

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Ringmain

George Brown

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George Brown



FOR PAULA - WHO REFUSED TO GIVE UP

'A circuit of high-speed explosive fuse for the simultaneous detonation of separate explosive charges . . .'

*School of Special
Operations
Sungei Buloh, Malaya*

PROLOGUE

THE MAN IN the darkened room raised the sashed window inch by inch until he'd made a gap of just over four inches. He waited a few moments, then, without disturbing the heavy curtain, rested a powerful night telescope on the ledge and surveyed the empty tree-lined road several storeys below him. After a careful study of the entrances to the grand apartments on the opposite side of the road he concentrated his attention on a building some three hundred yards to his right.

The telescope peered into the entrance bringing out a darker shadow, a man, motionless. The watcher removed his eye from the lens and blinked moisture into it then moved the telescope fractionally to the left. A second man stood in another doorway. The faint gleam from an adjacent street lamp reflected off a worn patch on the stubby Heckler and Koch machine pistol cradled in the crook of his arm.

He ignored the first floor of the building. It was in darkness.

The second floor showed only one lighted window.

The third had light leaking from every window.

He started from the corner of the building and through the lens checked each of these windows in turn. The curtains were effective; he could see nothing inside the apartment. But it wasn't the inside of the building that interested him. Half-way along the third floor and running almost the length of the building jutted a narrow balcony in front of four french windows. A man stood against the wall at either end of the balcony. They were both armed with machine pistols.

A third man with his back against the windows stared back at him through powerful binoculars, but saw nothing and moved on in his routine quartering of the surrounding area.

The man with the telescope glanced down at the luminous dial on his watch. Nine forty-five. Still on his knees he edged away from the window and stood up.

A tiny pinprick of light from a pencil torch guided him to the rifle already set on its sturdy tripod. Easing the bolt open he loaded a single round into the breech. Returning to the window he squatted at the far corner and, again without any sudden disturbance of the curtain, rested the tip of the rifle barrel on the ledge and adjusted the height of the tripod. There was just enough gap in the open window for him to see the entrance to the apartment through the powerful Schmidt and Bender power scope. The shadow in the doorway clicked into daylight-like shape. He fine-focused. The swarthy man's face was clear - he had a tiny nick in the corner of his upper lip where he'd cut himself shaving. His eyes never stopped moving. The man at the window touched the butt of the rifle with his finger, it was little more than a stroke, and tightened, gently, the lever on the ball and socket head of the tripod. The cross-hairs of the sight were centred at head height on the iron and glass door.

He glanced down at his watch again. Five past ten. He stroked the safety catch forward and placed his eye once more to the power scope. No change.

And then, in the silent, dark room, the small radio receiver on the floor beside him hissed into life.

'They're on their way down.'

He made no acknowledgement. His eye stared unblinking through the scope.

'They're coming out now,' said the voice from the receiver, urgently. 'Ghadaffi's man is in the light-grey suit. He's coming first - four close bodyguards, Libyans. They've

got two more outside. The Minister's right behind him - black suit, white shirt.'

Two cars pulled up and waited, engines running, their exhausts spewing white steam into the cooling night air, and then the door opened and the two outside protectors closed in on the man in the light-grey suit; then the French Minister and his entourage spilled out into the entrance. The Libyan bodyguards' eyes were everywhere, their heads, like puppets, moving in all directions as they shepherded their charge across the pavement.

The man at the window loosened the lever on the tripod head and tightened his thumb round the ribbed stock of the rifle, bringing it tight into his shoulder. It took only a second. The cross-hairs moved from the head of the man in the grey suit and zeroed in on the temple of the man still standing at the door. No hesitation; the finger squeezed.

Phhht!

He didn't wait to admire his handiwork.

The explosive bullet thudded into the French Minister's head and shattered it like glass. The men behind him, his protectors, hit the ground while the people escorting the Libyan crowded round him, pressing his head down, protecting him with their bodies as they swept him off his feet and rushed him into the car. It took off at high speed.

The French bodyguards recovered quickly and fanned out into the quiet, tree-lined avenue searching for movement in the windows and on the roofs above them. But they did it without conviction. This had the hallmark of a professional killing.

The radio crackled again: 'Jesus, Siegfried - you've shot the wrong bloody man! You've killed the bloody Minister!'

He continued dismantling the rifle and tripod and for the first time answered into the machine. 'Close down,' he said coldly. 'Don't acknowledge.'

