened to turn to the beautiful Anna, but she had made her choice and chosen to risk her life for a cause in which she believed. In spite of their courage, the rebels were losing the fight and now she was gone. I looked around at the war-torn streets of Budapest, where scarcely a building was intact, and I knew the struggle to stop the country becoming another communist outpost was over.

The dream of an independent Hungary was dead.

You have been in the wars, haven't you?

We had no choice but to try and make it back to the legation on foot, and we cautiously wound our way from one street to the next. With every step we could hear sporadic fighting, as the citizens of Hungary tried to defend their country in the futile hope that the West would come to their rescue. Of course our hallowed leaders were doing what they did best – talk.

But who am I to judge? And on our long walk back to what we hoped would be safety, I had the chance to prove that I'm no better than the rest. Two Soviet tanks sat menacingly at an intersection, and from out of nowhere a young teenage girl emerged and threw a petrol bomb at one of them. It smashed against the armour but failed to ignite.

As we watched from our side-street, four Mongolian soldiers appeared and manhandled her to a quiet courtyard. We ran forward and hid behind a gate to see what they intended to do. But then we were reminded that in the heat of battle a split second can mean the difference between life and death.

Without even taking aim, one of the soldiers' machine-guns fired and the little girl was thrown back against the wall by the impact of the bullets, before collapsing on to the ground like a limp rag doll. Would she have lived to see another day if we'd called out a moment before? Who's to say? Anyway, such questions are best left to philosophers and armchair generals.

The brutality sickened me but my feet stayed rooted to the spot. To have betrayed our position would have meant certain death - or so I reasoned. That was when I looked across at Biggins and, in its way, his haunted face was as terrifying as the event I had just witnessed.

He fumbled in the pocket of his jacket for a handful of bullets and loaded them into his revolver, before snapping it shut.

"My God, Henry, you're not going to..."

Before I'd finished giving voice to my disbelief, he stepped out from behind the gate with a serene calmness which was at odds with the task he was about to perform. He'd taken several steps before the troops spotted him.

One of the soldiers called out something but Biggins just kept on walking. I drew my own revolver but remained behind the gate, unsure what to do next. Unfortunately Biggins was in the way and I couldn't get a clear shot at any of the girl's executioners.

The soldier nearest to Biggins shouted again and fired a warning shot into the air. Biggins' right arm came up, his revolver in his hand, and he shot the Soviet soldier straight between the eyes. The other three turned and fired, sending bullets flying all over the courtyard. Biggins acted as if he was on the shooting range, taking careful aim and firing at each man in turn, until all four of them were dead.

I hadn't even had time to get off a single shot and, as I emerged from behind the gate to survey the carnage, I wondered at the miracle that left Biggins unscathed. But I thought too soon. A red spot emerged through his shirt, just above his waist-band, and his face was as

white as a sheet. He was about to collapse, so I rushed forward to support him by bringing his arm around my shoulders.

Somehow Biggins struggled on, as we slowly hobbled along the pavement. It was only another two blocks to the legation, but it took us nearly an hour to reach our destination because he had to stop and rest every few minutes. When we finally made it to Harmincad Street, instead of being greeted with the usual sanctuary of our British home from home, we were confronted by a row of Soviet tanks busy firing into the legation itself.

Intimidation appeared to be their main aim. The majority of the windows at the front of the building were smashed in, but the main structure was still intact. By lumbering down an alley we were able to enter by a side door. In our dishevelled state the guard failed to recognise us at first, but once he saw the terrible state Biggins was in, he was off and calling for the doctor before I'd sat my wounded hero down.

"My goodness, Henry," said the sawbones as he examined Biggins' wound. "You have been in the wars again, haven't you?"

A broken man

The doctor said that Biggins had been very lucky. The bullet had passed straight through his body, missing any vital organs. And because he received treatment fairly quickly, he hadn't lost enough blood for it to be fatal. Nevertheless he would require several days bed-rest.

For me, at least, the whole ordeal appeared to be over and the attack on the legation fizzled out. The Soviet authorities had no doubt warned their troops of the consequences if they deliberately killed Western civilians.

It soon became clear that Biggins and I weren't the only ones who had gravitated towards our home for the relative security it provided. Numerous rebels pleaded for asylum and the number of political refugees grew. Our orders were clear – verbal demands for their surrender were to be refused, but no attempt was to be made to defend them if the Soviets insisted on using force.

The stories our new guests told gave a brief glimpse of the horror that was unfolding around the city. The Soviets had killed civilians queuing for bread; unarmed nurses and doctors were being mown down in the streets; and any Russian officers seen fraternising with the rebels were being summarily executed.

I had to share my room with a young Franciscan monk of all people. Only weeks before he had been working in a school, before siding with the rebels at the Kilian Barracks.

"I stood, a tommy-gun slung around my neck, a grenade in one hand and a petrol bomb in the other, as the tanks advanced. We wanted to hold out until the troops from the UN arrived, but they never came," he explained with tears in his eyes. "They never came!"¹¹

The CIA-backed Radio Free Europe had obviously seen the error of its ways. Long gone were the triumphant commentaries, urging the rebels to take on the mighty Soviets with the tacit promise of help if it were needed. Propaganda broadcasts had been replaced with simple news articles reporting the situation in Hungary.

Brave pockets of resistance continued, but the people of Hungary were slowly losing their will to fight. Conscious of the fact that their efforts sometimes brought retribution on the people who sheltered them, the rebels increasingly used communist buildings from which to mount their guerrilla war. But a fight between civilians on the one hand and heavily armed troops with tanks and fighter jets on the other was only going to end one way.

So the Rebels were beaten and Hungary would have to wait more than thirty years to gain the independence she had so deeply craved. The two Cabinet ministers who had deserted Nagy's government in its hour of need came back to take the reins – and to run the country the way the Russians wanted.

Meanwhile Nagy and his associates were hiding away in the Yugoslavian embassy. Bibó, the mild-mannered professor who had done his best to save Hungary when Nagy had fled, was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment. He would emerge six years later a broken man.

I took no satisfaction in the fact that I'd seen it all coming from the start. I was busy counting the days until the country returned to normality so that I could get away from the place once and for all.

The doctor was as good as his word and Biggins was making a full recovery – physically, that is. Whenever I could bring myself to look in on him, a troubled look never left his face and his responses to my attempts at making conversation were monosyllabic at best. As I began to despair at ever having the old Biggins back in the fold, something was to happen that nearly finished him off for good.

The Devil himself

I've had my fair share of shocks in my time, but few compare with the double-barrelled variety that arrived at our doorstep that particular day. I was happily chatting with my roommate who, in spite of having taken holy orders, was clearly no less averse to a good drop of brandy as he was to burning Soviet troops to death with petrol bombs.

"You have a visitor, Captain Fletcher," announced one of the secretaries, poking her head round the door.

So I descended the stairs to see who was waiting in the reception room and if it had been the Devil himself, I doubt if I could have been more shocked. For there, standing before me, was Biggins' little heart-throb, Eva. I stood there, open-mouthed and stuck for words - in spite of the numerous questions I longed to ask.

"You're alive," was all I could manage to say, as I saw the would-be Orillo standing there.

"Wonderfully observed," she answered, displaying a sense of humour which had been noticeably lacking before she was supposedly blown to pieces.

"But ... but we saw you blown up. We ... I mean, Biggins and I both saw you killed," I stammered.

"Well, I survived ... and so did Anna."

It was then that my legs finally buckled and I found myself falling into the chair behind me.

"She's all right ... I mean, she's not hurt?" I asked, still trying to get used to the idea that neither of them had answered the last roll-call.

"She's fit and well but she's in trouble," said Eva cryptically.

"What do you mean?" I asked, feeling suddenly light-headed.

"I've no time to explain. I need to see Henry," she said dismissively.

"Hold your horses, missy - he's not well. If you turn up out of the blue, you're likely to give him a coronary," I said, deciding that her resurrection from the dead had done nothing to improve things in the personality department.

"He's going to be all right, isn't he?" she asked, suddenly full of concern.

"Yes, but he was shot, so we've got to handle your little reunion with care."

She agreed and a few minutes later she was waiting on the top of the stairs, while I went in to prepare the ground, so to speak.

"Henry?" I said, realising that, as usual, he hadn't noticed my sudden appearance.