He went down the back stairs and slipped into the closed garage. A dark grey Citroën was the only car there. He

leaned into the back, pulled up the armrest and the back section fell forward. The specially constructed brackets accepted the rifle and clicked back into place. The tripod went into the boot and fitted into the slots reserved for the jack. He lit a cigarette and opened the garage door. He waited a few seconds until the converging sirens wailed to a halt, then drove out and headed towards the, now, crowded street with its traffic jam of ambulances and flashing police vehicles. It was swarming with serious-looking men in dark suits. Four policemen clutching sub-machine-guns surrounded his stopped car and two of the dark-suited men appeared on either side of him. He kept his hands on the wheel. Between his fingers was a small leather card-holder. 'Slowly,' said the man on his side of the car.

He handed him the wallet. The other man leaned in through the offside window and watched. In his left hand he held a 9mm Browning automatic. It was pointed ostentatiously at the driver's head while the first man studied the card in the wallet.

'Merci, monsieur,' he said respectfully and handed it back. 'You'll have a job parking - can I get someone to do it for you?'

'No thanks.' He eased his foot off the brake and the Citroën moved slowly along the street, until it was lost in the chaos of parked ambulances and patrol cars.

'Who was that?' asked the other dark-suited agent.

'Maurice's man. Gerrard.'

'Who's Maurice?'

'Head of the Special Security and Intelligence Bureau at the Elysée.'

CHAPTER 1

December 1985: Dublin

THE AMERICAN WAS the last to arrive.

He took his raincoat off and threw it over the back of a chair. He nodded to the man by the fireplace, nothing friendly, a casual acknowledgement that they'd already met, then ignored him to concentrate on the six men standing nearby.

'My name's Meier,' he said to no one in particular, glancing round the huge, dimly lit Georgian room. 'Eugen Meier. Which of you gentlemen is IRA?' He paused for a second as if trying to recall the structure of that organisation. 'The Provisional IRA?'

A pair of heads offered the suggestion of a nod.

Meier acknowledged them curtly and allowed his gaze to fall on the two men furthest away from the group. They were both big men, well built and wearing identical navy-blue suits. They appeared unimpressed, even bored, by their surroundings and stood casually by the heavily curtained window smoking long filter kings. They stared flatly at Meier and waited for the question.

He didn't ask it, instead raised his eyebrows and tilted his chin interrogatively.

'IRA,' said one. 'Official.'

Meier nodded absently to himself then turned back to the man standing nearest to him - a thick-set man with thin lips and a coarse peasant Irish face, at the moment shrouded by a lungful of expelled cigarette smoke. The Irishman stared back into Meier's eyes.

‘So I can take it that you and your friend are INLA,’ Meier said to him. It was a statement not a question and was acknowledged by the thin-lipped man with a fractional depression of his eyebrows. He held Meier’s eyes for a second longer than necessary then looked away and brought the cigarette up again to his mouth.

Meier reckoned he’d spent enough time on introductions. He walked towards the head of the long pedestal dining-table, pulled the heavy carver out from under the leaf and sat down, staring for a moment at the silent, blank faces of the Irishmen – the heads of the three main Irish Republican terrorist organisations.

One of them sat down, uninvited, and the rest followed suit. Meier didn’t object. He peered through the haze of cigarette smoke and set his sights somewhere in the middle of the group.

‘I’ve been sent here to clear the British out of Northern Ireland for you,’ he said crisply.

The silence that greeted his announcement lasted almost ten seconds.

‘Oh, fuckin’ hell!’ A fist slammed on to the table-top and a chair was pushed back angrily as one of the Provisionals stood up. ‘You’ve brought us here to tell us that?’ The Provo pointed his finger menacingly at Meier. ‘That’s the big deal that brought us down here? That you’ve been sent to clear the British out of Northern Ireland! Jesus Christ! What the fuckin’ hell d’you think we’ve been doing up there for the past twenty bloody years?’

Meier stared dispassionately at the interrupter.

‘I know what you’ve been doing for the past twenty years,’ he answered calmly. ‘But you haven’t shifted them. They’re still there. And they’ll still be there in twenty years’ time, because you haven’t brought enough pressure to bear on them – and you won’t the way you’re going.’

‘Balls!’

Meier ignored the expletive. 'I *know* how to pressure them. And I know what'll shift them. I said I'm going to clear the British out of Northern Ireland and that's exactly what I'm going to do.' Meier frowned at the far end of the table. 'All you've got to do is listen.'

'Sit down and let him say what he's come to say,' interrupted a gruff voice, 'and then let's get the bloody hell out of this place.'

The Provisional sat down reluctantly. 'OK, Yank. Go on then, tell us how to pull nails out of concrete. But before you do, I know why I want the bastards out of the North - what's your interest?'

'Interest?' Meier stared at the speaker. 'My interest . . .'

He stopped himself and started again. 'Our interest is the same as yours: a profound desire to see a free and united Ireland.' His cold eyes embraced the other five Irishmen. 'Nothing political, nothing material - pure sentiment.' Meier closed his eyes for a brief second. It must be jet lag.

Sentiment? These evil bastards wouldn't know what the word meant . . . And as Solomon Boelke had said yesterday in New York: 'If you can talk those thick Irish potatoes into accepting that, Meier, they ought to make you the first German/Yiddischer king of Dublin! What do you think, can you take them along with you?'

'Will the IRA help?'

'They'll all help.'

'Money?'

'Help yourself.'

Eugen Meier opened his eyes and looked at his audience. Nothing had changed.

'That's all our interest is.' And he repeated: 'Pure sentiment. We just happen to love Ireland - nothing more than that.'

‘OK,’ said the Provisional’s spokesman, caustically, ‘so you love Ireland. Great! We can all sleep with our eyes shut tonight! Now that you’ve got that bit of bullshit out of the way, how about telling us how you’re going to disinfect the North of Ireland.’

Meier ignored the sarcasm. ‘We think it’s time to stop terrorising the British and bring political pressure co bear from the international community. Until now, Britain’s been allowed to have its own Gaza Strip and get on with it. That’s got to stop. Only if my Government turns the political screw on the British and demands their withdrawal from Ireland is there any likelihood that they’ll go.’

The two branches of the IRA looked at each other with scepticism. Meier ignored the looks. One of the older IRA men raised his eyes to the ceiling; he looked like a man reading the graffiti on the wall while he emptied his bladder in a Falls Road pub bog – there was not a lot of conviction in his expression.

Meier looked about him. ‘We have to take out a public figure who is so important that it will create shock waves around the world. Not another Mountbatten or Airey Neave or the Thatcher near-miss at Brighton but bigger than anyone ever hit before.’

One of the INLA men, Belstead, had the answer. ‘Let’s kill their queen.’ His suggestion was met by unanimous and enthusiastic nods.

Meier jerked them back to reality. ‘Killing British royalty doesn’t solve anything. It stiffens people’s resolve – it’s non-productive.’

‘But it’s good headline stuff!’

‘Wrong. It’s bad headline stuff. The world’s waiting for you to humiliate the British and they’ll applaud you when you do it . . . But they’re not waiting for you to kill an old woman; you won’t make any friends in that direction.’ Meier paused for a second and peered through the smoke at the animated faces of men who smelt blood and wanted to taste it.

They hadn't got the message.

'How about the Duke of Edinburgh? We got a lift out of Mountbatten - we could always make it the pair.'

Meier gave it the pretence of consideration then slowly shook his head.

But Belstead insisted. 'We've gotta have a splash. You said so yourself. We have to get the big one.'

Meier nodded his agreement. 'It's been taken care of,' he said carefully.

'Who?'

'That comes later, with the dots and pins of the detailed briefing, but accept my word, he's big - you'll get your splash. Bigger than you expected.' *But whether it's going to please your friends is another question.* Meier's eyes hooded briefly as he stared at the INLA chief. *There's only one man going to get a dividend out of this rolling head . . .*

September 1985: Washington

'Don Rourke's only got another year to bumble around the stage as President, Eugen, then he'll be able to loosen the clips that are holding his face together and go back to riding the range on Tonto - or whatever he calls it . . . What d'you think of Vincent Beaune's presidential chances in Eighty-eight?'

'Hundred per cent, Solly. Vice-Presidents always do well. This one'll ride home on Rourke's popularity.'

'I think you're right. And then comes Kennedy next time round - Kennedy's got charisma.'

'I disagree, Solly. Kennedy's got fuck-all except a name and a couple of flashy brothers in Arlington. They had charisma. Vincent Beaune'll swamp him too - it'll be embarrassing.'

'Right again, Eugen, Vincent's going to embarrass a lot of people.'

'What people?'