He looked up with a glazed expression, only vaguely registering my existence.

"Henry, you have a visitor."

"A visitor?" he said automatically, as if the word had no meaning.

"Yes. I think it's going to be a pleasant surprise, but I don't want you to get too excited."

My words were wasted because the little madam had clearly become impatient and she entered the room unannounced.

If you've ever seen someone receive an electric shock of a few thousand volts, you'll know the look that suddenly appeared on Biggins' weary face. He sat bolt upright and he

stared wide-eyed at the apparition that stood before him. It was as if he'd just seen a ghost – and in many ways I suppose he had.

He was clearly as dumbstruck as I had been, but before he could find the words to express his feelings, she was at his side and showering him with kisses. Once I was sure that the services of the doctor wouldn't be required, I reluctantly left them to it, in spite of the fact that I was desperate to know what had happened to Anna.

If I'd been worried about the effect Eva's sudden appearance would have on Biggins' wellbeing, I needn't have bothered. If anything she was just the tonic he needed and he was a changed man from that moment on. They finally emerged from their little love-nest, and it was the first time he'd been out of bed and dressed since his injury. His sullen expression had vanished to be replaced by a brilliant smile which remained fixed on his face to such an alarming degree, I began to think he might have had a stroke after all.

They'd turned up at my room just in time to stop Father Good-Time polishing off what was left of my brandy, and as Eva explained what had happened to Anna, Biggins was holding her hand and staring into her eyes like a love-sick puppy.

"The Soviets have been rounding up people at random and deporting them," she explained. "Anna was walking back to her apartment when tanks suddenly appeared, blocking both ends of her street. Everyone was held at gunpoint and kidnapped."

"Deported to where?" I asked.

"People say they are being taken to somewhere in the Soviet Union. I have seen the prison-trains with their sealed freight cars and you can hear Hungarians inside crying for help."

Of all the luck. In the space of an hour I'd received the astonishing news that Anna hadn't perished in the explosion at the cinema after all, only to learn that she'd been snatched by the bloody Russians and shipped off to Siberia.

To top it all, I was starting to get a terrible feeling about where all this was leading. Don't get me wrong – Anna was a lovely girl and all that, but I was damned if I was going to risk my neck chasing her all over the country while the entire Russian Army did its best to kill me. Unfortunately my suspicions were realised all too soon.

"Henry, I didn't know who else to turn to. We've got to help her," said the conniving strumpet, pulling Biggins' hand up to her face and kissing it lovingly.

"But she could be halfway to Timbuktu by now - what can we do?" I asked, trying to put a spanner in the works.

"No, she is still in Hungary. She was put on a train this morning at Vecses, just outside the city."

"How can you be sure?" I asked, determined not to give up without a fight.

"Crowds gathered at the station when there was a scene. A brave Russian officer refused to load innocent people on to the train and he was executed. A friend of ours was among the witnesses and he spotted Anna."

"When did the train leave?" asked Biggins, suddenly his old self again.

"A little over an hour ago."

“Come on, let’s go. If we’re quick, we might just get ahead of it before it leaves Hungary.”

I couldn’t believe it. One minute I’d been enjoying a relaxing drink in my room, relieved that the whole nightmare was finally over, and the next I was suddenly thrust into some sort of half-arsed rescue mission on the other side of the country.

So the three of us set off in one of the few legation cars that was still in one piece, with nothing but our sidearms and a couple of machine-guns in the boot. A fine arsenal, I thought, for stopping what I imagined would be a heavily guarded train headed for deepest Mother Russia.

As it turned out we just couldn’t catch up with the damn thing, no matter how hard we tried. It was beginning to look like we’d simply left it too late to be of any use.

After we’d arrived at the umpteenth station, only to find that the prison-train had already passed through, we’d almost given up hope of ever seeing Anna again. One look at the map told us the situation was hopeless. The next stop was at a town called Zahony, on the border with the Ukraine, and there was no way we were going to make it in time. Once the train was in the Soviet Union we’d have no way of finding her.

I drove the car like a madman those last few miles, but when we arrived at the final station the train had already departed.

“Let’s keep going,” suggested Biggins.