'Never mind what people, Eugen, take it as read. Vinnie'll have to go now, before he gets started.'

'He's not the only Republican runner, Solly. There are others.'

'Let's start with Vinnie. We'll deal with the others as it happens.'

'I thought you got me up here to talk about Ireland?'

'This is about Ireland, Eugen. It's all to do with the other thing we talked about . . . How're you getting on with that? Have you got the British worried yet?'

'It's coming together, Solly. I've got a network in England making all the right contacts for me. Give me three months, and I can go and talk Irish. It's being arranged. The three top crews fighting the war in the North are being negotiated into a position where they'll talk to each other - and then listen to me! But this thing about Vincent Beaune? I don't want to go off on a tangent, Solly - not at this stage.'

'I was thinking aloud, Eugen. Vincent Beaune and Ireland are interlocking - they're both part of a ringmain.'

'How's killing Vincent Beaune going to help Ireland?'

'I didn't say anything about helping Ireland, Eugen. I don't give a fuck about Ireland. I'm splashing paint over a much wider canvas than a third-rate bit of swamp land in the Atlantic. This goes deep, Eugen.'

'I've lost you, Solly.'

'Don't let it worry you. You get on with what you're doing, and the rest'll slot into place. You don't need to know anything else for the time being.'

'How does Kennedy fit into your plans?'

'They want to put the big hat on his oversized bonce. If Vincent Beaune gets in next year he'll be there for the next eight years. They can't wait that long - Teddy's losing his youth and charm. He'll be up the road with the other two if he misses out in Eighty-eight.'

'I can't see the connection between booting the British out of Northern Ireland and putting Kennedy on the throne . . .

Maybe it's better I don't know, Solly?'

'Maybe you're right . . . But don't worry, I'll tell you all about it, Eugen - all in good time. Let's get back to Vincent Beaune.'

'Let's.'

'As we anticipated, Vinnie Beaune will be making a European tour next year. Vinnie and his entourage will be in England in the middle of next summer . . . The British have arranged for him to carry out a little dedication ceremony down in London Docks. They're about to demolish some old warehouse or shed where Eisenhower had his last crap or something before D-Day - the British want to put a mark on the water where it all happened.'

'How d'you know all this, Solly?'

'I've got someone who helps draw up his programme.'

'So we can get the IRA to do the business for us?'

'Exactly.'

December 1985: Dublin

Belstead continued staring at Meier. 'I've got another question,' he said.

Meier raised his eyebrows.

Belstead leaned forward on the table and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. 'Who's that guy sitting in the corner back there?'

Meier said, 'That's Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick Lambdon.'

The Irishmen stiffened noticeably, and heads lifted round the room.

'That sounds English to me.'

'He is. But let Mr Malseed tell you about him.'

'He sounds English too.'

'He is. Mr Malseed co-ordinates on the British mainland. He is my representative over there and is in supreme control of this entire operation - under my direction, of course. He

will also take care of the political aspect and the post-withdrawal negotiations with the British Government.'

Six pairs of suspicious eyes studied Malseed, who returned the scrutiny blandly.

The American studied the Irishmen's disquiet and added firmly, 'Mr Malseed has the complete trust of the executive behind this operation.' He didn't get any further.

The shoulder blades of one of the Official IRA men were twitching.

'Let's go back to this lieutenant-colonel, whatever you said his name is, before things get too complicated for a simple Irish country boy like me . . .'

Like humour, sarcasm was wasted on Meier. 'Very well.' He raised his voice slightly. 'Will you join us, please, Colonel Lambdon?'

The assembled heads turned with curiosity to the dark corner where, beyond the edge, and out of the lambency of the central chandelier, the shadowy figure of a man rose from a deep armchair. He'd sat there throughout the meeting, silent and unmoving, listening to the hum of conversation. He'd made no movement to draw attention to himself until his cue arrived, then, with all eyes on him, he strolled unselfconsciously across the room and into the full glare of the stage. He posted himself, casually at ease, beside the American's chair and stood like an applicant for a job, waiting for the interview to commence.

Meier didn't keep him waiting.

'Please sit down, Colonel. Mr Malseed? Perhaps you'll introduce the Colonel to our colleagues . . .'

Malseed was in his element. He was a politician. There was no doubt about it; it was the way his mouth shaped itself for a long rambling discourse. But before anything came out, Meier said politely, 'Briefly, if you don't mind.'