“Look, Henry, I know you haven’t been well, but you must still be able to read a map. The border’s only a few miles down the road. The train will be long gone by now,” I said, trying my level best to get him to face reality.

“Let’s try anyway,” was all he said.

So we pulled away, and barely ten minutes later we saw the train sitting motionless, set back from the road behind a couple of fields. I brought the car to a halt and, once my two companions had retrieved the machine-guns from the boot, we headed across the muddy field.

As we drew close it soon became clear why the train had been forced to stop. Someone had wrecked the rail track a few hundred yards ahead. I jumped over the final hedge and landed on something soft.

“Ow!” said whatever had broken my fall.

Suddenly we were surrounded by insurgents, and it was only Eva’s timely intervention that stopped them from attacking Biggins and I when they mistook us for Russian secret police. When she explained why we were there, we were made a welcome addition to their group and, instead of being just three, we suddenly had our own private army of twenty or so rebels.

The train consisted of eight wagons and the engine itself. We could see two guards accompanying the driver and another eight guards were seated on the roof of the train, one for each wagon. That made ten guards in all. Odds of more than two to one in our favour. For once luck seemed to be on our side.

There were two problems as far as I could see. Firstly, the guards clearly realised something was up, and the chances were they had already radioed for reinforcements.

Secondly, we couldn't just start firing wildly at the soldiers on top of the wagons. From our positions on the ground we would have more than likely hit whoever was inside – the very people we'd come to rescue. When I voiced my concerns, the leader of the group was a little put out.

"Thank goodness you arrived just in time," said the joker, "I don't know how we would have managed without you."

"How about this for a plan?" I asked, happy to ignore the jibe. "If you've got someone who can drive the train, get them to move it back to those trees."

"In case you haven't noticed, there are guards with the driver," moaned the pessimist, happy to point out a flaw in my suggestion."

"We can take care of those, no problem," said Biggins, coming to my defence.

I didn't share his confidence. Just one look at his pale face told you he was in danger of fainting dead away, but there wasn't time to argue.

"In the meantime," I went on, "the rest of us can climb into those trees so that we have a better angle of fire. If the driver slams on the brakes, the guards will be thrown off-balance. That's when we let them have it."

"It sounds all a bit complicated to me," moaned the sour-faced leader.

"I tell you what," I said, thoroughly sick of his whining, "why don't we just sit around to discuss it while we wait for the Russian Army to come charging down the track?"

The hapless leader looked as if he was about to hammer me flat, like so much pig iron, but when some of his brighter colleagues said they liked the idea, he finally relented. Biggins and Eva took the machine-guns, and with a handful of the insurgents they made their way to the front of the train. The rest of us headed for the trees and, as we made our way, we could hear gunshots. Several of the group clambered on to the branches, but there was still no sign of the train.

"Where is your gun?" asked a rotund member of the band, and I pulled out my revolver in answer to his question.

"Bah," he said, spitting on the ground. "You won't hit anything with that. Here, take my rifle. By the time I climb this damn tree, the train will be back in Budapest."

I thanked him and took the weapon, while I looked for the most comfortable position I could find. A small limb protruded horizontally from one of the branches, providing an excellent rest for the rifle. But still the train hadn't moved. Everyone was in position and we waited. The gunfire had stopped and, just as I was beginning to worry that Biggins and his group had been overpowered, the train started to inch backwards.

It slowly gathered speed until it looked as though it wouldn't be able to stop in time. Then there was an ear-splitting screech of brakes and the guards were thrown from their positions. One of them had made the mistake of getting up to investigate the shooting at the front of the train, and he was physically thrown to the ground. Another dropped his machine-gun and the others had to use all their strength just to hold on.

"Fire!" I yelled, and volley after volley echoed through our wooded hideaway.

The Russian guards didn't stand a chance and within minutes they'd all perished. We climbed down from our perches and my fellow ambushers were clawing at bolts and locks to release their fellow countrymen.

At first some of the prisoners were wary, terrified that the unscheduled stop might actually be the end of the road, but as soon as they realised they were being rescued, great cheers rang out.

I ran from carriage to carriage, desperate for a glimpse of Anna. By the time I'd reached the seventh wagon I was beginning to fear that she might not have been on the train after all, and that we'd made some ghastly mistake.

Then I saw her smiling and laughing with her fellow escapees, still looking beautiful in spite of her ordeal. She turned when she heard me call her name and her scream of delight instantly made me forget all the danger that had gone before. We ran into each other's arms and she was treating me to one of her passionate kisses that I'd been missing since everything had turned sour.

"I can't believe you came to rescue me, Tom, you wonderful, wonderful man," she said, and she kissed me all over again.

"Don't mention it," I said, "it's all part of the service."

There is no other way out

I intended to try and persuade Anna to come back with us to the legation and I wondered how she'd react. I needn't have worried because she'd been so unsettled by her recent brush with Soviet hospitality, that she suggested the idea herself. What's more, Eva decided to join her, which brought the colour back to Biggins' cheeks with a vengeance. As we drove back to Budapest, our delectable rebels had another surprise for us.

"Eva and I have made a decision," said Anna out of the blue. "Will you help us to get out of the country?"

Obviously this was excellent news and now it wasn't just Biggins who was grinning inanely. Besides, it was the sensible thing to do. As well-known insurgents, they just wouldn't have been safe in Hungary any more. As it turned out, many of their fellow countrymen had the same idea and thousands were flooding over the border into Austria.

So I was in capital trim as we collected the girls' belongings and headed for the legation to organise our jaunt to the West. I was eager to be off the very next day but Anna had one last thing she wanted to do before we left, and if I'd known what I was getting myself into I would've put my foot down there and then. But she used her seductive charms to great effect and, being the susceptible chap I am, I agreed to join my Hungarian beauty on her ridiculous errand.

You see, she was still full of concern for her inspirational leader and one-time mentor, Imre Nagy, in spite of the fact that he'd bolted as soon as the Soviets had started to gain the upper hand. I could hardly credit it, but she wanted to see him one more time before she left the country. The problem was, he was safely tucked away in the Yugoslavian embassy and he wasn't going to step out until the coast was clear.

Kadar, the new prime minister, suggested to Nagy and his group that they should leave for Romania, but Nagy insisted he wanted to go home. Eventually the communist leader put in writing that they had nothing to fear by leaving the embassy and Nagy agreed to come back from his self-imposed exile. And that would have been that, if it hadn't been for one of those annoying coincidences that clutter up otherwise well-ordered lives.

You see, Nagy still saw himself as the prime minister, and as one of his last official duties he sent word to all the legations of his intentions. And who should get wind of this new development but my lovely, determined Anna.

So there we were, heading for the Yugoslavian embassy on the very day of his departure. At first we weren't allowed in, but when Anna insisted that Nagy be informed of her presence, we were ushered through the door and the man himself was standing in the hallway, ready to greet us.

"Anna, what a pleasant surprise. How thoughtful of you to come and see me during these troubled times," he said, and he embraced her warmly.

"You have always been very kind to me, Mr. Nagy. I just wish we were meeting under happier circumstances."

"You are alive and well - that is what is important. I am counting on you, young man, to take good care of my most precious supporter," said the old charmer.

“Rest assured, sir, she’s in safe hands,” I replied, thinking it sounded like the right thing to say.

I was eager to be off, but Nagy insisted that he and Anna catch up on old times and I was left kicking my heels in a kitchen with nothing but a pot of coffee for company. Eventually a bus arrived early that evening to take the party to their homes. Anna and I followed the entourage outside to wish them goodbye, and that was when I realised something was very wrong.

There were several Soviet secret policemen on the bus and I saw the driver sidle over to Nagy. He whispered something in his ear and I furtively moved behind him so I could hear what was said.

“Watch your step, Comrade Nagy. You’re not going home.”

Soldatic, the ambassador, stepped forward.

“Come back, don’t go,” he said softly in German.

Nagy advanced down the steps and angrily addressed the Russian officer.

“I demand that your men get off the bus.”

They did as instructed and Soldatic ordered two of his staff to board the bus instead. As Nagy went to leave, Anna stepped forward with a fearful look on her face.

“Mr. Nagy, are you going to be all right?” she asked.

“Don’t worry yourself, Anna. I’m sure it is all just a little misunderstanding,” he said, taking her hand and patting her on the arm.