Malseed's disappointment showed. He let his breath out slowly and said, 'Colonel Lambdon is an ex-member of British Security Service - MI5 . . .'

'I don't think I'm going to like this,' one of the Provisionals said loudly and tensed the muscles in his thighs ready to get up and leave.

'I think you will,' Malseed assured him.

'Is he the man from Whitehall?' a voice interjected.

'What man is that?' Malseed raised his eyebrows, but kept his eyes on the speaker.

'I heard we'd got a man sitting with the British spy brass in London. I'm asking if this is him.'

'Where did you hear that?' Meier took over from Malseed.

'It's done the rounds. What I heard was that a guy named Lynch was spouting about it in a pub in Poolbeg Street . . . some time ago. Months ago.'

'Who was this Lynch?'

'A Dublin lip. Started blowing his mouth off about the IRA playing high flyers in British Intelligence. A couple of their people were in the pub too.' The speaker nodded at one of the men in navy blue. 'They put a bag over Lynch's head and carried him down to the rubbish tip . . .'

'What'd they do with him there?' asked a voice, unnecessarily.

Nobody answered. They all knew what happened on rubbish tips.

Meier took charge of the interrogation again. 'What was the name?'

'I just told you - Lynch.'

'Not that one, the name of the person in Whitehall.'

'I don't know. I don't think a name was mentioned.'

Meier looked at each of them in turn. The globular eyes behind the rimless glasses were as cold as two wet shillings and the flat tone of his voice warned them to accept his word or get ready to go and join hands with Mr Lynch.

'There's no such person,' he said, 'not in Whitehall, not anywhere else. Is that clear?'

Nobody answered. It was clear enough.

The Official IRA man broke the silence that had descended on the room. 'You were going to tell us what makes our soldier here so special . . .'

Malseed was glad to change the subject. 'Do you remember a raid on the Felton Army Depot near Catterick a few weeks ago?'

The man nodded and inclined his head towards the earlier speaker. 'Sure I do. It was his people, Provo. Useless. Wasted effort. Put everybody on their bloody toes, and all they walked away with was a couple of old Brens and half a dozen SLs. What about it?'

'You didn't mention casualties.'

'Two Brit squaddies killed, one wounded. No PIRA casualties. So what?'

'Colonel Lambdon organised that raid and led it. He killed the two Brits himself.'

'It could have been set up . . .'

'No it couldn't.' The younger of the Provisionals spoke up. 'I was there with him.'

The Official scowled at Lambdon and said to the room in general, 'OK, so now we've got a British colonel wearing the green hackle!' His eyes came back to Meier. 'But you still haven't said what he's doing here tonight.'

Meier took over again. 'I've got a particular task for him that won't wait . . . It'll interest you, Belstead.' Meier blinked through the smoke at the INLA man, then swivelled his eyes back to Lambdon. The other Irishmen looked on curiously.

'Your knowledge of the European mad dog scene I would imagine is fairly extensive?' he said to Lambdon.

Lambdon said nothing.

Meier took his silence as agreement and went on, 'You'd have firsthand knowledge of men who kill for a living - jackals . . . Europe's full of them, wouldn't you say?'

Lambdon's eyes hadn't left Meier's face. He'd heard Meier's earlier conversation with Belstead and had a good idea what was coming next.

‘No, Mr Meier, I wouldn’t say that at all.’ Lambdon’s voice was classless, very English, with none of the high-pitched drawl that Irishmen associate with British colonels. They almost liked the sound of him. ‘Europe’s *not* full of top-class professional killers. What Europe’s full of is half-trained, soft-boiled terrorists who take a chance, and the money, on the quick kill. No skill – just straightforward gun merchants hyped up for a quick in-and-out.’

Meier’s expression remained attentive. ‘Point taken. Go on.’

‘But if you’re looking for the real thing, the man with the killer factor, the professional, he’s there somewhere – hard to find, but he’s there – about half a dozen of them – no more than that.’

‘Could you recommend three?’

‘Depends on the target.’

Meier’s eyes searched Lambdon’s face, but whatever it was he was looking for he couldn’t find. He blinked behind his glasses and nodded decisively. ‘OK. Give me a list of these three individuals – as soon as you like.’

‘They don’t work in teams,’ said Lambdon.

‘I know that,’ said Meier tartly. ‘A team isn’t my intention. I’ve got work for only one smart technician but it’s a strange quirk of my nature, Colonel Lambdon, I like to have a choice. Is that all right with you?’