We watched the bus drive off, but it had barely gone a few yards when an armoured car moved into its path and Anna let out a scream. A Soviet colonel boarded the bus and ordered the two Yugoslavs to get off before it finally drove away.

“Oh no, Thomas, what have they done?” she asked, tears forming in her eyes.

Before I could answer, the Soviet officer who had left the bus was standing in front of us and peering disconcertingly at Anna.

“How do you know Mr. Nagy? Are you a counter-revolutionary?” he asked sharply, but she was too distraught to answer.

“Can’t you see she’s upset, blast you?” I snapped in Russian.

“And who might you be? You do not look Hungarian to me,” said Sherlock Holmes.

“That’s right,” I said with a confidence I didn’t feel. “I am with the British legation and this lady is under the protection of Her Majesty’s Government.”

“You have no jurisdiction here,” he snarled. “You will both come along for questioning and we will see...”

He didn’t finish his sentence because he suddenly found himself with the barrel of my revolver pressed against his nose. The two Russian guards accompanying him raised their machine-guns, ready to shoot, and the ambassador and his staff let out a collective gasp.

“Tell your men to put their guns down. My trigger-finger is twitching already and I’m liable to splatter your brains all over the pavement,” I said, somehow keeping my voice steady.

He did as he was told as beads of sweat poured down his forehead, in spite of the chill of the November evening. I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck before he got any ideas.

“Everyone get back into the embassy. Anna, you go with them, but leave the door open!” I yelled and, after a few protests, the Yugoslavian farewell committee did as they were told.

When I was sure that everyone was safely inside and my escape route was prepared, I carefully stepped back to the front of the building, making sure I kept a firm grip on my captive.

“You will pay for this. You will have to come out sometime and I will be waiting,” growled my hostage.

“Bugger off back to Russia!” I cried, throwing him to the ground and stepping into the building before I slammed the door shut behind me.

As I stood there, gasping in the hallway of the embassy, I was about to congratulate myself on a job well done, when I turned to discover that now *I* was the one staring down the barrel of a gun. A Yugoslavian guard deftly relieved me of my revolver and a senior official stood before me.

“How dare you come here armed with a weapon and start threatening people?” he demanded angrily.

“In case you didn’t notice, those ‘people’ were about to falsely arrest Miss Novak - who is a personal friend of Prime Minister Nagy, I might add.”

“That is no concern of ours. For all we know you may be using our embassy to harbour a fugitive. If you think you can both stay here you are sadly mistaken, and you can be sure that I will be making a complaint to the British government in the strongest possible terms!”

“Don’t worry,” I said, unimpressed by his high-handed manner, “we don’t intend to stay here a moment longer than we have to. Now, if you would kindly return my revolver and show us another way out of the building, we’ll bid you goodnight.”

“There is no other way out,” said the diplomat indignantly. “You will leave through the door which you so rudely entered and submit yourself to the proper authorities.”

This embassy lackey was a tougher nut to crack than I’d expected, but I was convinced there was a Decuman Gate through which we could escape, so I decided it was time to bring out the big guns.

“Sir, as a member of Her Majesty’s Government I have resided in more embassies than I care to remember and every single one, without exception, has had another way out in case the need should arise. As for Miss Novak and I submitting to arrest by Soviet soldiers on Hungarian soil, you can think again. My government has made me responsible for Miss Novak’s safety and I will do my duty.”

“You can explain all that to the Hungarian authorities. Guard, escort these people out of the embassy.”

“Wait!” I yelled, stepping away. “Do you wish to cause an international incident?”

“I hardly think that the arrest of a young Hungarian woman and a minor official of the British government will warrant much attention,” he said haughtily.

“If you believe that then you must be as stupid as you look.”

He stood there gaping, as if someone had broken wind in front of the archbishop, but I didn’t mind him and pressed on regardless.

“I was sent to Hungary on an important mission by the prime minister himself, and Miss Novak has been instrumental in its success. I received a radio transmission at the British legation this morning, requesting that I return to London with Miss Novak so that Sir Anthony can thank her personally.”

Never having been one to let the truth stand in the way of getting me out of a sticky situation, I continued while the going was good.

“We came to the Yugoslavian Embassy in good faith so that Anna could say goodbye to Prime Minister Nagy before she left the country. Now I put it to you, sir, to decide how Sir Anthony will react when he discovers that officials of the Yugoslavian embassy have deliberately handed over Miss Novak and I to Soviet troops – who, I might add, have invaded Hungary illegally.”

I was quite pleased with my little speech. Whether or not the official believed me was another matter, but you could see he was weighing up his options. If I was telling the truth and he handed us over, he would have had a lot of explaining to do. Whereas if he let us escape, no one would be any the wiser.

“If I agree to let you avoid arrest, do I have your word that you will not divulge any part played by the Yugoslavian government?” he asked.

“Believe me, sir, it would not serve my purposes to do so. I merely wish to carry out my duty.”

He stood there, deliberating for another painful minute, but finally he relented.

“Guard, return this man’s weapon and escort him and Miss Novak out of the grounds through the gardens at the rear of the building.”

I took my gun and began to lead Anna away, but the diplomat stopped me again.

“I trust, Mr...?”

“Captain Fletcher, sir.”

“I trust, Captain, that we will not meet again.”

The palm-presser tried to look down his nose at me, but I was at least a foot taller, so I stood up straight and gave him the dirtiest look I could muster before deigning to reply.

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure.”

It was a delight to see the smug smile wiped off his ugly face.

Dreams survive

As I'd suspected, the soldiers waiting for us at the front of the embassy hadn't had time to arrange for reinforcements to cover every exit. Mind you, if we'd had to wait for the Yugoslavian bureaucrat to finish his dithering, I dare say the place would have been surrounded by half of the Soviet Army. As it was, we made it back to the legation without incident.

Anna was beside herself with worry about what had happened to her hero, Nagy, and it rather spoilt our time together because she was hardly in the mood to participate in any of the frivolities I had in mind. Fortunately Biggins came up trumps and he used his connections to find out what had happened to the ex-prime minister.

"In spite of the assurance offered by the Russians that Mr. Nagy was taken home, he has been held at the Soviet headquarters on Gorky Avenue ..." he started to explain, but Anna was on her feet before he had a chance to finish.

"We must do something..." she began.

"Sit down, Anna, there's more," I assured her, and eventually she took her seat to hear what Biggins had to say.

"However," Biggins went on, "he and his party have recently been taken in three military planes to Romania."

"Are you sure, Mr. Biggins?" asked Anna, not daring to believe her beloved Nagy was safe.

"I can assure you that I have verified the facts myself. He is a guest of the Romanian government at a place called Snago, just outside Bucharest. I have visited there myself, as it happens. It is a very pretty lake district. I am sure he will be very comfortable there."

Anna seemed to relax when she heard the news and by the next day she was her old self again. What Biggins and I hadn't told her was that Nagy was virtually a prisoner of the Romanian secret police, but we decided a white lie wouldn't hurt. There didn't seem any point in Anna worrying herself sick over something about which she could do absolutely nothing.

All that remained was the little matter of getting our wanted lovelies out of the country. Officially legation cars were not supposed to be searched, but we decided not to take any chances and we arranged for Anna and Eva to hide under the tarpaulin of a food lorry, while we followed on behind in case there were any problems. Fortunately the new Hungarian government hadn't finished tightening its grip on the country and we crossed the border without any trouble.

When we arrived in Vienna it was as if a great weight had been lifted off everyone's shoulders. For once, Biggins wasn't champing at the bit to report back to London for his next mission, what with his little Eva eager to show her appreciation for all he'd done.

As for Anna, she appeared to have made peace with the fact that the fight for Hungary was lost, at least for the present, and she resolved to enjoy life for what it offered in the here and now. And you can rest assured I was just the person to show her. Biggins had sufficient

funds wired to his account so we could wine and dine to our hearts' content, and even the poisonous little Eva became almost half human.

I made sure we were happily billeted in one of Vienna's finest hotels, and my fondest memories are of the times when Anna and I retired to bed after a hard day doing nothing.

Perhaps if Anna had known that she would be a middle-aged woman by the time Hungary was finally free, she might not have been quite as carefree. Fortunately she was blissfully unaware that another thirty years would pass before the communist grip on her country finally ended.