Lambdon ignored the sarcasm. ‘Of course. But if you told me the target it might help me make my recommendations. It becomes a question of specialities.’

Meier’s face remained bland, but the eyes showed Lambdon that this line of enquiry had reached a dead end. Meier shook his head.

‘The target comes with the final briefing.’ He placed a mental tick beside that subject and moved on. ‘An estimate of the cost, please, Colonel?’

Lambdon tried from a different angle. ‘Again, it would depend on the subject.’

‘Naturally. But think high, very high, say, er . . . head of state, king, queen . . . erm . . . prime minister . . . Go along those lines.’

Lambdon didn’t hesitate. ‘Half to three-quarters of a million pounds.’

Meier didn’t blink. ‘Very well, take the upper level for the very best. Your budget is three-quarters of a million pounds. I want those names within two weeks. Can you produce?’

Lambdon nodded thoughtfully.

‘There’s something on your mind, Colonel?’

Lambdon stared at the American for a second, then said, slowly, ‘There are some very, very good technicians in the States, top-class professionals . . . I know of a couple who’d make the Europeans look like fairground workers . . .’ Lambdon left the statement in the air. Meier knew what he was getting at.

‘I have my reasons, Colonel. He’s got to be European. That means no Americans, and . . .’ he paused for a second and caught Belstead’s eye, ‘no Englishmen.’

After Lambdon left the room the meeting began to disperse.

The Irishmen stood up and stretched their legs and began talking seriously to each other in deep hushed voices. Belstead detached himself from the Irish group and approached Meier, now shrugging into his damp raincoat. Something was troubling him. Something would always trouble Belstead.

‘How long’s that Englishman been on our side?’ he asked.

‘Which one?’ said Meier.

‘The soldier.’

Malseed answered for Meier. ‘He’s been with us just over two and a half months. He’s been screened and double-screened. The word from London is that he’s as clean as I am.’

The comparison didn’t seem to impress Belstead. He turned his back on Malseed and addressed himself again to

Meier. 'Is he in on the final briefing? Is he going to know the target, the timing, the location?'

'I haven't decided yet.' He turned back to Malseed.

But Belstead wasn't finished. 'Is the plan finalised?'

'Yes.' Meier showed his impatience. 'It was put to bed three months ago. Every detail . . . It's all been carefully researched. Nothing's going to go wrong.'

'How many copies of the plan are there?' persisted Belstead.

'One.'

'How many people have seen it in its final form?'

'Two. And one of them's standing in front of you.'

'And the other one?'

'A man called Felix Schoernberger. His was the tactical brain - he researched and planned it. Apart from myself he's the only man who's seen where the pin goes in the map.'

'Great,' said Belstead caustically. 'And how secure is he?'

'They don't come any securer than Felix Schoernberger.'

'Is that supposed to impress me?'

'It should - he's been dead three months.'

October 1985: Washington

The two young men, one in a mid-blue blazer and the other in a light-grey suit, detached themselves from the crowd and came up on either side of Felix Schoernberger as he left the restaurant, and, without a word, steered him into the waiting car.

'Evening, Felix,' said the man in the blazer. He smiled at Felix as he made himself comfortable on the back seat. 'Steak well done and to your liking, was it?'

Felix wasn't disturbed. He recognised the haircuts and the after-shave - he knew CIA when he smelt it.

'Whatever your problem is, boys, let's get it over quickly, I've got an after-dinner date that won't keep.'

'This won't take much of your time, Felix. It's about your friend Solly Boelke.'

'What about him?'

'He's been seen stretching his podgy little fingers towards the east . . .'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Somebody saw him standing on the sea-shore shading his eyes with his hand and gazing towards England.'

'Very Homeric, gentlemen, but I'm still not with you.'

'Felix had a classical education,' the man in the blazer told his companion. 'What do you make of this then, Felix? Standing beside your friend Solly was your friend Eugen Meier with a rolled-up map of Great Britain under his arm. What are they up to, Felix?'

'I don't know what you're talking about . . . Who's your boss?'

It was the turn of the man in the grey suit to smile. 'We're self-employed, Felix - no boss.'

'You're CIA?'

'Sort of.'

'I don't think I like the sound of that . . . Take me to your leader!'

'Well done, Felix! They said you had a great sense of humour.' The smile vanished. 'What're Solly and Meier up to, Felix?'