She didn't have to wait quite so long to find out what happened to her beloved Nagy, however. He was eventually brought back to Hungary for trial and, on June 14th 1958, he was sentenced to death and hanged the next day.

So Hungary remained behind the Iron Curtain – an 'ally' of the Soviet Union. "Just think," so the joke went, "the Russians came as friends - what would they have done if they'd come as enemies?" Somewhere around three thousand Hungarians died in the uprising, or so they say, with perhaps twenty thousand injured. Like Anna and Eva, two hundred thousand got out of the country while they still could.¹²

In my final years I often look back on that time and ask myself what it was all for. Why did ordinary men, women and children give up their lives to try and stop the communists? Why did that young boy hold on to the Soviet tank with tears in his eyes and wait for the grenades to explode? Why did the teenage girl hurl a bottle of petrol, only to get shot for her trouble?

Of course it's easy for a coward like me to shake my head in wonder. Hungary wasn't my country and it wasn't my family being arrested and tortured by the dreaded secret police. The Hungarian people had simply had enough. No one told them to march and fight back. They chose to do it themselves.

If the West had helped, the outcome might well have been different. If the British and French hadn't chosen that moment to attack Egypt, Khrushchev wouldn't have had the excuse he needed. If the extremists hadn't pushed Nagy so far and taken their revenge on every street corner with a rope, then the Russians might not have invaded. If...

I've experienced enough war and suffering to know that such speculation is pointless. I prefer to dwell on the more pleasant memories from that time - like Anna's beautiful face as she drank her champagne and giggled with delight in our sumptuous Viennese bedroom.

Many of her friends had died fighting for what they believed, but Anna had survived. Not only that, the dream that one day Hungary would be free survived with her.

[This is where the third packet of my uncle's memoirs ends.]

Notes

1. Although Fletcher does not name him, his description of the professor he meets at the polytechnic matches that of Tibor Dery, a famous novelist of the time.
(Columbia University Oral History Project interviews).
2. Imre Nagy's daughter, Bozske Nagy (Bess), became Mrs. Francis Janosi. In the early 1950's she worked on a glossy Russian/English propaganda magazine called '*Hungary*', where she may well have met Anna Novak. Clearly Miss Novak's political beliefs must have changed in the intervening period, unless she just worked on the magazine as a matter of expediency.
(Interview with Mrs. Francis Janosi - *Uprising!* by David Irving).
3. The speaker was probably Julia Rajk, the widow of Ladislav Rajk - a former Party leader who was put on trial by Rakosi and forced to make false confessions so that he could be executed. The records of the trial indicate that he gave a false date of birth - probably as a message to the outside world.
(Szabad Nep, October 6th 1956).
4. The Fourteen Points represented the most important demands of the insurgents.
(Radio Budapest, October 28th 1956).
5. The man who Fletcher heard being referred to as Mezo was probably Imre Mezo, the Party Secretary.
(Columbia University Oral History Project).
6. The British minister at the time was Leslie Fry.
(Manchester Guardian, October 27th 1956).
7. The man offering to surrender was Imre Mezo (see Note 5).
(Columbia University Oral History Project. *One Day That Shook The Communist World: The 1956 Hungarian Uprising & Its Legacy*, Paul Lendvai).
8. The two Party members who fled to the Soviet embassy were Dr Francis Munnich and Janos Kadar.
(Testimony of Nagy's secretary, Mrs. Balogh, Procs).
9. The British air attaché at the time was Group Captain Dennis David. Although Fletcher was working for the Secret Intelligence Service, he was still officially an officer in the RAF and the air attaché would have been his superior.
(*Uprising!* David Irving).

10. The bald man may have been Julius Hay, a writer and one-time professor at the Academy of Film and Theatre Arts. Until 1953 he had been a supporter of the Communist Party.

(Radio Budapest, November 4th 1956).

11. From Fletcher's description, the priest may have been Father Basil Vegvari, a young Franciscan monk who was a chaplain at the Kilian Barracks.

(Columbia University Oral History Project).

12. Fletcher's claims about how many died or were injured during the uprising appear to agree with those reported on the radio and in the newspapers at the time.

(Radio Budapest, January 15th 1957. Esti Hirlap, December 28th 1956. Nepszasbadsag, December 30th 1956).



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