'I've no idea . . . But I'll tell you two clowns what I *have* got.'

'What have you got, Felix?' asked the man in the grey suit.

'I've got some very powerful friends in very powerful places.'

'You sure about that, Felix?' said the other man.

'What, about my powerful friends?'

'No, I know all about them. I'm asking if you're sure about the other thing - about old Solly and Meier.'

Felix shook his head. 'Quite sure.'

The man in the blazer stared at him for a second then shrugged his shoulders. 'OK, Dick.' He turned to his companion. 'Let's take Felix to the massage parlour.'

The massage parlour was four concrete walls of a large underground garage. There was one chair in the middle of the garage. Nothing else.

'We got the idea from an old gangster movie,' the man in the grey suit told Felix. 'It's soundproof too.'

Felix wasn't worried. He sat in the chair and said, 'OK then, let's play gangsters . . .'

'D'you want to change your mind?'

'No thanks.'

'Dick, I'm going to break Felix's ankle.'

'Which one?'

'Which ankle do you walk on, Felix?'

'What movie did you two comedians get that bit of dialogue from?'

'It's not funny, Felix, I'm going to cripple you if you won't chat with me . . . You're quite sure you don't want to change your mind and tell me about Solly's thinking?'

'I've just told you . . . I don't know what Solly thinks about.'

'You'll have to wear an iron boot, Felix. It's going to be bloody uncomfortable clomping about in an iron boot. You won't be able to foxtrot any more.'

Felix shrugged his shoulders. He knew they were bluffing.

The man in the blazer nodded slowly. 'OK, Dick, go and get the stuff.' He smiled at the unconcerned Felix. 'And don't forget the aspirins. I don't want to have to hang around all night trying to make sense out of Felix's screams . . . You're still quite sure about this, Felix?'

Felix didn't reply. But suddenly he wasn't quite sure. The juices in his stomach confirmed it and started an upward journey when the man in the grey suit returned with a long-

handled fifteen-pound sledgehammer. The joke had gone beyond a joke – his throat dried up.

His change of mind came a few seconds too late.

The two men worked like a cabaret act.

Felix's mind boggled.

One of them stuck a handful of fingers hard into his midriff. When he opened his mouth to shout his pain the other one forced a tennis ball between his teeth and rammed it into his mouth as far as it would go. His eyes popped out. But it didn't make any difference, they were well into their act. They strapped him into the chair and pulled his legs apart over the seat as if he were in the saddle and out riding in the park.

'Which ankle – the right one or the left?' Dick asked his friend.

'I don't think it matters. Does it matter, Felix, which side you hobble on?' The man in the blazer smiled down at Felix, but nothing came past Felix's tennis ball. The message that he'd changed his mind and now had things to say remained stuck firmly behind it.

'We'll do the left one first . . . We're going to do the left one first, Felix!' The man in the blazer raised his voice as if the tennis ball was also inhibiting Felix's hearing. 'Hopefully we won't need to do the other ankle . . . I can't imagine the racket you'd make, Felix, stomping in and out of the club with two iron boots! Dick, give Felix a little jab now, it might deaden a bit of the pain, and then give him another good dose when he comes round.'

Felix tried to tell the man in the blazer what Solly Boelke and Eugen Meier were planning, but the man had dropped out of sight; he was down on his hands and knees and, with the help of his friend Dick, was rolling up Felix's left trouser leg.

'You can leave his shoe and sock on, Dick.'

Felix tried to faint when he felt fingers exploring his ankle, and then he felt a sharp prick in his calf – there was no

question of fainting now.

The man in the blazer said, 'I reckon about there . . .' His fingers gently massaged Felix's ankle bone through his sock. 'This little bit that sticks out, Dick . . . What do they call it?'

'Bugged if I know! Ankle bone, I think.'

Felix thought they sounded like a couple of first-year medical students playing with their new plastic skeleton. But his thoughts were short-lived. The man in the grey suit stood up, gently touched Felix's ankle bone twice with the cold hammer head, raised it level with his shoulders, and swung . . .

When he woke up, and had stopped screaming, Felix told the two men what Solomon Boelke had planned for Ireland.

There was no mention of Vincent Beaune.

'Is it workable?'

The man in the blazer smiled bleakly at his superior. 'Certainly, Director, there's nothing wrong with Meier's thinking. The only holes I can punch in the thing are the guys he's going to have to use. The IRA are like red-tipped matches - rub 'em against anything and they're liable to go off.'

'Where's Felix now?'

'He had a nasty motor-car accident, Director. It rolled over and over and caught fire - he'd just filled it up with gas. Poor old Felix was burned to a frazzle. They could only just tell what he was, let alone who he was.'

'Has Solly been informed?'

'The Police Department did all that. Apparently Felix had dined and wined too well - particularly wined . . . The restaurant confirmed that, they said he was quite the worse for drink when he left.'

'They said that . . .?'

'No, they said he was loaded to the gills.'

'I hope they weren't put up to making statements like that.'

'Never let it be said, Director.'

'Poor Felix . . . Solly'll be quite upset.'

'Poor Solly!'

'OK, so you've got it all on tape and film?'

'And in my head.'

'What about Dick?'

'What about him?'

'Is he safe with something like this?'

'Sure he is. He wouldn't want to join Felix.'

'You're a hard bastard.'

'So they say.'

'OK. Go diplomat. I'll inform Grosvenor Square. When you get to London the man you want to see is General Sir Richard Sanderson. I'll inform him you're on the way. He'll leave a message at the Embassy telling you where you can meet. You two should get on quite well - he's like you, a hard bastard.'

'It takes all sorts.'

'Give him everything, be open and frank - he likes fine detail.'

'Is this from CIA?'

'No, from me . . . Personal favour . . . Erm, one other thing before you go.'

'What's that, Director?'

'Tell Sir Richard to look under his bed.'

'He'll know what he's looking for . . .?'

'Tell him, if you don't mind a metaphoric cocktail, that there are indications that the Micks have got a friend swinging from the chandelier in the boardroom.'

'Red?'

'Could be . . . Come and see me when you get back.'

CHAPTER 2

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL FRED LAMBDon moved briskly up the steps of Green Park Underground. He stood at the entrance and stared into the sunshine of Piccadilly for a few seconds then, with a shake of his head and a frown, retraced his steps and slipped into one of the empty phone booths in the ticket hall.

His follower went to the news-stand and bought a copy of the *Sun*. He moved out of Lambdon's line of vision, propped himself against the wall and, with one eye on the phone booth, opened his paper and studied the inside back sports page.

Lambdon turned his back on the crowd, dialled his number, and said into the mouthpiece, 'Let me speak to the General, please.'

'Who wan -'

'Don't ask questions, Coney, go and get him.'

'Sorry, Colonel, I didn't recognise your voice.'

'Sanderson,' a new voice said.

Without preliminaries, Lambdon said, 'You were right, Richard, there's a hairy creature with a wobbly mouth using your executive loo . . .'

'What does that mean in English, Fred?'

'There's a mole in the shop.'

'Just what we need. What about the other thing?'

'You were right. The Irish have got a big bang planned, and the Yanks have taken over. They've sent over a hard bastard named Meier to organise the party.'

'I know all that - I told you, remember? I'm more concerned about the other bloody thing at the moment . . .'

Didn't they drop a hint as to who this mole might be?'

'Not a word. Just that there was somebody collecting the carbon papers in Whitehall; somebody senior, who wasn't to be mentioned under threat of joining the last bloke who was indiscreet . . .'

'And where's that?'

'Gasping for air at the bottom of the Liffey.'

'Try and keep it serious, Fred. What's your position with them at the moment?'

'You did too good a job on me, I'm almost an honorary Irishman.'

The voice didn't smile. 'Don't let it go to your head, it was either you or the tea lady. You had the broader shoulders.'

'A fitting testimonial! Which brings me to the raid on Felton . . .'

'Forget it. It was very realistic.'

'Too bloody realistic. Sorry about the two lads who bought it.'

'Three. The other soldier died in hospital. But don't burst into tears. If you hadn't done it one of your new playmates would have obliged. Don't give it another thought, we've got plenty more soldiers. Have you got anything else for me?'

'You're becoming quite a hard bastard yourself in your old age, Richard. Look, isn't it enough that somebody's down for the chop?'

'Have you got a name?'

'No. But it's big, very big - Mountbatten proportions. Meier's asked me to sign up a top European gun. He wants a list of three so that he can make a selection - he's talking in terms of half to three-quarters of a million pounds.'

'And when is this due to take place?'

Lambdon dived into his memory, but didn't stay there very long. 'It wasn't mentioned, but I doubt that it could be sooner than three to four months. There's a lot of ground work to be done yet.'